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Female fighters: from the involvement in the fight against ISIS to Turkish military interventions in Northern Syria: the case of the Kurdish YPJ

Prof. Carlo Magrassi

RELATORE

Prof. Alessandro Orsini

CO-RELATORE

Gabrielle Vanhaecke (650232)

CANDIDATE

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

AANES: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

ENKS: Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, also known as KNC

FSA: Free Syrian Army

ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as Daesh or ISIL

KNC: Kurdish National Council

KRG: Kurdish Regional Government

PDKS: Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria

PKK: Kurdistan Worker's Party

PYD: Democratic Union Party

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG: People's Protection Unit

YPJ: Women's Protection Unit

List of Figures

Introduction

Indiscriminate attacks, massive use of drones, the destruction of existing civilian infrastructure, war crimes. At a time when Western attention is focused on the Eastern flank of Europe, this situation eerily resembles Ukraine. However, Turkey employs the same military tool against the Syrian (and Iraqi) Kurds amid international media and political silence. Putin attacked Ukraine to protect against its "Nazification," Erdogan to defend against Kurdish "terrorists," the same Kurds who have been fighting ISIS since 2012 alongside the international coalition. But unlike Russia, Turkey is a member of NATO, has made itself indispensable in the Ukrainian conflict, and hosts several million refugees, whom Erdogan does not hesitate to instrumentalize.

Kurds exhibit significant diversity, stemming from factors like their geographical dispersion, varied political ideologies, and distinct beliefs. Nevertheless, a common thread unites Kurdish fighters, as they all share a fundamental goal: the pursuit of freedom and self-determination. For a long time, the Kurds remained on the margins of global awareness. The Kurdish cause in Iraq and Turkey became known to the public due to the repression by dictator Saddam Hussein and the relentless struggle waged by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. In contrast, the Kurdish question in Syria remained relatively obscure until the battle of Kobané against the offensive of the terrorist organization Daesh. In 2014, the resistance of the YPG-YPJ fighters drew the attention of global media to this somewhat forgotten corner of war-torn Syria: Syrian Kurdistan, or Rojava. From then on, as the embodiment of resistance against "Evil," the YPG-YPJ, formerly simple Kurdish militias, became the new "bulwark against Daesh." The Kurds, the most efficient ground allies of the international coalition, established a genuine anti-terrorist shield in northern Syria.

Therefore, this dissertation will argue about the Syrian Kurds, in particular about the following Kurdish Forces: YPG and YPJ. The People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) were respectively established in 2011 during the Syrian Revolution and in 2013 in northern Syria with the primary goal of defending and protecting the Kurds. These two armed branches are associated with the predominant political party in Rojava, namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which shares ideological ties with the PKK. In 2015, under the guidance of the Americans, the YPG

and YPJ joined the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). They became the backbone of this mixed alliance consisting of Arabs, Turkmen, Christians, and other minority militias. In the context of this study, the focus will be on the YPJ, a Syrian Kurdish militia composed entirely of women. This choice is explained, in part, by the uniqueness of this commitment in an Islamist region deeply rooted in traditional values. The objective of this research is to analyze the involvement of the YPJ in the fight against Daesh and the implications of Turkish attacks against the YPG-YPJ. Policy recommendations will be proposed to mitigate these risks. More explicitly, this work revolves around two questions:

- What role and influence did the YPJ, as a primarily female force, have in the fight against ISIS in Syria?
- How do Turkish attacks on Syrian Kurds impact the stability and security of the region?

This study encompasses several points of analysis to address these questions. Firstly, the exploration of feminist theories regarding women and war will introduce and establish the concept of female combatants. This chapter will, in particular, demonstrate that the academic debate is divided into two distinct parts on this subject. A literature review will also be provided to compare the roles and opportunities offered to women in regular armies and rebel movements. The conclusions drawn in this first chapter will serve us throughout this thesis, particularly in the analysis of the role of Kurdish women in the fight against ISIS.

Likewise, to better understand the formation of the YPG-YPJ, it is essential to present the history of the Kurdish people and the origin of the "Kurdish question." This second chapter will establish the context in which the Kurdish political movement in Syria was organized. This section will also address other elements such as the geographical framework, language, and beliefs, as well as the causes of the partition of the Kurdish people among four states resulting from the division of the Ottoman Empire.

The long history of their people, marked by discrimination, armed struggle, and the pursuit of self-determination, has led Kurdish women to engage in politics and military operations. Overexposed in the media after the battle of Kobané against ISIS, the involvement of Kurdish women in combat is often misunderstood. Seeking to move beyond established stereotypes, the third chapter aims to analyze the context in which

women's involvement in warfare took place, the various sources of motivation that propelled them, the roles they assumed, and their achievements both on the battlefield and in safeguarding their territorial heritage. The first part will revisit the regional and national context to better understand the emergence of these actors.

Finally, the analysis of multiple offensives and drone campaigns carried out by Turkey against Kurdish forces in Syria will highlight several destabilizing security issues at different levels. To this end, the first part will inquire about Turkey's motivations for these offensives and the various initiatives undertaken to achieve them. Taking into account Turkey's strategic importance, I will present policy recommendations that include balanced support for the Kurds in the ongoing fight against ISIS while considering the broader regional dynamics to achieve a lasting solution.

Chapter 1. Theory and literature review

The current fascination surrounding Kurdish female fighters, overpublicized since the Battle of Kobanê in the autumn of 2014 and juxtaposed inversely with young "jihadists" in Syria, renews the debates about women in armed struggles and military institutions. Once again, elevated as a weighty issue for various actors with highly diverse interests, the involvement of women in armed struggles paradoxically finds itself under the dual sign of both heightened visibility and relative ignorance. However, from the Second World War to Vietnam War, the Palestinian struggle, Central American guerrillas, and the more recent neo-Zapatista rebellion in Mexico, the participation of women in regular armies or these anti-colonials, nationalist, ethnoreligious, and/or revolutionary armed movements has been extensively studied. Numerous actors, with very different and sometimes opposing goals (the political-military organizations in which these women act, the adversaries of these organizations), deploy considerable efforts to increase this participation and also to portray it in specific ways.

It is true to say that an increasing number of women are enlisting in regular armies, and certain guerrilla or national liberation movements are also including them in their ranks. Nonetheless, the conduct of war remains largely a men's enterprise. Consequently, women's roles during conflicts often position them as victims rather than active participants. With men leaving for the frontlines, women frequently find themselves isolated, facing violence and hardships of war while also struggling on the home front to protect their families and preserve their households from enemy threats. Women sometimes become primary targets of the enemy's brutality. Specifically, rape is utilized as a weapon of war to humiliate the enemy, assert dominance, and disrupt family structures, particularly in situations involving ethnic cleansing, massacres, or genocide (Nahoum-Grappe, 1996; Bucaille, 2013).

Literature from feminist scholars argues that women remain victims of hierarchical military structures that are dominated by men and do not achieve equality despite being integrated into military organizations. Although the portrayal of women as victims is widely perpetuated, some choose to join men in state armies or rebel organizations. By becoming combatants, they find themselves inflicting violence upon the enemy. Although their numbers are smaller compared to men, their involvement cannot be explained merely as a result of being instrumentalized. To understand the

circumstances under which women are led to wage war and how they do so, some avenues need to be identified.

1.1. Theorizing women and war

Throughout the twentieth century and beyond, “Women and War” has been a central focus for feminist thinkers and scholars (Begikhani, Weiss, Hamelink, 2018). Classical feminist perspectives on this subject have revolved around two main ideas. The first concept centers on women's bodies and sexualities being perceived as violable objects used strategically in warfare (Garas, 2021). It depicts women as pacifist by nature, stuck in traditional gender roles, where men are seen as active subjects, soldiers, warriors, and aggressors, while women are considered passive agents of war, victims, mourners, mothers, and wives primarily located on the home front, vulnerable to rape, aggression, and slavery. This school of thought is more generally called “anti-militarist.” On the other hand, the second notion challenges these traditional concepts by presenting women as active agents who possess physical and psychological strength and are capable of actively participating in war and military activities (Begikhani, Weiss, Hamelink, 2018). This perspective disputes the traditional gender roles and views women as capable participants in defense of their communities, nation, and against patriarchal standards.

These two perspectives could be summarized by the issue thereafter: Is war a product of patriarchy and, if so, can women support it or even wage it themselves in a spirit of resistance to patriarchy? Both of these notions will be further explored in the following paragraphs.

1.1.1. Pacifist and victims: anti-militarization of women

Whether men or women, feminists or non-feminists, and for different reasons, some scholars find the engagement of women in military activities undesirable. They argue that women's use of instrumental violence would be a degradation.

Military historian Van Creveld (2002) contends that women not only lack the essential trait of aggression required for warfare but also possess a morphology and biology that naturally make them unsuitable for war. According to him, their smaller size, higher proportion of fat to muscles, and bodily fragility would limit their ability to

participate in physically demanding activities like men. As Felices-Luna (2007) explains in her essay, he also argues that their breasts could hinder movement and necessitate special protection, while their bone structure and shorter arms might impede their aiming and drawing weapons. Van Creveld even sees the cessation of menstruation during military training as nature's indication of forbidding women's involvement in military endeavors. He believes that menstrual irregularities suggest a disruption of women's natural essence when participating in war-related activities.

From this postulate, I derive a second argument raised by feminist scholars: military institutions are often perceived as macho environments, where soldiers are routinely encouraged to reject anything considered effeminate in order to promote notions of masculine bravery. Consequently, women engaging in such careers become vulnerable to rape and sexual violence, not only from the enemy but also from their fellow soldiers. The primary argument against women pursuing equality through combat lies in the clash between the values of militarism and those of a more "women-friendly" environment (Carter, 1996). Historically, women in war have been seen as victims or mere appendages to men, leading some to advocate for women to stand in opposition to war and militarism. Hence, there is an argument that misogyny, encompassing sexual harassment and violence, is nearly unavoidable and cannot be effectively addressed solely by increasing the presence of women (Woodward & Ducanson, 2015). The idea that a greater representation of women will lead to a transformation of the institution is dismissed by anti-militarist feminists, asserting that women may only become symbolic figures in inherently masculine and violent institutions (Enloe, 2007; Eisenstein, 2007).

Despite women's participation in the military, they will never be truly equal due to workplace discrimination, working harder to gain acceptance within units, and labeling women as disruptive in the workplace. This situation, therefore, undermines the argument that military involvement enhances female equality. Moreover, when women are denied access to combat roles, they are also denied opportunities to attain the highest levels of command (Woodward & Ducanson, 2015). Indeed, the prevailing portrayal of women in war depicts them as sufferers (Carter, 1996): mourning for husbands or sons engaged in battle and, if defeated, becoming the spoils of war for conquerors. Military rhetoric often emphasizes the importance of safeguarding the home and the purity of women. Under the guise of this protection, women have been traditionally expected to support their men by cheering on their warriors, providing sympathy and companionship, and caring for the

wounded. Additionally, another group of women is assigned the role of meeting soldiers' immediate needs as camp followers and prostitutes. For example, the French army during the XXth century created the “bordel militaire de campagne”, to accompany the army units and made it easier for soldiers to have sexual relations with prostitutes.

Another corpus argues about women are naturally pacifist and therefore not able to engage in violence (Ruddick, 1989; di Leonardo, 1985). Since the beginning of feminist pacifist thoughts, it has been emphasized that women have tended toward peace, while men have tended toward war. This has led to the hope that a world without war could be achieved once women attain positions of power. Women can be identified by three adjectives according to Ruddick: mater dolorosa (referring to the sorrows of the Virgin Mary's life), outsider (as strangers to men's wars), and peacemaker (Ruddick, 1989; Fernandez Aragonès, 2022). This concept of “maternal thinking” or “preservative love” opposes the military, considered masculine and immoral. The fact that women create, bear life, and could then be the protagonist of murder or genocide is, for some scholars, a horrific picture and paradox. The brutality of women shocks because it goes against common representations that associate them with vulnerability. As a result, when a woman strikes, kills, or tortures, "the offense appears all the more heinous because it emanates from the quintessential fragile being" (Dauphin, Farge, 1997). Therefore, di Leonardo (1985) states that mothers are moral by default. This perspective emphasizes gender differences and posits that women have a unique ethical approach based on caring and relationality (Peach, 1996). However, this perspective is strongly challenged by other authors who reject the idea of biological determinism, as it neglects the role of culture in shaping individual personalities (Carter, 1996).

This anti-war posture is not surprising if we remember that women are the main victims of armed conflicts. Rape continues to be directly associated with combat; as in Ukraine, it may be employed to assert complete dominance over prisoners or civilians. Nevertheless, the role of wives, girlfriends, and mothers remains primarily in awaiting the return of their soldiers from the battlefield. Women in military settings are often depicted as neglected and requiring protection (Heck and Schlag, 2012; Sjoberg, 1979). According to United Nations Resolution 1325 (2000), the majority of those affected by the detrimental consequences of armed conflicts, including refugees and displaced individuals, are civilians, with women and children being particularly vulnerable.

Furthermore, fighters and armed groups are increasingly targeting these civilian populations. One of the forms of violence on which feminism has focused is sexual violence in contexts of armed conflict. Sexual violence against women is frequently used as a weapon of war to terrorize the population, breaking families apart, destroying communities, and, in some cases, altering the ethnic composition of the next generation. Sometimes, it is also employed to intentionally transmit HIV to women or render women in the targeted community unable to bear children. Furthermore, women are the primary victims of the indirect consequences of armed conflicts (UN, n.d). During wartime, there is an increase in domestic violence due to the widespread presence of firearms, as well as a high level of frustration and aggressiveness among men who have experienced traumatic combat situations. Women often face the loss of husbands and children who have gone off to fight. Lastly, they are at the highest risk of losing their jobs when attacks target infrastructures such as factories, offices, and hospitals.

This represents a powerful and extreme form of patriarchal control, serving as a pervasive expression of male dominance across cultures. Even though, it has often been dismissed or downplayed in the history of conflicts, sexual violence against women during wartime is not a recent phenomenon (Card, 1996; Hynes, 2004). Despite recognizing it, it was only in 2001, spurred by the resolutions of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), that rape against women and girls was officially acknowledged as a punishable crime. This occurred when Rwandan and former Yugoslavian soldiers were convicted of war crimes, categorizing these actions as crimes against humanity, comparable to slavery or torture. Amnesty International (2004) underscores the disproportionate impact of war on women, who face additional obstacles in seeking justice due to the stigma endured by survivors of sexual violence, especially rape.

The negative consequences mentioned above can certainly account for the significant role women play in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace-building. Indeed, in "Development, Women, and War: Feminist Perspectives" by Deborah Eade and Haleh Afshar (2003), shared experiences of women and their contributions to peace are highlighted. According to the United Nations, “increased women's participation in peacekeeping operations has demonstrated that it enhances mission effectiveness, provides better access to local communities, especially women, and promotes human rights and civilian protection.” Because women are often the primary victims in conflicts,

they are better equipped to prevent and resolve them. Furthermore, numerous studies (World Bank, 2023) show that countries with greater gender equality are more likely to resolve conflicts without violence, and the inclusion of women in peace processes promotes the sustainability of peace agreements.

That is why Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, adopted by the United Nations Security Council on October 31, 2000, is historic as it calls on the UN and its member states to systematically consider the interests of women in peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities. It recognizes and reaffirms the role of women in peacebuilding and their active participation at all stages of conflict prevention and dispute resolution (Onyejekwe, 2005). This resolution garnered strong global support, largely due to the vibrancy of the women's movement. It places a priority on the protection of women in armed conflicts, assigning them a central role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and peace consolidation. As a result, since their establishment in 1948, peacekeeping operations have evolved to become more representative of the populations they serve, with an increasing presence and role of women within them. In 1993, women represented 1% of the deployed uniformed personnel (France ONU, n.d.). In November 2021, women constituted 5.6% of military contingents and 19.57% of positions for military experts, military observers, and staff officers (France ONU, n.d.).

However, these figures still indicate a relatively lower representation of women in this sector. As Shekawat (2015) asserts, “Neither the peace negotiations nor the Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration programs have ensured gender equality as women continue to remain marginalized in all such processes that aim at restoring normality in a violence-torn region.” Many former female combatants are excluded from peace negotiations and do not receive the same reintegration opportunities as their male counterparts. The sidelining of women's roles in conflicts, branding them as “auxiliary” and considering them “inessential,” diminishes their status not only during conflicts but also in the aftermath, thereby yielding a dual negative impact (Shekawat, 2015): “Firstly, it reinforces, legitimizes, and prolongs the regressive patriarchal system. Secondly, it obstructs the development of an empowering dialogue for lasting peace.” It is imperative to directly address biased conversations surrounding gender within contexts of conflict and peace.

1.1.2. Emancipation by taking up arms: the "right to fight"

According to Carter (1996), "There is a close association between women gaining greater social status and they are playing a more active part in war." She links the increase in women's emancipation of the last century to women's contribution to war efforts. During the Second World War, women were prohibited from engaging in combat, but in the 1980s, the armed services began to integrate women in response to the second wave of the women's liberation movement (Carter, 1996; Fernandez Aragonès, 2020). As a result, numerous American and British women participated in the Gulf War. Nowadays, even more, opportunities are available for women in combat roles. Although the number of women in front-line military positions remains limited, ordinary Western women, including mothers of small children, are now actively participating in warfare. The "right to fight" scholars argue that denying women access to frontline combat positions not only inhibits their ability to advance within these specific combat roles but also perpetuates their inferior military and social status as a whole (Carter, 1996; Snyder, 1990; Stiehm, 1996). This depiction of women's powerlessness and suffering in war, combined with their forced or coerced roles dictated by men (Carter, 1996), highlights the need for women to achieve symbolic equality on the battlefield for their liberation and as an act of revenge. The Chinese Communist movement in the 1930s and the Guerrilla movements in Latin America from 1960 to 1980 have provided examples of emancipatory socialist and nationalist movements giving women symbolic recognition as fighters.

While commonly associated with liberal feminism, "right-to-fight" feminists draw upon theoretical traditions that lean towards republicanism rather than pure liberalism (Woodward & Ducanson, 2015). They promote the full inclusion of women as equal citizens, sharing an equal responsibility to participate in military service. According to this viewpoint, women's involvement in the military is not solely about achieving gender equality, but also about promoting democratic participation and shared responsibility (Mazur, 1999; Snyder, 2003; Kronsell, 2012). Nevertheless, some feminists oppose this approach due to the military inherently masculine and macho approach. From a feminist standpoint, the strategy of achieving genuine gender equality by granting women both the right and duty to fight has sparked objections.

Judith Hicks Stiehm and other Western feminists advocate for women to take on the role of protectors and discard their traditional position as vulnerable and protected individuals. Stiehm suggests that by witnessing women in positions of agency and strength, male soldiers are less likely to sexualize women (Woodward & Ducanson, 2015). Furthermore, Stiehm argues that women's presence can bring about positive changes in the military, fostering a more democratic, less hierarchical, and compassionate environment that aligns better with the demands of the modern world. While the military institutions are described as machos, keeping women away from patriarchal standards will not lead the military towards a more modern organization. On the contrary, these masculine values will continue to persist over the years, considering that the military world is predominantly dominated by men. Integrating women into this field could be seen as a sacrifice to restore a sense of equality within these institutions. In the United States, liberal equal rights feminism specifically promotes the inclusion of women in the armed forces on equal terms with men, aiming to provide women with an equal opportunity to undertake demanding roles and jobs.

There are several objections to the argument that women's maternal instincts make them pacifist by nature. By taking this point of view, Carter (1996) demonstrates that the implication would be that men are therefore aggressive by nature and drawn to deadly enterprise. In this way, the notion seems reductive for men and not verified. April Carter opposes Ruddick's claim about maternal instincts, as being a mother does not automatically result in disdain for war or empathy towards mothers on the opposing side. Anne Morelli (2017) also supports this argument in her book. According to the common belief that women, as life-givers, are naturally destined to preserve life, they are not inherently pacifists.

While historical trends show that women have tended to be pacifistic, there has always been a minority of women openly bellicose or personally engaged in combat. However, this inclination towards pacifism is a social construct linked to gender roles, which associate hostility with wartime violence and perpetuate stereotypes of femininity. These stereotypes include a spontaneous submission to force, self-perception as victims, fear for oneself and loved ones (men and children), and a tendency to prioritize values of the private sphere over political interests (Ricci Lempen, 2018). It is these stereotypes that lead to the social perception of women's violence, in all its forms, as an anomaly and even a monstrosity.

1.2. Literature review

Throughout history, women have always been involved in in the military regardless of their culture or roles. The existing scholarship, spans fields such as political science, sociology, anthropology, women, and gender studies (Morgan, 2019). While extensive research has been conducted by scholars, particularly Western academics, on female fighters in guerrilla and rebel movements, the feminization of established state armed forces has received comparatively less attention. The majority of literature discussing the impact of militarization on women's lives centers around their victimization (Rehn, Johnson Sirleaf, 2002). They are portrayed as victims of armed violence, facing challenges as mothers, wives, refugees, and survivors of sexual assault, while also being affected by the rise in "civil" violence and increased sex trafficking in war zones (Helman, 2007). Both areas of study tend to view women as distant from the realm of military violence. Despite the symbolic value attributed to women in both regular armies and rebel groups, they can still leverage their involvement to gain new skills and autonomy that may influence post-conflict changes. However, while women in regular armies might find it somewhat easier to apply their newly acquired skills in the post-conflict society due to the more structured and established nature of these militaries, female combatants in rebel groups may face challenges in translating their experiences into broader societal contexts after the conflict ends. The literature review will explore various groups and sub-groups, starting with an examination of women's participation in regular armies. This study will be useful for understanding and contrasting the role of women in rebel movements.

1.2.1. Women's participation in regular armies

Throughout history and across various cultures, war, and combat have usually symbolized a male aspiration within political, social elites. Serving in the military for one's country has been esteemed as an honorable pursuit. In the Western world, war has historically been linked to masculine attributes, such as physical strength, honor, and courage, and many still perceive it this way today. The term 'hero,' despite Hero being a woman, is commonly associated with male adventures and struggles. Still, now, some scholars argue that war and masculinity are closely related. As Van Creveld (2000) likes to support "in tribal societies hunting, a masculine activity par excellence is more highly

regarded than gathering which is woman's work; even though it is the latter that brings in more calories to feed on." The complete integration of women in the military is a relatively recent development. During the two world wars, the need for military personnel led to the enlistment of women, but they were excluded from combat roles. Instead, women were assigned to traditional positions such as nursing, administration, and communications (Decew, 1995). The military roles available to women reflected traditional female stereotypes found in civilian life. As a result, nursing and secretarial jobs became the predominant experiences for women in the military (Quester, 1977). In Western countries, there existed a dominant belief that women's military service should be limited to "women's work," which likely influenced the decision to exclude them from combat roles (Decew, 1995). Certain combat roles have received occasional publicity, often as part of a public relations effort to impress the outside world. This was evident in the Russian military during the first and second world wars. In December 1941 in the United Kingdom, the National Service Act no. 2 enlisted single women and widows without children: in 1945, 72,000 of them served in the WRNS and 190,000 in the ATS, representing 8.2% of personnel in uniform (Jauneau, Le Gac, Ripa, Virgili, 2020). In France, during the Second World War (Jauneau, 2008), women's integration into the military took a step forward as they were given opportunities in specific support roles and contractual positions, which, unfortunately, often confined them to domestic duties after the end of hostilities. Although subsequent legal developments laid the groundwork for gender equality and the feminization of the armed forces, progress has been gradual, and integration still operates within established quotas, limiting the scope of opportunities for women. Until the 1970s, the United States Army enlisted women to fulfill a 2% quota (Goldman, 1973). However, at this time, even the literature ignored the role of women in the military (Stiehm, 1989). Indeed, Charles Moskos in 1981 had to point out that the position of women in the military was almost completely unresearched.

Israel is unique among Western countries as it has enforced compulsory conscription for both men and women since its inception in 1948 (Sasson-Levy, Lomski-Feder, 2013). Consequently, women make up 34% of its permanent personnel, surpassing rates in other leading nations like South Africa and Canada. This exceptional proportion can be attributed to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the prevailing ideological representation of war and its preparation as an unavoidable social phenomenon. In France, it was only after the abolition of compulsory military service and the total

professionalization of the armies in 1996 that a massive influx of women was observed. According to Segal (1995), “Nations considering a transition from the conscription of men to a voluntary system include plans to expand women's military participation”. Segal's (1995) works outlines the theoretical factors that affect women's participation in the armies. In order to explain the varied patterns and attributes associated with the recruitment of women into the military, two key factors have been identified. It appears that social and cultural factors are a significant part of establishing the context and determining the conditions for women to enlist. These factors stem from global shifts in women's social and political participation, their increased presence in the labor market, and the growing demand for gender equality driven by democratic pressures (Carreiras, 2006). Conversely, with modernization, the use of new technology and due to major transformation in international relations, evolutions are occurring within military institutions. The consequences of these transformations include the shift in the balance between combat and support functions, specialization of occupations, and an emphasis on increased professionalization. These changes have led to the necessity for more skilled personnel and highlighted the military's reliance on the broader society (Carreiras, 2006).

The ongoing evolution of women's status in Western societies allowed a change in military policies. It is only after 2010 that countries started lifting restrictions policies. In 2013, then US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced the suppression of the combat exclusion policy, allowing women to serve in all military roles, including ground combat units. This decision was based on the evolving nature of modern warfare and the recognition of women's contributions to the military. Michael Fallon, the UK Secretary of State for Defence, announced in 2014 that he would put an end to this ban because “roles in the armed forces should be determined by skills and not by gender.” (Jauneau; Le Gac; Ripa; Virgili, 2020). The French Navy began to open submarine crews to women on an experimental basis in 2017 (Boutron, Weber, 2022). They were representing 16% of the army’s global workforce in 2020 (Lapeyre, Paoletti, Boutron, 2022).

At a time when Western forces are sending troops to Romania in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, it is essential to highlight the significance of Ukrainian women in defending their country, often rendered invisible. In 2014, as Crimea was annexed by Russia and war erupted in the eastern part of the country, Ukrainian law did not permit women to be part of the regular armed forces. For those wishing to defend their country with arms, the only option was to join the volunteer battalion Aïdar.

According to Hanna Hrystsenko (2023), women went to combat positions, albeit unofficially. Faced with a lack of recognition, a civil society movement called the “invisible battalion” emerged, advocating for the advancement of women's role within the armed forces. It was in 2018 that Ukrainian law guaranteed equal rights and opportunities for women in the regular armed forces. Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, an increasing number of women are joining the ranks of the Ukrainian army.

While significant progress has been made, challenges remain in achieving full gender equality in the military. Women continue to face issues such as sexual harassment, gender bias, and the need for cultural changes within the armed forces (Hérisson, 2015). According to Carreira’s research (2006), “available data showed that more than two-thirds of military women were concentrated in support and medical functions, 17.5% in technical areas, and only 7% occupied positions in the more operational areas.” Because of their significantly low numbers, women had limited representation across different ranks. Even though there were no legal barriers to their hierarchical advancement, the representation of women in different ranks and opportunities for promotion remained constrained.

The progressive image projected by Israel through mandatory conscription of women conceals a much more traditional reality. While they are allowed to train men for combat, only 3% of women are authorized to participate in combat (DeGroot, 2007; Goldman, 1973; Sasson-Levy, 2013). When serving in occupied territories, they actively engage in policing operations on the civilian population, such as conducting home searches for weapons; notably, they are the ones performing body searches on women, which are prohibited for men. Hence, they partake in military violence perpetrated in these areas while being excluded from the most prestigious combat missions, which practically represent the only path to advancement (Sasson-Levy, 2013). This status inferiority is glaringly evident at the top of the hierarchy: there are only fifteen colonels (4.4% of the rank's personnel) and three brigadier generals. In Canada, the representation of women in the military does not mirror civilian life (Winslow and Dunn, 2002). It still operates within a patriarchal framework, making it challenging for women to be considered equally in the armed forces. In 2015, following numerous allegations of sexual misconduct within the Canadian military, a significant official report known as the Deschamps Review showed that sexual harassment was commonplace and embedded in

military culture (Deschamps, 2015). Even within societies that offer the essential infrastructure and support for military women, resources are unequally maximized. Studies by Segal and Lane (2002) have shown that female ex-combatants were less favored to make use of the US Veterans Affairs centers compared to men.

The issue of gender in contemporary armies has been raised largely through United Nations resolutions, which have prompted different member countries to engage with the topic. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in October 2000 - better known as the Women, Peace, and Security Resolution - marked the starting point of increasing attention to women in international peace and security efforts. Subsequently, nine other resolutions were adopted, shaping the architecture of the international agenda on "Women, Peace, and Security," with more than ninety countries currently involved (Carey, 2001; Barnes, 2011). This agenda is subject to national adaptations that can vary from country to country. While armies are not the only organizations concerned with its implementation, they are central actors (Boutron, Lapeyre, Paoletti, 2022). Focusing specifically on the case of Portugal and how the Portuguese army has engaged with various issues related to the agenda, Helena Carreiras, Cristina Rodrigues da Silva, and Luís Malheiro (2022) show that the Portuguese army sought to reclaim this agenda early on. The different branches of the Portuguese armed forces quickly implemented internal policies to promote the integration of women into military careers and sensitize their personnel to the challenges raised by the Women, Peace, and Security program. However, this reformist intention is limited by the resistance of the armed forces to implement certain measures they perceive as imposed by the civilian world and disconnected from operational reality.

These regular armies offer varying level of opportunities and inclusion for women. Despite being primarily built on traditional structures, they do involve women and integrate them to some extent. Women who actively participate in such armed forces can acquire new skill sets, irrespective of the intentions behind their inclusion by state militaries (Morgan, 2019). However, their active presence in state militaries does not always translate into a broader impact on the rest of society. The feminization of contemporary armies, although still limited in many respects and conditioned by the maintenance of male hegemony, has nevertheless brought forth new perspectives and renewed various sociological approaches to the military phenomenon (Boutron, Lapeyre, Paoletti, 2022). Whether acting as a "rupture" marker or as a "continuity," the gender

perspective undoubtedly opens new possibilities for the critical analysis of the military reality. It is crucial to examine why women's military participation does not always lead to broader societal participation. Research on women's military participation sheds light on both how war impacts women and how women impact war. Understanding these dynamics can help researchers and policymakers implement policies and initiatives that safeguard women's rights in the post-conflict period.

1.2.2. Women's participation in rebel movements

The participation of women in rebel movements differs greatly from women's involvement in regular armies. Violent political organizations, from the leftists to nationalist movements passing by fundamentalist ideologies, recruited and still recruit female fighters in their ranks. Their roles, integration, and numbers vary depending on the organizations and their ideology.

Accurately measuring the exact number of female combatants within armed groups can be challenging. Insurgent and rebel organizations typically refrain from disclosing detailed statistics about their troop composition, making it difficult to assess the overall gender breakdown of these groups and the number of women actively serving in combat roles. Similarly, even in state militaries, which are generally considered more transparent institutions, obtaining precise data on female combatants can also present difficulties. Women's encounters with warfare and their positions within nonstate armed factions exhibit diversity, mirroring the variations observed among male combatants' roles (Darden, Henshaw, Szekely, 2019). This is largely due to the diverse policies that militant groups implement concerning their female fighters (Bond and Thomas, 2015; Darden, Henshaw, Szekely, 2019). Among the seventy different rebel movements that have been active since 1990, women have played an active role in 60% of them (Henshaw, 2016). As such, it is essential to study their involvement separately from established state actors. National liberation movements like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Irish Republican Army have provided more opportunities for women's military participation compared to the nation-states they were fighting against. However, even within these movements, individual men are less likely to support women attaining equal status (Alison, 2004). Women have also been involved in various historical instances of

armed conflicts, such as the Bolshevik Combat units, the Chinese Revolution, the Vietnamese Revolution, and the Lebanese Civil War (Enloe, 1980).

The inclusion of women in rebel movements or violent political organizations relies on different factors. Rebel movements often heavily rely on local communities and networks of local power holders, such as religious leaders, tribal councils, clan leaders, and village headmen, for crucial support (Wood, 2017). However, directly challenging or contravening the established norms and values cherished by these constituencies can come at a high cost for armed movements. For instance, during the Zimbabwean War of Liberation, ZANLA's decision to incorporate female fighters and promote women's rights in the areas under its control faced resistance and resentment from male villagers and local leaders. Despite these adverse reactions, ZANLA continued to depend on female combatants, but its leaders chose to scale back some of their domestic initiatives aimed at promoting women's rights and equality (Kesby 1996; Wood, 2017). Consequently, rebel leaders often display reluctance to include women in their group's fighting force at the beginning. For example, in the case of the Sandinista fighting forces, even though female combatants eventually made up about a third of the group, traditional societal views of women's roles in Nicaraguan society initially limited their participation, and the organization refrained from recruiting women during the early stages of the rebellion (Chuchryk 1991). Similarly, female combatants were largely absent from the early years of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO). Nevertheless, by 1967, just three years after the initiation of significant conflict activities, the group's leadership established a women's combat detachment. Another factor studied by Wood (2017) and Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely, (2019) is that rebel movement leaders tend to enlist female fighters when there is a pressing demand for combatants. Wood (2017) argues that "as conflicts escalate, the costs of war increase, necessitating greater inputs of both human and material resources to sustain the movement." Failure to meet the human resource requirements of the rebellion raises the risk of failure and defeat for the rebels. The significant increase in the recruitment of women into the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil) in Sri Lanka during the mid-1980s appears to be a strategic response to the urgent need for more fighters resulting from heavy losses sustained by the group in previous years (Alison, 2004). Similarly, in El Salvador, Jocelyn Viterna (2013) explains that the FMLN needed female guerrillas due to high mortality levels early in the war, which created a personnel shortage that could not be filled by recruiting men alone. Usually,

rebel movements tend to lack media coverage and are materially weak. Therefore, highlighting the presence of women in their movement can help people to rally for their cause (Wood, 2017). That is the case of the PKK and the FARC in Columbia, where female fighters' videos can reach 1.7 million views.

Military leaders often view the inclusion of female combatants as incompatible with their beliefs about how wars should be conducted and who should participate in them. As a result, women are frequently discouraged from joining armed groups (Goldstein, 2001). In reality, if women are present in rebel movement, it is only because the organization's leadership explicitly agreed to recruit women. Therefore, the political ideologies held by the leadership directly impact the recruitment of female combatants within the group. Specifically, if the leadership supports gender equality and women's rights in society, the likelihood of recruiting female combatants increases (Thomas and Bond 2015). On the other hand, armed groups that adhere to ideologies that reinforce traditional social hierarchies and are more sensitive to the costs of recruiting female combatants, are less likely to incorporate women into their ranks even as resource demands escalate and potentially jeopardize the movement's ability to achieve its objectives (Wood, 2019). Thomas and Wood (2017) concluded that groups embracing leftist ideologies are more likely to employ female fighters. Indeed, Marx and Zedong argued that the key source of women's oppression was patriarchy and women's equality was a crucial step towards progress. Leftist organizations, who are driven by these historical and charismatic figures, integrated their ideas and adopted policies to reduce discrimination. On the other hand, Islamist rebels are less likely to recruit female fighters since their goal is usually the reaffirm traditional gender roles. Their traditional way of thinking of both male and women in this movement suppress the prevalence of female combatants. Nationalist and ethno-nationalist rebellion does not have a distinct ideology, instead, the ideas supported by nationalists depend on other factors and are subordinate to other ideologies (Freeden, 1998; Thomas and Wood, 2017). Therefore, it is unlikely that nationalist ideas influence female employment but depends on the organization.

Accordingly, women's role in rebel movements varies depending on the group, its ideology, and its mode of action. Indeed, most organization seems to limit women's direct participation in violence and combat. Thus, they are relegated to support roles. While taking into account Henshaw's research (2016) on seventy armed rebel groups, it concludes that women are involved in the majority of these organizations. While women

are often engaged in support-type roles, approximately one-third of these groups include women in combat positions, and around one-quarter have women in leadership roles (Darden, Henshaw, Szekely, 2019). Moreover, women act as combatants in rebel groups more frequently than current scholarship acknowledges (Henshaw, 2016). Evidence shows that leftist groups, following their ideology are more likely to let women access combat roles and greater access to leadership positions. The PKK in Turkey has a specific organizational policy that prioritizes women's equality within the group, extending to leadership positions as well. The involvement of women in the guerrilla of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and People's Protection Units (YPG) underscores the significant positions women have held in their struggle against the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) (Woodward & Ducanson, 2015). Initially in Latin America, women were mobilized into the FARC along with their families and were assigned supporting roles like camp maintenance and meal preparation. It was only later that women were accepted as combatants. Some scholars argued that nationalist movements tended to restrict women's role in combat. Alison (2004) studied women's agency in two nationalist groups: the IRA and the LTTE. She concluded that some women "experienced total equality with male comrades in terms of respect and tasks assigned, this was not always the case, and some male members have been resistant to women's military involvement". While female fighters in the IRA were almost fully involved in combats position, they still faced sexism.

Women joining fundamentalist Islamist movements are often relegated to the roles of mothers and wives and excluded from combat. These women often choose these groups especially because they promote traditional gender values. However, some Islamist groups have deployed women in specific circumstances, particularly for carrying out suicide bombings. Women represent a significant strategic interest in the conduct of terrorist attacks. Firstly, they do not arouse the same suspicion as their male counterparts (Cecini, 2018). They can deceive the vigilance of law enforcement forces predominantly composed of men, making it difficult to search and interrogate them. Secondly, an attack of this magnitude carried out by a woman leaves a lasting impact, provoking an escalation of terror (Cecini, 2018). Some authors argue that suicide attacks carried out by women (whether on behalf of secular or religious organizations) are more lethal than those conducted by men and, consequently, more "effective" (O'Rourke, 2009). This is notably the case with Al-Qaeda, Chechen Black Widows, and Palestinian women belonging to Hamas (Bloom, 2012).

Henshaw's (2016) study reveals that in most movements where women are active, recruitment primarily occurs through voluntary means. This refutes the notion of female participants as mere victims and suggests that the decision to join the rebellion is often a deliberate and conscious choice (Dalton, Asal, 2011). Similar to men, women are frequently driven to participate in high-risk collective action due to their dedication to political or social causes (Bloom, 2012; Kampwirth, 2002; Viterna, 2013). Scholars commonly identify three main motivations that drive women to participate in violent political organizations (VPOs): revenge, representation, and fulfilling social roles. Bloom (2005) and Cecini (2018) points out that personal tragedies, such as the loss of a husband, brother, or father due to political violence as the Chechen black widow, or a desire to retaliate against the government for limiting educational and financial opportunities, often compel women to seek revenge. Alison (2009) cites an example of a young Tamil woman who joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and expressed her rationale as follows: “I want to do something. Staying at home and facing widowhood or the risk of sexual abuse by Sinhalese Soldiers is not a life.” According to Kampwirth (2002) and her study of women combatants in Latin America, the roots of this engagement can first be found in the “family tradition of resistance”. Others joined in the first-place activist and non-violent organizations before rebellions. This membership created a sense of political awareness which turned into a willingness to take coercive actions. Female fighters in El Salvador demonstrates that women's engagement in guerilla is heavily shaped by their social connections (Viterna, 2013). As highlighted in Mia Bloom's *Bombshell* (2012), women become kamikaze due to a combination of various elements, including women's own choices and the manipulative tactics of recruiting organizations.

Research into the motivations of female combatants often reveals similarities with their male counterparts in combat (Darden, Henshaw, Szekely, 2019). Recent research has shed light on the common feature that rebel movements who enlist female fighters are sharing. For instance, Thomas and Bond's analysis (2015) which examined the involvement of women in VPOs across 19 African countries spanning the period from 1950 to 2011, reveals that women are expected to join larger organizations, those that employ tactical specialties in terrorism, and organizations that advocate for women's rights. Still, the individual motivations of women to join rebel movements are varied and usually depend on the political context and personal factors.

One can argue that women were viewed as invaluable resources in the pursuit of independence, but the wider issues concerning women were not genuinely prioritized by VPOs. After a conflict, the rhetoric that was previously employed to attract women often return to the traditional hierarchy model, forgetting what was once achieved (Sunindyo, 1998). Indeed, in Sierra Leone, while former male rebels were urged to join the State Army, female ex-combatants were left aside in the post-conflict period (Morgan, 2019). There are examples where women rebels were able to leverage a political position after civil war or guerilla, like FMLN activist in El Salvador, but it remained a minority. Therefore, though women played a significant role in most of liberation movements, their status post-conflict usually reverted to its pre-conflict state.

As previously discussed in the literature review, women in rebel movements undergo distinct experiences compared to their counterparts in regular armies. Depending on the ideology the organization adopts, they can be offered important roles and consideration. However, while women in regular armies are able to leverage skills from their experience, female ex-combatants in post-conflict might encounter challenges in achieving broader societal advancements.

Chapter 2. Origin and history of the “Kurdish question”

Every people have a history and origins. The Kurdish people have a destiny that sets them apart from other nations. Before delving into the analysis of Kurdish women fighters in Syria and their role in safeguarding Kurdish autonomy against Daesh, it is crucial to present the origins of the world's largest stateless people and the construction of their identity. The Kurdish issue is an extremely complex subject deeply rooted in the history of numerous countries. Long a marginal issue, the Kurdish question was thrust to the forefront of the regional stage following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and developments in the Syrian revolt in 2011. Therefore, a historical reminder is necessary to shed light on the current security challenges unfolding in the region in recent years.

The Kurds, an ethnic and linguistic group, are scattered across a geographical area known as Kurdistan, spanning the borders of several Middle Eastern countries, primarily Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The Kurds are among the largest and oldest stateless populations, with a rich cultural and political history that spans thousands of years. Despite their significant size and historical presence, Kurds have often faced political, social, and economic challenges in the countries they inhabit. Their struggle for autonomy, recognition of their identity, and protection of their rights have been marked by conflicts, uprisings, and territorial disputes. The complexity of the Kurdish situation reflects the influence of geopolitical dynamics and regional rivalries that have shaped their destiny. At the same time, it highlights their resilience, culture, and unwavering determination to safeguard their heritage and achieve their aspirations. This part presents a broad overview of the Kurds and the primary challenges they confront in their pursuit of identity and rights within the Middle East. It aims to offer an accessible account for readers who may be familiar with the Kurds but lack knowledge about their past and recent events. Subsequent pages will delve into providing the reader with comprehensive information and analysis on the history of the Kurds, particularly in Syria, which is crucial to understanding the roles played by the PYD, its armed forces and the creation of the autonomous region of Rojava.

2.1. Who are the Kurds?

Defining the Kurds is not an easy task as there is no Kurdish passport, and identities in Kurdistan are diverse and ever-changing. The states in which they reside generally do not acknowledge their ethnic, religious, or linguistic affiliations. Consequently, there are no exact and reliable figures, but it is estimated that the Kurdish population ranges from 25 to 35 million individuals (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). Straddling the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Kurdistan is one of the most versatile regions in the world, and its people form the largest stateless population group. While the Kurds are native to the Middle East, scholars and the Kurds themselves have yet to agree on the origin of their group. Similarly, not all Kurds share a singular religious identity; although the majority are Sunni Muslims, other religions are also practiced. However, one thing is clear: the Kurds share an ethnic identity. These commonalities have been present since the Middle Ages, and since then, the Kurds have played a role in the histories of the nations that are now known as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

The origin of the Kurds is a complex and debated subject among historians and researchers. Long before nationalist ideology emerged, the Kurds already appeared as a distinct people, a distinct entity. Their presence in history has been the subject of intense research by European orientalists since the late 19th century. Throughout history, the Kurds traditionally adopted a nomadic way of life, focusing on sheep and goat-herding across the extensive Mesopotamian plains and the highlands in Turkey and Iran (Bozarslan, 1997). Despite their enduring presence in Kurdistan for centuries, the Kurds have never had their independent nation or established a sovereign political entity.

Two main hypotheses are often considered: one suggests that the Kurdish people originated from Iranian tribes that migrated into the Zagros mountains during prehistoric times and settled there. While the other proposes that the Kurds emerged from Iranian tribes moving westward, who subjugated and exploited an indigenous population (Pelletiere, 1984; Riamei, 2017). The Kurds have been traditionally linked to the ancient populations of Mesopotamia and have been present in the region for thousands of years. However, the exact origins of the Kurds remain a subject of debate. Godfrey Driver was among the first to draw significant connections between terms related to the name of the Kurds found in cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia and references in Greek and Iranian

texts. For instance, the term “Karda” mentioned in Sumerian texts dating back to the 3rd millennium BCE corresponds to the area of Kurdistan, while the “Kardukhoi” cited in Xenophon's Anabasis during the involvement of Greek mercenaries in a 5th-century BCE internal war for the Iranian throne also appears to have links to the Kurds. These connections suggest a historical relationship between these ancient populations and the Kurdish people. Vladimir Minorsky, a central figure in Russian-speaking Kurdish studies, refutes Driver's thesis and presents a direct line between the Kyrtoi and the Kurds. He links the former, from the east and clearly defined as Iranian, to the Mardoï, a more western Medoscythian group. Some historians put forward the hypothesis that the Kurds are descended from the Medes, dating from the time of the Persian Empire. Kendal Mezan points out that, in the construction of Kurdish identity, the Medes are to the Kurds what the Gauls are to the French or the Romans to the Italians. Indeed, the name of the mountainous Medes is pronounced Kardu by the ancient Syrians and Kordu by the Armenians.

Other historians claim that the Kurds were present long before the Medes. Historically, Kurdistan first appears in cuneiform in Sumerian and Assyrian inscriptions from 2000 BC, which refer to it as the 'Land of the Karda' in the Zagros-Taurus Mountains of the northern and northeastern parts of Mesopotamia (Riamei, 2017). These meager indications of a Kurdish presence in the ancient period are counterbalanced by the abundant information produced by Arab histography. The latter took off in the 9th-10th centuries but refers to an earlier Kurdish presence. First within the Sassanid Empire, then at the time of the Islamic conquest, which marked the violent encounter between the troops of the Mosul hinterland, confined to a series of fortresses, and the Arab armies.

Some authors emphasize that the origins of the Kurdish people trace back to the history of Indo-European tribes that migrated to Kurdistan and assimilated with the inhabitants of the region. As Kurds are native to this area, there is no definitive starting point in their history and settlement. Their heritage is the result of thousands of years of continuous internal evolution and the assimilation of various new groups. It is fair to describe the Kurds as a refugee population, being the descendants of diverse ancient groups, including Caucasian peoples from the north and those who once inhabited the mountainous territories west of the Caspian Sea. The central part of these territories spans

both sides of the Zagros Mountains and extends to the south and east of Southern Anatolia, encompassing the mountainous area of northern Iraq and Syria.

There have been two brief periods of semi-independence for Kurds in modern times, namely the Kingdom of Kurdistan in Iraqi Kurdistan, led by Sheikh Mahmoud from 1922 to 1924, and the Mahabad Republic in Iranian Kurdistan, headed by Qazi Mohammed from January to December 1946. However, these instances of partial autonomy were exceptions in the Kurds' historical journey, as they have been ruled by different external powers throughout their history, including Armenians, Persians, Byzantines, and later the Turks and Arabs. As a result, the Kurds have never had the opportunity to fully realize their autonomy and have been struggling to achieve it for centuries. This is why the current attempt at self-determination is so important to the Kurdish people.

As we can see, the question of the origins of these people is vague. All these scientific or mythological theories may contain elements of truth. We can only point out that the earliest occurrences refer to semi-nomadic, warrior, and Iranian-speaking populations of the Zagros region. Early converts to Islam, the Kurds joined both the armies of Muslim potentates and the great Islamic metropolises on a massive scale. The Kurds are a people influenced by the cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity of Turks, Arabs, Medes, Persians, and Georgians. So how do we define the Kurds? In other words, who are the Kurds?

2.1.1. Mapping the Kurdistan

Kurds can be found in northeast Iran, the Caucasus, and the major cities of the Middle East and Europe. When discussing Kurdistan, we are describing a region situated for centuries in the mountainous transitional zone of the Fertile Crescent, where the Taurus and Zagros Mountain ranges create a circular arc around the Mesopotamian region. The mountain chains of Iraqi Kurdistan stretch from northwest to southeast, running along the border regions with Iran and Turkey (Riamei, 2017). Nowadays, the Kurdistan region is divided into four states: Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. It is important to remember that Kurdistan has no international recognition, and borders within states are often blurred and controversial. Added to this problem is the refusal to recognize the

existence of a contiguous Kurdish geographical entity or even, in the case of Turkey, a distinct people and culture.

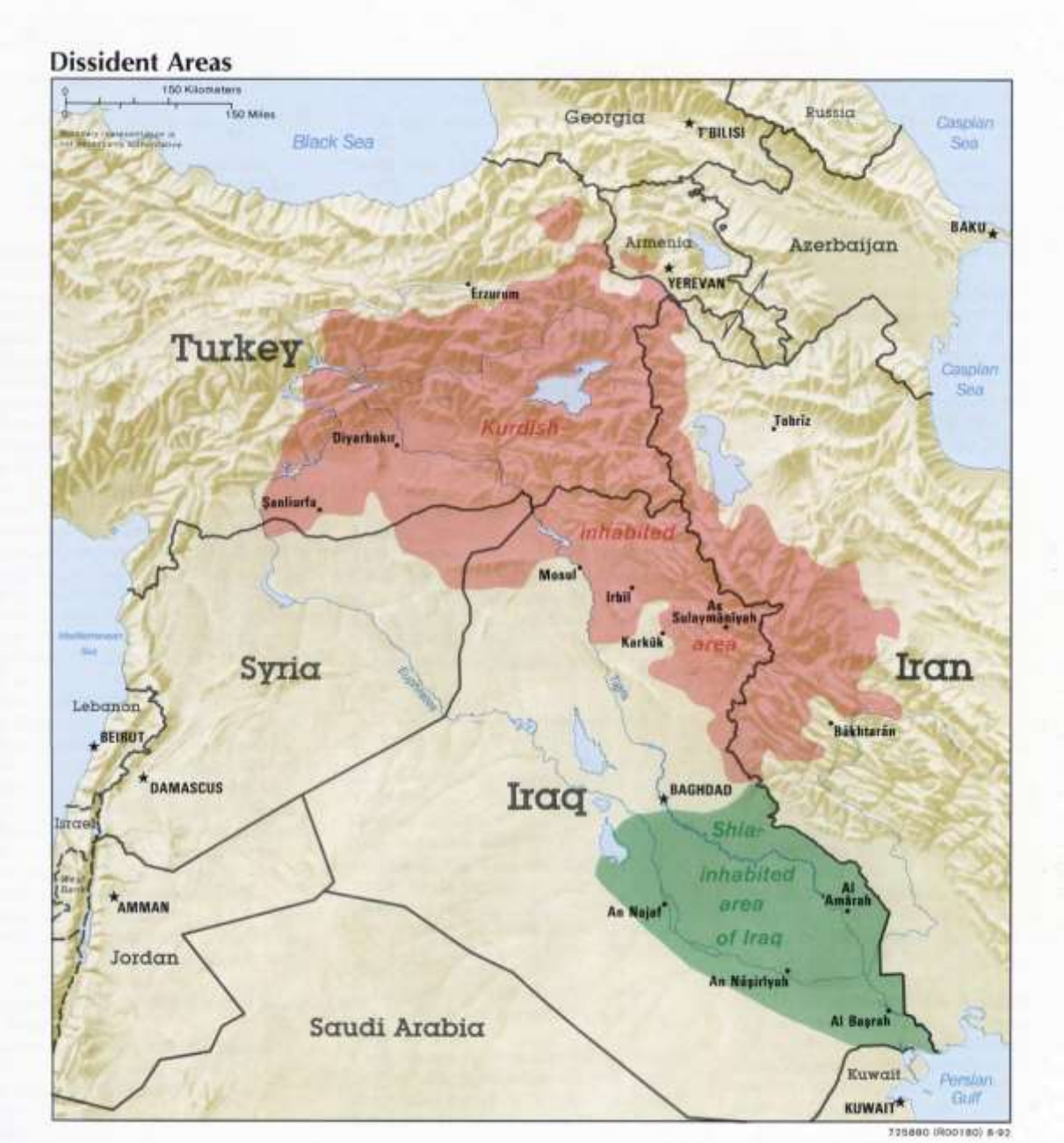

Figure 1 : Map of the Kurdish areas

Source: Institut Kurde de Paris

Medieval Persian and Arabic sources reveal that the main Kurdish groups were unevenly distributed in a region stretching from east to west, between Shiraz in Fars and the Euphrates, and from north to south, between Georgia and the southern Iranian region of Khuzestan. Although not all Kurds live in the mountains, the Kurdish space is primarily characterized by a geological break from the Arab space. The heart of the Kurdish region

is a mountainous strip that extends from the western side of the Zagros range and continues into the Taurus Mountains.

The Kurdistan was and remains without defined limits and borders. Between the XIth and XIIIth centuries, its territory was reduced to the east due to the disappearance of Kurdish tribes in Fars and extended westward, covering areas inhabited by Syriac and Armenian populations (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). Then, in the 14th century, it appeared as a buffer zone between the Mamluk Empire based in Syria and Egypt and Western threats. It was only after World War I and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire that Kurdistan took its current form, divided into four countries. In each of these countries, aspirations for autonomy and independence have been seen as threats to the sovereignty of these territories. In Iraq and Syria, in particular, the central states aimed to establish an Arab belt to reduce Kurdish prevalence in these areas and settle Arab populations there.

Currently, Kurdistan has an area of 520,000 km2 (Bélaïch, 2009). The Kurdish question, therefore, is not merely a problem of minority within one country or another, but rather that of a divided country. Like all other nations, the Kurds are assumed to have the right to self-determination. Quoting the work of Burkay (2001), “The borders that divide Kurdistan are neither natural, nor economic, nor cultural. They are artificial borders imposed against the will of the Kurdish people to satisfy the interests of the powers that divide the country and balance power. These borders have often separated villages, cities, and even families, leading to the destruction and division of cultural and social life.”

There is no official census of the Kurds, simply because the countries involved do not keep records or statistics based on ethnicity or language. Most Kurds live in Turkey, where Kurdish regions cover 30% of the territory, approximately 230,000 km2. According to Pauwels (2019), the Kurdish population in Turkey was estimated in 1990 to be “15 million people, according to Kurdish sources, and 12 million according to a statement by the President of the Turkish Republic, Turgut Ozal.” The region of Kurds living in Iran extends over an area of about 125,000 km2, representing 8% of the Iranian territory (Cigerli, 1999). The Kurds make up seven million of the Iranian population, accounting for 15% of the total population. In Iraq, the Kurdish territory comprises 74,000 km2, about 17% of the country's territory, with an estimated Kurdish population of 5.6 million. In Syria, Kurds make up approximately 2.5 million people, accounting for 7% of

the population. However, Pauwels (2019) emphasizes that these figures are only approximations, especially for Syria – the war and conflicts have displaced millions of people.

2.1.2. Religious beliefs

Religion in the history of the Kurds has always been a source of conflict, as it has been for the majority of peoples in the region. As mentioned by Sabri Cigerli (1999) “The Kurds have often been accused, sometimes of being fundamentalists, and sometimes of being atheists.” They have faced discrimination based on their beliefs, even though the vast majority are Muslims, much like the neighboring inhabitants of the region.

The Kurds, initially influenced by Mazdakism and Zoroastrianism (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018), underwent a swift conversion to Islam during the Arab conquests. Around 640 AD, Arab armies entered the Nineveh plains region and conquered Kurdish fortresses located in or near the northern mountains, marking the first contact between the Kurds and Islam. Kurdish groups in the Fars region of central Iran, situated on the eastern side of the Zagros mountains, were displaced by the Muslim forces, returning to the area much later for transhumance. Although this violent encounter was recorded by Arab historians of the 9th and 10th centuries, its impact appears to have been relatively short-lived.

Upon the arrival of Arab armies in the region, the Kurds quickly embraced Islam, integrating into the caliphate's armies and major cities across the Muslim world. Today, approximately 80% of Kurds identify as Sunni Muslims, following the Shafi'i school of thought, while 12% are Shia and Alevi (Cigerli, 1999). This distinguishes them from their Arab and Turkish neighbors, who predominantly follow the Hanafi school of thought. However, religious diversity is also prevalent among the Kurds. In medieval texts, some Kurds were even mentioned as Christians, although such categorizations are rare in both medieval and modern accounts, as Christianity and Judaism serve as strong differentiating factors. In summary, while it is possible for a Kurd to convert to Christianity, such a decision could result in them being no longer recognized as Kurds within society, even among fellow Christians. On the other hand, the situation with Judaism is somewhat different. Despite the significant emigration of Jews from Kurdistan in the 1950s and some lingering anti-Jewish sentiment, there has been a recent display of mutual sympathy,

leading Kurdish Jews who migrated to Israel to proudly identify as either Kurdish Jews or Jewish Kurds (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018).

Some of them turned to heterodox forms of Islam, such as the Yazidis and Alevis. The latter are mainly present in Turkish Kurdistan. During the rule of the Ottoman Emperors, the Alevis faced frequent persecution due to their heterodox beliefs and suspicion of having pro-Iranian leanings. The Alevis are categorized either as a heterodox Islamic sect and community or as the continuation of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian traditions. According to Philippe Boulanger (2006), approximately 20% of the Turkish population, which amounts to around fifteen million people, consists of Alevis, with about 80% being Turks and 20% being Kurds. The Alevis follow the beliefs centered around Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. As described by Kieffer (1994), Alevis do not adhere to the strict rules of Islamic practice, such as the sharia law, the five pillars of Islam, ritual ablutions, and mosque attendance. They also do not consider Arabic as the language of worship and hold the holy books in less importance, viewing them as testimonies.

The Yezidis, often mischaracterized as "devil worshippers," belong to a syncretistic sect that diverges significantly from orthodox Islam (Riamei, 2017; James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). While their roots can be traced back to Sunni Islam, the Yezidis have integrated elements from various regional religions, such as Paganism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeanism, Judaism, Nestorianism, and Christianity, alongside other Islamic aspects (McDowall, 1992). During the seventeenth century, the Yezidi community was relatively large, but over time, their population declined due to various factors such as physical oppression, forced conversions, and emigration (Bruinessen, 1992). Presently, the Yezidis are found in four primary regional clusters: the Kurd Dagh (Kurdish Mountain) district of Aleppo in Syria, the Sinjar Mountain on the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Shaykhan district north of Mosul, and the southwestern Caucasus (Kreye, 1989). The Society for Threatened Peoples estimates that around 300,000 Yezidis lived in Iraq in 1993, with approximately 5,000 in Iran, 5,000 in Turkey, and around 110,000 residing in Europe. The precise number of Yezidis remains uncertain due to the persecutions they endured, which compelled some to abandon their religious beliefs. Currently, a significant number of Yezidis from Turkey have emigrated to Europe, particularly to Germany.

2.1.3. Language diversity

In contrast to numerous other minority groups in West Asia, the Kurds did not adopt a common language. The rugged landscape of Kurdistan, characterized by high mountains and challenging communication systems, along with the historical absence of political unity among the Kurds, contributed to the lack of shared literature and resulted in significant variations in local dialects within different groups (Riamei, 2017). Consequently, inter-Kurdish communication was hindered, and the significance of language as a symbol of ethnic identity for the Kurds was diminished. Once again, there are several debates regarding the origin of the Kurdish language.

It is important to mention here two authors with completely contrasting theses to highlight the disagreement among researchers on this subject. According to Kreyenbroek (1994), "Kurdish is a language of Western Iran, belonging to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. For this reason, it is very different from Turkish and Arabic - like English is different from French - but it is very similar to Persian, which is the national language of Iran." On the other hand, Eagleton (1946) argues that "Kurdish is a distinct language, belonging to the Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, and is different from Persian in terms of syntax and vocabulary." According to Riamei (2017) Kurdish, as an Iranian language, shares its Indo-European origins with other languages of the Iranian family. It stands in stark contrast to Semitic Arabic and Altaic Turkish. Kurdish bears a closer resemblance to Persian than to Arabic. In its modern form, Kurdish is classified into significant linguistic groups, each further enriched by numerous sub-dialects. Three major dialects are distinguished:

- Kurmanji is the predominant dialect spoken by 80% of Kurds, particularly those residing in Turkey. It serves as the literary language of the Kurds, making it the most esteemed among all Kurdish vernaculars (Riamei, 2017). Kurmanji further branches into North and South Kurmanji. The former is predominantly spoken by Kurds in the Caucasus region of the former Soviet Union, while the latter is used by the people of central Kurdistan, constituting around two-thirds of all Kurds.
- The southern Kurdish dialect, commonly referred to as Sorani boasts approximately 6 million speakers (around 15% of the Kurds). Sorani is, in fact, a collection of numerous dialects and is regarded as the classical Kurdish language.

This dialect is widely used in the majority of the Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan regions.

- The Kurdi dialect, comprising Gurani and Sulaymani variations, is prevalent among certain Kurdish communities. Gurani is primarily spoken by Kurds in Kermanshah (Bakhtaran) in Iran. Additionally, Kurdi is spoken by some Iraqi Kurds. Overall, the Kurdi dialect is estimated to be used by approximately 3 million Kurds.
- It is also worth noting that around 10% of Kurds in Turkey, primarily residing in the regions of Dersim and Diyarbakir, speak a dialect known as dumilî or Zaza (many Alevi Kurds speak the Zaza dialect).

For the same reasons mentioned earlier, the Kurds have had to opt for the alphabet used in the countries where they reside. Kurds use three different alphabets to write in Kurdish - Latin, Arabic, and Cyrillic (Karakus, 2010). Therefore, the Kurds in Turkey, as well as those in Syria due to their strong cultural ties, have adopted a simple phonetic Latin alphabet since the early 1930s, which is more suitable for Kurdish. It is noteworthy that, deprived of a national state and facing cultural and linguistic restrictions in the countries they inhabit, the Kurds have never had the opportunity to unify their language. The multitude of Kurdish dialects poses challenges to mutual understanding, thus undermining the establishment of a cohesive national solidarity built upon a politicized identity (Riamei, 2017). Scientific and literary efforts to protect and enrich Kurdish dialects have been lacking (Riamei, 2017). The presence of diverse religion has not served as a unifying factor either.

It should also be pointed out that many Kurds do not speak Kurdish or do not speak it well, especially the new Kurdish generation, due to assimilation policies. The lack of a robust, centralized administrative structure to unite competing Kurdish tribes has fostered the emergence of diverse languages among the Kurds (Entessar 1989). The rugged and inaccessible mountains, geographical remoteness of Kurdish rural areas from each other, limited transportation and communication systems among various tribes, and constant isolation of one group from another have contributed to the development of distinct dialects. Moreover, state-led efforts at Arabization, Turkification, or de-Kurdification in the region have added to the complexity of the situation (Chaliand 1980; James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018; Riamei, 2017).

2.2. The building of a stateless identity

Until the XIXth century, the Kurds formed relatively autonomous groups within the Ottoman and Persian empires. They experienced a long era of peace in a state of relative submission.

By the time the Ottoman Empire joined the war alongside the Triple Alliance on October 29, 1914, it had already experienced significant weakening and decline. Within its borders, a coup d'état by the “Young Turks” officers in 1913 had effectively placed them in control of the Empire. Simultaneously, external factors had eroded its territorial holdings. Across Europe, the Empire had lost territories to Greece, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria. Only Eastern Romania, Macedonia, and Eastern Thrace remained under its control.

The slow decline of the Ottoman Empire had been set in motion earlier in the 19th century through a process of dispossession initiated by other European powers. France had taken Algeria and Tunisia, while Great Britain had established control over Egypt. Additionally, Italy's actions in Libya in 1912 further chipped away at the Empire's holdings.

In this weakened state, the Ottoman Empire entered World War I with the expectation that its alliance with Germany would help it regain lost territories, including driving the British out of Egypt and countering the growing desire for autonomy and independence among the Arab territories in the Middle East. Although this conflict devastated the Kurds enlisted in the Empire's armies, it brought them closer together, consolidating their national sentiment through political movements they established in the main Kurdish urban centers. After the end of the First World War, the Kurds demanded the creation of an independent state.

2.2.1. A denied state

As the Ottoman Empire was crumbling, the British and the French collaborated to partition the region. On May 16, 1916, amid the ongoing bloodshed in Europe, Sir Mark Sykes, an orientalist and Middle East advisor at the Foreign Office, and François Georges-Picot, a French diplomat, signed a document at Downing Street that would leave a lasting

impact on their names. The Sykes-Picot Agreement outlined zones of control and influence for their respective governments within the Arab-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which had aligned with Germany's Wilhelm II and was considered an enemy (Maila, 2016).

This agreement was reached while the outcome of the conflict remained uncertain, but it set the groundwork for subsequent treaties such as Sèvres and Lausanne. The provinces predominantly inhabited by Kurds were divided as follows: the northeastern Anatolian region was to be placed under direct Russian administration, the southeastern Anatolian region under direct French administration, including Syria, and the Ottoman province of Mosul was split into two zones with French economic management (Rowanduz and Erbil) and British economic management (Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah).

After the Brest-Litovsk armistice in December 1917, Russia's withdrawal from the global conflict had a significant impact. Additionally, the United States joined the conflict in April 1917, further altering the dynamics. Revolutionary Russia's exposure to secret agreements made during the armed conflict prompted the British to reconsider their allied policy towards the Ottomans. On January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson presented a fourteen-point program to Congress. Point 12 focused on the nationalities under Ottoman authority, affirming that “The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities that are now under Turkish rule should be guaranteed an unquestionable security of life and an absolute opportunity for development” (Jmor, 1994; Tejel Gorgas, 2014). Consequently, the inter-allied treaties signed during the war, along with President Wilson's Fourteen Points, had favorably prepared Western public opinion for the establishment of an Armenian state and a Kurdish state.

During this time, several Kurdish nationalist associations come into existence. In November 1918, the “Committee for the Revival of Kurdistan” (KTC) establishes contact with the French and British authorities to champion the aspirations of the “Kurdish nation” (Jmor, 1994). While some Kurdish nationalist groups embrace the principles laid out by Wilson in 1918, they face strong opposition from the strategic interests of Great Britain and France in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the intentions of these major powers remain somewhat ambiguous. Within the association, there are passionate debates about the question of Kurdish independence. Prince Emin Ali Bedir Khan and his supporters

advocate for complete independence, while Seyyid Abdülkadir and his followers promote the idea of autonomy within the framework of the new Turkish-Ottoman state.

General Chérif Pasha, a former Ottoman diplomat and representative of the KTC in Paris, asserts the autonomy of Kurdistan with the support of France and puts himself forward as the potential "Emir of Kurdistan" (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). The Memorandum detailing the Kurdish people's demands, presented by Pasha, is extensive, particularly in the northern regions, which undermines the claims of Armenian nationalists in the provinces of Erzurum, Bayazid, and Van. The attached map in the Memorandum shows a more modest approach, granting the northern provinces to the Armenians, with access to Lake Van. On the other hand, the envisioned Kurdistan in the southern region (present-day Iraq) is more expansive, encompassing cities predominantly inhabited by Arabs, like Mosul. Additionally, although the Kurdish claims pertain to Ottoman territory, the map also outlines the borders of Persian Kurdistan, asserting the existence of a Kurdistan beyond the imperial boundaries. In 1919, the conditions appeared favorable for the liberation of non-Turkish peoples. Despite the strategic interests of Great Britain and France in the region, the possibility of establishing a British-influenced Kurdish state was not entirely dismissed. France, despite initial hesitations driven by the desire to counterbalance British influence in the Middle East, eventually supported the creation of an independent Kurdish state in an area recognized as its own under the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

During the Paris Peace Conference, General Chérif Pasha, representing the KTC, signed an agreement in 1919 with the Armenian Boghos Nubar Pasha, which outlined the establishment of independent Armenia and Kurdistan (Chaliand, 1980). While both the Armenian and Kurdish delegations had previously laid claim to the entire eastern provinces of present-day Turkey, they ultimately reached a compromise under European pressure. This agreement was affirmed by the Treaty of Sèvres on August 16, 1920, which was a peace treaty signed between the Ottoman government and the Allies. According to this treaty, based on the principle of self-determination of peoples, the empire recognized the independence of Hedjaz, Armenia, and a portion of Kurdistan, and granted mandates to major powers over Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Cyprus, and Libya (Kaymah, 1996). The treaty was the outcome of extensive negotiations that began in 1919 between the Istanbul government and the Allied nations. Regarding the Kurds, the understanding outlined temporary autonomy for the Kurdish-populated regions in Turkey and the

possibility of complete independence in the future, depending on the will of the population in those areas. As a result, this treaty brought the Kurdish nationalists closer to their objective of establishing an independent state. The treaty with Turkey, signed at Sèvres, established Armenia in its Articles 88 to 93 and guaranteed Kurdish autonomy in its articles 62[1], 63[2] et 64[3]. Article 62 thus envisages "local autonomy for the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman Empire where the Kurdish element dominates," and in its article 64, it speaks of an "independent Kurdish state." The fate of the Kurds inhabiting the vilayet of Mosul is to be decided later.

The territorial boundaries of this Kurdish state in eastern present-day Turkey, however, are limited, as the future Kurdistan is restricted to only the provinces of Diyarbakir and Hakkar. This treaty confined the future Kurdish state to the poorest and most mountainous part of Kurdistan: east of the Euphrates, south of the Armenian border, and north of the Turkish border with Syria and Mesopotamia. The oil-rich and agriculturally abundant region of Mosul would not be included in the Kurdistan defined by this treaty (Chaliand, 1980).

Furthermore, the Treaty of Sèvres only refers to local autonomy and not an independent state. The internal struggles and fratricidal disputes between the independentist and autonomist Kurds weakened the influence of the Kurdish delegation. Far from fully satisfying the territorial demands of the Kurds, the Treaty of Sèvres remains the first international legal instrument to recognize the rights of the Kurds to establish an autonomous region promised independence within one year. The main signatories express their strong sympathy for the Kurdish people as follows: "Considering their recognition of the autonomy or possibly the independence of Kurdistan and believing that to facilitate

[1] Article 62: A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French, and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3). If unanimity cannot be secured on any question, it will be referred by the members of the Commission to their respective Governments. The scheme shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas, and with this object, a Commission composed of British, French, Italian, Persian, and Kurdish representatives shall visit the spot to examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier where, under the provisions of the present Treaty, that frontier coincides with that of Persia.

[2] Article 63: The Turkish Government hereby agrees to accept and execute the decisions of both the Commissions mentioned in Article 62 within three months from their communication to the said Government.

[3] Article 64: If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas. The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the Principal Allied Powers and Turkey. If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul vilayet.

the economic development of this country and provide all the assistance its administration may need, it is desirable to avoid rivalries between nations" (Kaymah, 1996). The Treaty of Sèvres is received with great joy by the Kurdish people, who believe that access to autonomy is very close. Following this treaty, the idea of independence becomes more certain for Kurdish nationalists, who wish to see an autonomous Kurdistan comprising all Kurdish regions.

The Treaty of Sèvres plays the role of a powerful political myth for various Kurdish movements since 1920. Its importance lies not so much in the recognition of a Kurdistan as envisioned by Kurdish committees in 1919 but in the recognition of a Kurdish state, even if it should be limited to a small part of the claimed territory. Furthermore, the promise made to the Kurds in 1920 is used to denounce the plot of European powers who, after signing the treaty, fail to enforce its conditions upon Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkey, which refuses to recognize Kurdistan (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). Consequently, the European powers become responsible for the misfortune of the Kurdish nation, while political and social divisions, as well as the opposition of some Kurdish tribes to the Treaty of Sèvres, are forgotten.

In 1918, responding to the interests of the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), the British government decides to occupy the oil-rich province of Mosul in northern Iraq before the Ottoman government's surrender becomes effective (Tejel Gorgas, 2014). Faced with this fait accompli, France, originally slated to obtain economic rights over northern Iraq as per the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in 1916, relinquishes the region to the British. In return, France secures the promise of French participation in the TPC.

The creation of a Kurdish state, as envisioned by the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 but under British influence, is not entirely discarded. In practice, British policy towards the Kurds is multifaceted. Between 1918 and 1923, two parallel systems are established in northern Iraq (Kutschera, 1997). "Southern Kurdistan," with its capital in Sulaymaniyah, is administered by the Kurds themselves under the supervision of British advisors (Kutschera, 1997). The second system falls under direct control by the mandated power, encompassing the remaining Kurdish regions from Mount Sinjar in the west to the Great Zab in the east. Nevertheless, the western region witnesses the defeat of the Greek army by the Turks, while in the east, the Kurdish Alevi uprisings are suppressed by Mustafa

Kemal's loyal forces in March 1921. Simultaneously, French troops in Cilicia face significant setbacks against Turkish soldiers and Kurdish militias. The withdrawal of Italian, Greek, and French troops from Turkish territory between 1920 and 1921 puts Great Britain in a critical situation. Thus, between 1920 and 1922, the British faced conflicting views on the status of Kurdistan. While officers deployed in the region tend to favor the creation of an independent Kurdistan under British influence, the High Commissioner based in Baghdad, Sir Percy Cox, advocates for the annexation of Kurdistan to the Iraqi state to ensure its survival and regional stability (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018).

Additionally, the government led by Lloyd George sympathized with the Kurdish cause, and British officers based in Cairo also support the detachment of Kurdish regions from both Turkey and Iraq, with Kurdistan being seen as a potential buffer state between the two countries. However, the viewpoint of the High Commissioner gradually gains prominence. French and Italian defeats against the Kemalists, along with the alliance of Kurdish tribes along the border between Turkey and northern Iraq with Turkish rebels, seem to validate Sir Percy Cox's perspective: an independent Kurdistan could invite Turkish interference and lead to instability on the borders of the British-mandated Iraqi state (James, Tejel, Gorgas, 2018). Furthermore, the 1922 elections bring victory to the conservative Bonar Law, who questions the foreign policy pursued by Lloyd George until then. By the end of 1922, the British were willing to engage in new negotiations for peace with Mustafa Kemal's new government.

As the Lausanne Conference on Middle Eastern affairs took place, resolving the aftermath of the First World War, Ismet Pasha led the Turkish delegation (Bakawan, 2021). His mission was to justify “Turkey's sovereignty over the province of Mosul,” which largely corresponds to the territory of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan, in the presence of Lord Curzon, the head of the British delegation. Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership, the new Turkey entered a phase of distancing itself from the Treaty of Sèvres, signed on August 20, 1920, which explicitly proposed the creation of a Kurdish state encompassing Kurds from Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. Opposed to these provisions, Mustafa Kemal entrusted Ismet Pasha with formalizing a new treaty with the international powers during the Lausanne Conference (Bakawan, 2021).

Eventually, on July 24, 1923, the Turkish delegation concluded the Treaty of Lausanne with the Allies, which was more favorable to Turkey and rendered the Treaty of Sèvres null and void. In this new agreement, there was no mention of a Kurdish or Armenian state. While the treaty did guarantee rights in religious and educational domains to non-Muslim communities in Turkey, the implementation of these clauses was never realized. The Kurds in Turkey were not recognized as a "national minority" with specific rights, particularly linguistic ones. The treaty primarily recognized the legitimacy of the Atatürk regime established in Ankara. Next, the borders of modern Turkey were defined. Turkey relinquished its former Arab provinces and acknowledged Britain's possession of Cyprus and Italy's possession of the Dodecanese. As a result, modern Turkey was confined to Anatolia and eastern Thrace. The Allies secured significant concessions from Turkey concerning the former Arab and European lands of the now-defunct Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the treaty stipulated that the border between Turkey and Iraq would be determined amicably between the two disputing countries within nine months. In case of failure to reach an agreement within the specified timeframe, the matter would be brought before the League of Nations Council[4], which indeed happened. After numerous negotiations and a proxy war between Turkey and Great Britain, during which the Kurdish tribes of Northern Iraq played a significant role, the League of Nations ultimately decided to grant the province of Mosul to the British, who had been present in Iraq since 1918.

Aktar (1985) draws our attention to Ismet Inonü's declaration, the representative of the Turks at the Lausanne Conference, who states: "The Kurds differ in no way from the Turks; although they speak different languages, these two peoples form a single block from the standpoint of race, faith, and customs." Indeed, less than a year after the signing of the treaty, the Turkish government implemented a policy of "Turkification" of Kurdistan, thereby renouncing the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne. From that point until the 2000s, the Kurds would undergo an unrelenting process of assimilation. This repression began as early as March 1924 when schools, associations, and publications in the Kurdish language were banned throughout the territory. Hence, there would be no Kurds in Turkey, but rather "mountain Turks," the term now given to the Kurds. As per the new legislation introduced by Mustafa Kemal, mentioning the existence of a Kurdish people, culture, or language would undermine national unity, creating minorities based

[4] The League of Nations is the former United Nations Organization which will be created only after the Second World War in 1945.

on race, language, and religion, and seriously jeopardizing the indivisibility of the state's territory and nation.

In mandated Syria, under the influence of the French protectorate, the Kurds were not officially recognized as a “minority” with specific rights, neither by the French authorities nor subsequently by the various Syrian regimes. As a result, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 and the subsequent handling of the Mosul issue represented the culmination of the perceived “betrayal” of European powers towards the Kurdish people, leaving them without any territorial entity to fulfill their national aspirations.

2.2.2. The political organization of the Syrian Kurdish movement in the recent period: PYD road to power

This part has the heavy task of demonstrating how fragmented and disunited the Kurdish political organizations are in Syria. There are currently more than twenty-five Kurdish political parties in Syria, for a population of around 2.5 million. This fragmentation of the political field is due in particular to internal dissensions facing the impossibility of finding a consensus on claims, but also to external players such as the Iraqi PDK or the Turkish PKK.

Syria, under the French mandate, faced a notable absence of ethnic, religious, political, or cohesive “national” unity. The social structure revolved around clans, tribes, and confederations, where their interests outweighed any sense of “nationalities,” which remained mostly theoretical (Riamei, 2017). Consequently, certain Kurdish tribes, who were supporters of the Republic of Aleppo, regarded the arrival of the French with suspicion, while others who aligned with Mustafa Kemal during his “war of independence” saw it as an opportunity. The French authorities adopted a divisive policy to consolidate their control, which involved promoting ethnic and religious minorities as a counterbalance to the Arab and Sunni majority (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018; Carrier, 2022). Although France never formally recognized a “Kurdish minority” with specific rights, some French officers practically supported Kurdish nationalism to resist Turkey's territorial ambitions in Northern Syria and weaken Arab nationalists in Damascus (Allsopp, 2016). As a result, France implemented a policy that favored certain Kurdish tribal leaders while further dividing the Kurdish community into three enclaves - Kurd Dagh, Ayn al-Arab, and Upper Jazira - each treated as separate territories.

The consequences of this development have a distinct impact on Upper Jazira. Motivated by French officers eager to prolong their mandate in Syria, influential Christian figures and Kurdish tribal leaders in the region initiate an autonomist movement. They seek France's direct protection over Jazira, and demand local affairs be managed by “minority” officials (Tejel Gorgas, 2014). Although the autonomist movement loses momentum after two years, the nationalist Syrian government resulting from the 1936 elections perceived the Christian and Kurdish elements as a threat to the Syrian "nation" (Carrier, 2022).

Concurrently, the recognition of the Kurds' significance for mandate politics in the 1920s prompted France to establish special connections with Kurdish intellectuals and activists exiled in the Levant (Seida, 2005). As Mustafa Kemal assumes power in Turkey, Kurdish leaders depart from Istanbul, seeking exile or going underground. Among the exiled intellectual circles in Syria, the Bedir Khan family holds a prominent position. With the collaboration of French officers, the Bedir Khan family becomes instrumental in driving both the Kurdish political and cultural movement during the mandate (Tejel Gorgas, 2014; James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). They are the pioneers of the Khoyboun committee (“Be Yourself”) and, with support from the French Institute in Damascus, they publish cultural and literary journals - Hawar (The Call), Ronahi (Clarity), Roja Nú (The New Day), Stér (The Star). Even though these publications' readership is limited to the Levant, they play a crucial role in maintaining a link between the emerging Kurdish nationalism during the Ottoman era and the modern nationalism of the interwar period. The emergence of a Kurdish national movement, backed and sponsored by the mandate authorities, primarily stemmed from refugees of the Turkish state (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). These refugees introduced “nationalist” ideas from Turkey, although with relatively modest immediate success. Consequently, the organized Kurdish national movement in Syria originated as a response to Turkey and diverged from Arab nationalists, while showing minimal opposition to the mandate power.

In 1946, Syria achieved both de facto and de jure independence as French troops withdrew. The nation witnessed a succession of leaders driven by coup d'états, each aiming to modernize the country. Within this context, the Kurdish population found itself divided and vulnerable. While some leaned towards embracing Syrian state nationalism, others aligned with the Syrian Communist Party, and a minority identified with Kurdish nationalism. It's noteworthy that despite constituting 10% of the Syrian population, there

was not a well-structured Kurdish political movement in Syria that wielded significant national influence.

During this period, the first explicitly Kurdish political party in Syria was established. In the politically active years of the 1950s, many Kurds were aligned with the Syrian Communist Party. A group of activists closely associated with this party developed a political agenda and subsequently founded the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (PDKS) in Aleppo in 1957. The party's initial platform was strongly influenced by leftist ideas (Carrier, 2022). Beyond advocating for national aspirations such as the protection of cultural rights and the call for a “special status” for predominantly Kurdish regions, the PDKS also aimed to challenge imperialist exploitation in Syria on behalf of the Kurdish population.

Despite these movements, the Syrian government persists in denying the Kurds equal rights enjoyed by other inhabitants of the country. For instance, Kurdish dialects are not officially recognized as languages of the Syrian state, which is in contrast to the recognition given to other languages and dialects spoken within the nation (Bouvier, 2020). A pivotal moment in the politicization of Syrian Kurds took shape through the government's census on August 23, 1962, conducted in the contemporary Hassakeh district, where Kurds constitute the majority. As a result of this census, the Syrian government declared that the 120,000 individuals accounted for (roughly 20% of the Kurdish population of that time) were classified as illegal immigrants from Turkey and, consequently, their nationality was revoked (Seida, 2005; Carrier, 2022). Consequently, they forfeit their status as Syrian citizens and are categorized as either “ajanib” (“foreigners”) or “maktumin” (“unregistered”) individuals (Bouvier, 2020; Carrier, 2022). With these designations, Syrian Kurds who have been stripped of their nationality are no longer able to provide education for their children, secure employment, acquire real estate, or even enter into marriages. A considerable number of their properties were subsequently seized by Syrian authorities and allocated to Syrian citizens of Arab or Assyrian descent. The Syrian government also made efforts to establish an “Arab belt” along the Turkish border (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016) with terms that closely resemble Ankara's “safe zone” initiative in the northeastern region of Syria explained in Chapter 4. In connection with the execution of this “Arab belt” plan, it has been reported that the Syrian government relocated approximately 140,000 Kurds to the desert regions of the Baadiya and resettled Arab settlers in over 300 Kurdish villages (Bouvier, 2020).

During the same year, following internal disagreements within the sole Kurdish party, members of the Democratic Kurdish Party of Syria (PDKS) divided into two rival factions: the PDKS (left) and the PDKS (right). The formal political cohesion among the Kurds in Syria ceased to exist. Syrian Kurdish political groups faced paralysis, influenced both by the oppressive atmosphere and their internal divisions. The 1965 split of the PDKS marked just the beginning of a series of such divisions. The Cold War backdrop provided ample grounds for conflicts among Kurdish political leaders who showed little inclination for compromise. Consequently, there was a rapid proliferation of Kurdish political groups in Syria, particularly during the 1980s. All of these organizations had their origins in the original PDKS (Carrier, 2022). Each internal election catalyzed a fresh beginning, often stemming from personal rivalries. Each emerging organization formed a distinct circle around its leader. Notably, in the Kurdish groups that emerged from PDKS divisions under Hafez al-Assad's leadership, the "founding presidents" held their positions for numerous decades, with limited turnover or significant dynamism (Tejel Gorgas, 2017).

These internal tensions open the door to external mediation, particularly from the KDP led by Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq. Despite their efforts to restore unity within the Syrian branch of the KDP, the fractures and divisions persist.

In 1978, a group of revolutionary Kurdish and Turkish students, led by Abdullah Öcalan, initiated the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). What set this organization apart from other leftist groups in Turkey was its clear separatist agenda (Bozarslan, 2017). The PKK's goal was to form a "socialist and independent" Kurdish state that encompassed the Kurdish territories from all four regions. The military coup in Turkey in 1980[5] dealt a fatal blow to the burgeoning democratic movement in the country. As a result of being banned, the PKK went underground. Abdullah Öcalan and his loyal core members, known as "Apocus," subsequently sought refuge in neighboring Syria, where the government was relatively accommodating to Turkish revolutionaries due to longstanding historical tensions between the two nations.

[5] The leadership of the Turkish army believes that the popularity of the PKK, combined with the state of political violence prevalent in the country due to an important economic crisis, seriously threatens the survival of the state. As a result, on September 12, 1980, a military coup is orchestrated by General Kenan Evren, under the pretext of restoring order in Turkey. The constitution is suspended, and all political parties are banned. Many leaders of the PKK are arrested, tortured, imprisoned, or killed. The Kurdish movement retaliate by engaging in armed struggle.

The leniency shown by the Syrian state towards the PKK sparked inquiries. Although the PKK's goal was to create a cohesive Kurdish state, its primary actions were centered on the Kurdistan region within Turkey. In practical terms, the PKK opted not to mobilize Syrian Kurds against their own country's government, choosing instead to direct their efforts toward combating the Turkish state (Carrier, 2022). On the other hand, the Syrian government allowed the PKK to enlist and provide military training to Syrian Kurds to counter Turkey. From the Syrian state's perspective, channeling the most militant Kurdish factions against Turkey appeared more favorable, as it established a shared cause that could divert attention from its nationalistic policies. Nevertheless, the PKK's entry and establishment in Syria did not sit favorably with other Syrian Kurdish groups, each with its distinct political objectives. This not only led to rivalries and conflicts but at times also resulted in confrontations and interpersonal tensions (Tejel Gorgas, 2014). Subsequently, Kurdish nationalism gained momentum throughout the Middle East, both in terms of military efforts and political and cultural realms.

Recognizing that the organization's resilience hinged on having a haven, the Turkish state presented a demand to the Syrian government: either declare the PKK a terrorist organization and outlaw it within Syria, or face military intervention from Turkey (Carrier, 2022). The notable military imbalance made victory an improbable outcome for Syria. Additionally, due to American influence, Turkey allied with the State of Israel. From Syria's perspective, prioritizing enduring peace with its Turkish neighbor seemed more appealing than endorsing a guerrilla movement that appeared destined for failure throughout history. Consequently, compelled by Turkey's stance, Syria entered into the Adana Agreement in October 1998 (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018; Carrier, 2022). This agreement rendered the PKK banned within Syria, its leadership figures, including Abdullah Ocalan, were expelled, its organizational framework was dismantled, and Syria relinquished any military alternative for addressing its border-related discord with Turkey.

Despite his forced isolation, Öcalan, now regarded as a martyr-like figure, continues to maintain control over the PKK. Faced with the guerrilla's lack of success, his party shifts its strategy. Beginning of the current century, he announces the cessation of armed struggle, abandons Marxist ideologies, advocated for autonomy instead of full independence, and ultimately develops the concept of democratic confederalism—a transnational approach based on local self-governance and influenced by the American thinker Murray Bookchin (Piot, 2020). Due to the relatively small number of Syrian

Kurds and political oppression, Syria was not the primary focus of the PKK. Nevertheless, as early as 2002, during its eighth congress, the PKK announces its intent to establish new entities in Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Carrier, 2022). The PKK lamented that the Syrian government had taken no steps to address the issues of the Kurds while acknowledging that, unlike the Turkish state, it did not pursue a policy of "denial." The program did not refer to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which was supposed to have been founded two months earlier. The establishment of the PYD is generally dated to the end of 2003 (Carrier, 2022). However, it is challenging to determine the significance of this official founding, as no proclamation could be made in Syria. The PYD's mission was to propagate the organizational model of the new ideology advocated by Abdullah Öcalan in his writings.

The Kurdish political landscape in Syria has increasingly prioritized forging connections with democratic entities both within and beyond the country's borders. This emphasis aligns with nationalist liberal values and a step-by-step approach to democratic reforms. Nevertheless, the diminishing significance of ideological differences has not prevented the Kurdish political movement from experiencing continued fragmentation. In fact, from 1990 to 2000, the movement saw seven divisions and four-party amalgamations. Subsequently, between March 2004 and 2010, there were no less than seven endeavors to establish fresh Kurdish political parties (Allsopp, 2016).

Indeed, the years of relative stagnation that followed the expulsion of the PKK from Syria created an environment for the growth of other Kurdish political parties. A notable example is the formation of the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (Partiya Yekitiya Democrata Kurd li Sûriyê, PYDKS) - commonly known as "Yekîtî," which means "Union" in Kurdish. This party emerged in 1992 as a result of the amalgamation of various small leftist groups (Allsopp, 2016; Carrier, 2022). Mainly active in urban centers, the Yekîtî party distinguished itself from other Kurdish factions through its active political engagement. The fundamental principles of the Yekîtî party's agenda centered around two core concepts. To begin with, its perspective centered on the idea that resolving the Kurdish issue in Syria should be approached through a "national" lens, focusing on the Syrian context rather than adopting a transnational approach as advocated by other factions (Carrier, 2022). Additionally, the Yekîtî party emphasized the presence of a "Syrian Kurdistan," contrasting with alternative viewpoints that tended to define it primarily in terms of ethnicity or culture (Carrier, 2022). Consequently, the Yekîtî party

garnered a reputation for being relatively more radical, which appealed especially to university environments.

From March 12 to 16, 2004, numerous Syrian Kurds flooded the streets to display their dissatisfaction, directing their anger at all the symbols associated with the Bachar al-Assad regime. The origins of this revolt can be traced back to both longstanding dynamics and unprecedented occurrences within the Kurdish regions of Syria. Up until the late 1990s, the Syrian government had effectively redirected Kurdish grievances towards other Kurdish areas in the Middle East, particularly Turkey and Iraq. Substantial regional changes disrupted this established situation: the strategic partnership between the PKK and the Damascus regime ended in 1998 due to Abdullah Ocalan's expulsion from Syrian territory. Additionally, the Turkey-Syria rapprochement during the 2000s, the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) the same year, all played a role (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). Encouraged by the significant progress of Iraqi Kurds, other Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iran, along with Syrian Kurds, began expressing aspirations for administrative autonomy. At last, the first indications of a fresh era of prominence for the Kurds in Syria are catalyzed by the liberal climate of the “Damascus Spring,” advanced by the ascent of the new President Bashar el-Assad. During this time, the Yekîtî party arranges several peaceful protests in the streets of Damascus.

The start of the Kurdish uprising in March 2004 occurred during a soccer match in Qamishli, located in Syrian Kurdish territory. Supporters of the Arab team displayed portraits of Saddam Hussein to provoke the Kurds, who had experienced chemical attacks under Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, resulting in the deaths of 50,000 to 180,000 Kurds (Bouvier, 2020). The confrontations at the stadium quickly escalated into riots. Despite being politically divided, Kurdish organizations united and called for demonstrations. Thousands of individuals protested the regime's policies and police repression in other Kurdish cities like Afrin, Amouda, Derik, and Aleppo, where a significant Kurdish population resides. In a historic moment for modern Syria, simultaneous mobilizations sweep across all three Kurdish enclaves. This gave rise to the image of a cohesive and supportive "Syrian Kurdistan" (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). The toll included 43 recorded fatalities, hundreds of injuries, and about 2000 arrests. The severity of the crackdown underscored the government's apprehensions regarding the Kurdish minority. As a

consequence, Kurdish political groups emerged from this period of unrest in a diminished state.

Until 2011, marking the onset of the Syrian civil war, Kurdish political parties maintained a low profile and were fractured within Syria due to the political pressures stemming from the earlier riots (Bouvier, 2020). As the protests against the Syrian government initiated on March 15, 2011, the Kurdish population and its political leaders found themselves divided regarding their stance toward Bashar al-Assad. Some, especially among the Kurdish youth, believed it was advantageous to align with the broader protest movements, as they viewed this surge of dissent as an opportunity to advocate for a political system that would ensure equal rights for the Kurdish minorities residing in Syria. However, Kurdish leaders showed greater reluctance in calling for Assad's removal (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018; Bouvier, 2020; Carrier, 2022). Traditional Kurdish political parties harbored concerns that if the Kurds aligned with the opposition, the regime could target them. This gave rise to the notion of uniting Kurdish organizations within a "national council." Through numerous negotiations, participants eventually reached an agreement on a collective agenda by October 2011. As a result, the Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC) was formed, comprising around fifteen Kurdish parties.

During this period, the PYD sets itself apart from the other prominent Kurdish parties in Syria. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which holds significant influence in Afrin and Kobani, chooses not to align with the KNC due to the omission of several active segments of Kurdish society in its composition. As a result, the PYD follows a distinct path, abstaining from support for either the Syrian revolutionary forces or the Damascus regime. Instead, it encourages Kurds, particularly in regions where the party has a strong presence, to adopt the concept of "democratic confederalism," a political vision that seeks localized self-governance. Concurrently, internal disagreements among the parties within the KNC hinder its progress, causing difficulties in fulfilling the pledged commitments. Taking advantage of the situation, the PYD embarked on building an extensive network of supporters in other Kurdish regions of Syria where its presence was initially limited. It involved activists establishing Kurdish schools and cultural centers in specific areas and subsequently initiating community councils, all aligned with the principles of autonomy and democratic confederalism (Carrier, 2022). By the end of 2011, the PYD had evolved into a political entity capable of rivaling the Kurdish National Council, which encompassed nearly all the major parties (Tejel Gorgas, 2014). While the

former was focused on expanding its grassroots structures and local influence, the latter positioned itself as the "recognized representative" to external entities. The former boasted ideological and organizational coherence, whereas the latter grappled with internal disagreements.

In July 2012, following an implicit agreement of non-aggression with the PYD, Bashar al-Assad decides to partially withdraw his forces from northern Syria. This move serves a dual purpose: gathering his troops around Aleppo and Damascus and creating a threat along the southeast border with Turkey in a border region (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). The partial withdrawal of Syrian forces from the Kurdish enclaves represents a significant shift. While the parties aligned under the KNC struggle to react effectively to this unforeseen change, the PYD capitalizes on its strengths: established activist networks, strong internal discipline, the military expertise of PKK leadership, the charismatic presence of leader Abdullah Öcalan, and the establishment of the organizational groundwork for "democratic autonomy." The PYD swiftly emerges as the dominant force within the Kurdish enclaves. While both Western and pro-PYD media portray the liberation of Rojava from Ba'athist influence, reality presents a more intricate picture. The PYD is determined to allow no other social or political power to challenge its authority, which indirectly extends to the influence of Damascus. It becomes clear that while the Rojava system, which will be explored in Chapter 3, showcases inclusivity in terms of gender - each canton is jointly governed by both a man and a woman - as well as ethnic and religious diversity, it is deeply partisan.

Aware of the weakness stemming from their political disunity, the KNC, and the PYD have made several attempts to overcome their differences. One of the most significant endeavors will be embodied by the signing of the "Erbil Agreement" on October 15, 2012: the two Syrian Kurdish movements agree to co-administer Rojava and conduct joint military operations. Despite establishing a coordinating entity, the "Supreme Kurdish Committee" (DBK), this agreement fails to resolve the disputes between the two major Kurdish political currents and does little to diminish the PYD's dominance.

Chapter 3. The involvement of Kurdish female fighters in the struggle against ISIS: the case of the YPJ

Having delved into the historical context of the Kurdish issue and gaining a deeper insight into the origins of the struggle, the upcoming chapter, the third in sequence, will shift its focus towards the participation of Kurdish women in the YPJ and their resolute battle against Daesh. This chapter will encompass the pivotal events that paved the way for the formation of Rojava.

The engagement of Kurdish women in the fight against the Islamic State has drawn significant global media interest. This can be attributed, in part, to the prohibition of women's direct involvement in ground combat in most countries worldwide (a relatively recent development in most Western nations). Moreover, the striking ideological and normative juxtaposition between these women and their extremely religiously conservative opponents adds to their compelling narrative. Significant armed forces such as those of the United States and the United Kingdom implemented a ban on women in active roles on the battlefield. Consequently, to Western audiences, the YPJ combatants appeared to embody the concept of liberal feminism, where women are seen as upholders of rights and exemplars, thus demonstrating their parity with men. Concurrently, the YPJ fighters seemed to contradict prevailing assumptions about oppressed Muslim women in the Middle East.

Seeking to move beyond surface-level headlines, this chapter aims to analyze the context in which the involvement of women in warfare took place, the various sources of motivation that propelled them to it, the roles they assumed, and their achievements both on the battlefield and in safeguarding their territorial heritage. Despite offering a striking contrast to the prevailing imagery of male-dominated conflicts, media representations of Kurdish female fighters often neglect a deeper exploration of the broader context they operate within. Thus, the initial segment of this chapter will concentrate on the genesis of the uprising in Syria, the establishment of Kurdish armed forces within the country, and the historical underpinnings of Kurdish women's participation in warfare. Indeed, when delving into the annals of Kurdish history, it becomes evident that their involvement is far from extraordinary.

3.1. Contextualization

> "The real fear is not that Syria is dividing. It's that the Kurds are uniting."
>
> Aliza Marcus

The initiation of the Syrian Civil War has ushered in a variety of novel players in the Middle East (Darden, Henshaw, Szekely, 2019). Among them, two radically opposing political entities: on one side, the Islamic State organization (Daesh), which pursued a Sunni "caliphal dream." On the other, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed branches – YPG and YPJ. The PYD's armed forces, in particular, have risen to prominence not only due to their noteworthy combat capabilities against ISIS (a feature that sets them apart from both the Syrian military and the primary opposition factions) but also due to the substantial presence of female soldiers within their ranks. Considering the open and aggressive misogyny propagated by ISIS, the frequent defeats it has suffered at the hands of a predominantly female fighting force have been met with a significant amount of schadenfreude within the global media.

It is indeed important to revisit the beginnings of the Syrian uprisings to contextualize the emergence of these new actors on the international stage. Both the PYD and Daesh capitalized on the chaos prevailing in Syria to advance their respective ambitions. For the former, it was the creation of a Caliphate adhering to strict Sharia rules; for the latter, an autonomous region aligning with the ideology of democratic confederalism. The autonomy of Syrian Kurds and the Syrian crisis are deeply intertwined events. As Zabad (2017) argues "While the Arab Spring may have endangered the fates of certain minorities in the region, the unrest has created substantial political opportunities for others. The Kurds, the long-suffering people whose homeland straddles war-torn Iraq and Syria, might turn out to be the accidental winners of the era." Given their geographical extent and long history of active resistance, it is not surprising that the Kurds fully leveraged the window of opportunity opened by the upheavals sweeping the region over the past two decades to reshape the post-Ottoman Empire map in their favor.

3.1.1. The Arab Spring in Syria

The emergence of change in Syria was marked by the wave of uprisings famously known as the “Arab Spring.” The social movement that initiated in late 2010 in Tunisia resulted in the ousting of Ben Ali in January 2011. This event triggered apprehension among Arab leaders, with many worrying about potential repercussions and the spread of similar movements in their own countries. This wave of change continued its course relentlessly. After Ben Ali's departure, the movement at Tahrir Square led to the eventual exit and subsequent apprehension of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Similarly, Libya experienced the start of demonstrations that swiftly transformed into armed confrontations.

The reasons behind these uprisings often bore similarities, transcending the individual idiosyncrasies of each state: high unemployment, youthful populations, entrenched political structures, and endemic corruption. The prevailing authoritarian military governments, concentrating wealth in the hands of a privileged few, struggled to meet the aspirations of the burgeoning youth. The rejection of the status quo by the younger generation is one of the factors contributing to these uprisings (Radpey, 2020). Furthermore, this revolution gained global attention and spread rapidly worldwide primarily due to the modern digital technologies employed by the youth (Garas, 2021; Carrier, 2022). As a result, the revolts are fundamentally rooted in both socioeconomic distresses, surpassing a simple protest by educated youth against oppressive regimes.

The unexpected regime changes and the potential shifts in international dynamics raised concerns among certain powerful nations that had safeguarded their interests in these states. Turkey, whose GDP experienced significant growth from 2000 to 2010, recognized a favorable occasion to enhance its influence throughout the Arab world, in line with its “strategic depth” doctrine articulated by its Foreign Minister, A. Davutoglu (Carrier, 2022). The adjacent country of Syria held a strategic position in what Turkey saw as its “natural hinterland.” Despite having maintained cordial relations with the Syrian government since the 2000s, a regime change would have been favorably received by Turkey.

In Syria, the question of following the trend arose rapidly. President Bashar al-Assad remained confident at the beginning of 2011, believing that the reasons behind the uprisings in other Arab countries did not apply to Syria. And it must be acknowledged

that the early months of 2011 seemed to support his perspective (Carrier, 2021). Opposition forces attempted, albeit with limited success, to initiate a similar opposition movement in Syria as seen in other Arab nations. Various Syrian opposition groups, primarily operating from abroad, coordinated efforts to call for demonstrations on February 5, 2011 (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). The calls made on social media, primarily on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, were filled with optimism. However, these calls remained ineffective: no demonstrations occurred within Syria itself (France 24, 2011). Fear played a significant role, especially since the organized opposition in Syria, more than in Tunisia or even Egypt, was tightly controlled and heavily suppressed.

The situation changed in mid-March 2011, marked by an event considered the starting point of the Syrian revolution. Several teenagers who had written anti-regime slogans on a wall were arrested by the police in the city of Daraa, near the Jordanian border (Keskin, 2015; Carrier, 2022). This incident could have remained just another minor event among the scattered incidents that had occurred in Syria. However, the treatment of these teenagers, who were tortured, sparked widespread outrage and led to the first significant demonstrations in that city (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). Other solidarity demonstrations with Daraa took place in several major cities across the country, including Damascus, on March 15, 2011 (Barthe, 2013). The response of the Syrian police was immediately brutal: they opened fire on the protesters with live ammunition, resulting in dozens of deaths. In response, the Syrian opposition called for a national day of action in major cities across the country on March 25 (Siddique, 2011). The Syrian revolution had begun. However, these initial significant demonstrations did not bring about any changes in the Kurdish cities (Carrier, 2022). The Kurdish organizations remained steadfast in their approach, aiming to avoid the eruption of unrest.

The efforts of the Kurdish parties could only contain the inevitable for a certain period. The nationwide demonstrations, which were now taking place every Friday, occurred in several Kurdish cities (Keskin, 2015). On April 1, 2011, young Kurds responded to the calls for protests launched on social media, despite the silence of the parties. The demonstrations mainly took place in Cezîre (Qamishli, Amuda, and Hesekê) and the city of Kobanê. Exploiting the fear of Sunni Islamism, the Syrian government exacerbated communal divisions and brutally suppressed Sunnis but showed leniency towards protesters from minority groups (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). On the same day, while protests in Damascus were met with violent suppression resulting in

several fatalities, the authorities refrained from intervening in the Kurdish cities, except for a few instances of firing warning shots and imposing brief detentions (Carrier, 2022). The regime appeared particularly apprehensive that these opposition protests might expand into Kurdish cities. This concern was amplified by the potential risk of the Kurdish parties, with which the regime had ambiguous relationships, losing their relatively established influence (Allsopp, Van Wilgenburg, 2019).

A pivotal shift occurred in June 2011, marking a significant development for the events that followed. Colonel Hussein Harmouch of the Syrian army made a noteworthy announcement in a video where he disclosed his identity and declared his desertion (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016; Carrier, 2022). However, this video merely highlighted an ongoing trend: the increasing occurrences of desertions and instances of disobedience within the Syrian army. Numerous soldiers, along with entire units, progressively joined the ranks of the rebellion. Over time, all factions opposed to Assad underwent a process of militarization. On July 29th, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established by officers who had defected, forming a military council (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). In August, the Islamic State of Iraq dispatched a small contingent of jihadists to exploit the prevailing chaos and establish a foothold in Syria. These jihadists would later evolve into the al-Nusra Front several months down the line.

While Kurdish and Arab political organizations began to unite, spontaneous protesters and activists also started to organize in parallel (Feuerstoss, 2012). Local coordination committees were established across the country. They took on the responsibility of organizing the protests, preparing banners and slogans, encouraging passersby to join the demonstrations, and more. These activists were primarily young individuals with computer literacy, adept at organizing through social networks, and capable of circumventing the censorship imposed on the Syrian internet (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). They were the ones initiating the protests and deciding on the national slogans. On a national scale, these councils attempted to draw closer and coordinate their efforts from the summer of 2011 onwards, with varying degrees of success. Thus, the summer of 2011 marked a pivotal shift in the trajectory of the Syrian protest movement (Feuerstoss, 2012). Western powers openly backed the opposition, while Turkey, a significant neighboring force, sheltered and lent support to those opposing its former ally. The Syrian situation seemed to be following the trajectory of the Libyan scenario, a civil war.

In areas where it held political sway, such as Afrin, the PYD did not organize opposition demonstrations. It is noteworthy that this stance of neutrality, upheld by the PYD, was viewed critically by other Kurdish political parties and Western entities (James, Gorgas, 2018). One of the senior figures of the PYD, Hîsên Cawis (2011), argued for this choice. He rejected two misguided perspectives on the ongoing developments. Firstly, the perspective that unconditionally linked the fate of the Kurds and the Kurdish issue to the Arab protest movement in Syria, seeking to erase Kurdish characteristics and identity under the pretext of engaging in the Syrian revolution, to emphasize Kurdish 'patriotism' (Carrier, 2022). The other perspective, on the contrary, was "to not see the developments and changes in the overall situation," and to wait for the revolution to unfold without "taking practical measures" (Carrier, 2022). According to him, it was a mistake to impose the slogan of "the fall of the regime" on the Kurds and "limit their aspirations to that," ignoring the unique characteristics and issues faced by the Kurds. The Kurds should "use the majority of their strength to address their social and national issues." Therefore, they needed to "move beyond the logic and mentality of begging," which involved seeking their rights from others. For Hîsên Cawis (2011), the Kurds had enough strength to organize themselves and "impose the solutions to their problems on all parties and powers as a fact."

To implement this strategy outlined by Hîsên Cawis, professional Syrian activists who had spent years in the PKK were dispatched to Rojava. The arrival of these activists in northern Syria dates to the summer of 2011 (Carrier, 2022). Some were tasked with preparing "defense," while others focused on forming "civil committees." Their work was conducted in secrecy, which is why their presence went relatively unnoticed by most Kurdish parties. The choice to operate initially in the Afrin region was not coincidental, as the PYD had many sympathizers there. The decision to start with villages was also strategic: it aimed to avoid cities where the regime's grip and control were tighter.

In summary, there was a reciprocal relationship between the Syrian Revolution and the establishment of democratic autonomy. As the revolution progressed, expanded, and gained intensity in Arab urban centers, it compelled the regime to withdraw from comparably calm Kurdish regions. This dynamic proved advantageous for Kurdish rights and their pursuit of an autonomous region. By 2012, as confrontations escalated from rebellion to civil conflict, the Syrian military committed a series of massacres. Simultaneously, the Free Syrian Army, backed by Turkey, underwent organization and

aimed for a decisive breakthrough. It initiated an assault on Damascus, the Syrian capital, and within five days, launched another offensive in Aleppo, the country's second-largest city (Le Monde, 2012). In Damascus, the regime puts up resistance and launches a counter-offensive that pushes the rebels out of the city center on August 4th. In Aleppo, the clashes remain inconclusive, resulting in the city quickly becoming divided into two parts. To bolster their forces in Aleppo, the Syrian army withdraws from Syrian Kurdistan. While loyalist troops maintain strongholds in Qamishli and Hasakah, PYD takes control of Afrin on July 11th, Kobane on July 19th, and several other local areas. This move places the region under the governance of the PYD, as previously discussed in Chapter 2. Through this strategic maneuver, the Syrian regime issues a warning to Turkey, a steadfast supporter of the Free Syrian Army.

In this context, the Kurds leveraged the ongoing political turmoil in Syria to assert their ambitions for autonomy. While the PYD focused on establishing civil councils guided by the principles of democratic autonomy, this was not their sole objective. Democratic autonomy also encompassed a significant facet: the issue of self-defense. Establishing a network of councils and creating an autonomous region without armed forces seemed unviable. The Kurdish territories were situated within a national framework amidst a civil war. Turkey, increasingly concerned by the conflicts occurring at its border, was preparing for potential intervention. Consequently, it was unimaginable for the Kurds that this conflict would not eventually spill over into Rojava.

3.1.2. The armed organizations of the PYD and the historical engagement of Kurdish women in guerilla

The armed forces of the PYD, known as the YPG/YPJ, came into the spotlight following their prominent role in the battle of Kobanê against the Islamic State. However, their origins are not as recent as one might think. The exact timeline of the inception of the initial self-defense groups in Syrian Kurdistan remains elusive. According to some researchers, like Knapp (2019), the genesis of the first militias can be traced back to the aftermath of a violent crackdown by the regime in 2004 during a football match between an Arab and a Kurdish team in Qamishli. This incident triggered an atmosphere of apprehension in the predominantly Kurdish regions. The memory of the 2004 unrest partially accounts for the hesitancy of Kurdish political parties to fully engage in the

Syrian uprising of 2011. Despite the regime's harsh suppressive measures, the establishment of self-defense mechanisms persisted and even gained momentum. By 2007, defense committees were already initiating their first military actions in response to anti-Kurdish attacks (Knapp, 2019). Consequently, the groundwork for these committees was laid before the eruption of the Syrian crisis, with the crisis itself serving as an accelerant.

When the situation in Syria started to deteriorate, the PYD was aware of the threat posed by this war, especially the possibility of Turkish intervention in Syrian territory (Carrier, 2019). The PYD saw this potential intervention as the greatest danger to the Kurds of Syria. It was within this context that the establishment of defense committees began. According to Cemîl Kobanê, a senior commander of the YPG, the organization of self-defense initiatives reportedly commenced in the summer of 2011 in the Afrin region. Silvan Afrin further elaborated on these developments in an interview conducted by Knapp and al. (2016):

> "In the spring of 2011, we expected that the protest movement would spread... We talked about how to get ready for it, and what we would do. We were very watchful. That spring we began to build people's organizations. The question arose as to how we would protect ourselves. So in July or August, we established the self-defense unit of the People's Self-Defense Units YXG [predecessor of the YPG]. At first we were few in number, as most people were still so intimidated by the state. We invited all the minorities to a founding congress, but because the war was going on, only a handful dared to show up."

It is important to mention that initially, these defense units were not affiliated with the PYD. However, the PYD was the only Kurdish party to recognize the necessity of developing armed branches to protect the Kurdish population. In this context, Afrin adds:

> "The only party that supported us was the PYD. We were always criticized for that, but the PYD worked every day at the grassroots, and our numbers grew. We built the armed units illicitly. Many people in Kurdistan had weapons hidden away: shotguns, pistols, and Kalashnikovs. Within six or seven months we organized the self-

defense committees of the YXG clandestinely" (Knapp et al., 2016; Gunter, 2018).

The primary activities attributed to the YXG primarily involved retaliating against the assassinations of Kurdish politicians. Despite their close association with the PYD, the YXG's protective measures extended to all Kurds, regardless of their political affiliations.

On July 19, 2012, Bashar al-Assad withdrew his troops from northern Syria[6], the YPG declared their formation. The YPG disclaimed being a partisan militia and simply defined itself as a patriotic force and a defense institution in service of the Kurdish population (Carrier, 2022). The YPG then welcomed the Erbil Agreement, signed a month earlier between the PYD and ENKS (formerly known as KNC - Kurdish National Council[7]), pledging not to differentiate between the two councils or political organizations. However, the YPG's distinctions from the YXG were only in their name. The political orientations of this armed group were well known. Under these circumstances, aiming to avoid any disagreements with rival parties of the PYD, the YPG formally positioned itself under the authority of the Supreme Kurdish Council (DBK) (Khalil, 2013). Comprising ten members, with five representing various parties from the ENKS and the remaining from the PYD (Carrier, 2022), this council had been established to jointly administer the Kurdish regions and curtail the PYD's power within these enclaves. Nevertheless, this did not alter the PYD's predominant position. On July 29, 2012, the YPG proclaimed the liberation of Kobanê, Afrin, and other cities from Ba'athist control. Subsequently, they endeavored to liberate the Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo but encountered severe repression from the regime.

As defense units began to form, numerous female fighters from the YJA-Star, the women's army of the PKK, were mobilized in Rojava to train future combatants (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016). In 2011, when the YXG was established, two-thirds of the leadership was composed of women. After the YXG transformed into the YPG following the July 2012 revolution against the regime, more and more women expressed their desire to join their ranks. The PYD supports gender equality as articulated by Abdullah Öcalan in his writings. Women are regarded as indispensable in protecting Rojava and advancing

[6] Two narratives explain the withdrawal of Syrian troops from northern Syria. According to the discourse of the PYD supporters and Kurdish militias, the fighters surrounded the areas held by the regime and peacefully or militarily requested Syrian army soldiers to surrender. The other narrative, put forward by rival Kurdish parties to the PYD, asserts that the PYD had struck a secret pact with the Damascus regime.

[7] See Chapter 2, "The political organization of the Syrian Kurdish movement in the recent period: PYD road to power."

its quest for liberation. Thus, on April 4, 2013 (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016), an autonomous unit entirely composed of women was formed, named the Women's Protection Units (YPJ)[8]. These units are composed solely of women combatants, although numerous YPJ fighters serve in units that include both men and women. It is important to note that, at this time, YPJ were not the female counterpart of the YPG. The YPG were the global armed wing which includes an exclusive female battalion, the YPJ. The YPJ assumed comparable roles to men and are furnished with suitable equipment (Nash, Searle, Rodriguez, 2021). All female individuals who had been previously involved in the YPG's combined units were automatically enrolled as members of the YPJ. Şîlan Karaçox contended that "at first, there was one women's battalion per canton; then each neighborhood received one" (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016). Subsequently, each district established a YPJ center, and multiple academies for women's defense were built. Fresh women's units were established almost daily (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016).

Regarding the strength of these units, there are no truly reliable statistics available. In early 2013, the YPG reported having approximately 3,000 fighters, while the YPJ, their women's wing, consisted of around 700 members (Barfi, 2015). By 2015, the YPG claimed to have around 23,650 fighters and the YPJ had approximately 19,350 members in their ranks (Barfi, 2015). Furthermore, alongside these combatants, there were approximately fifteen thousand troops from the Sanadid Forces of the Shammar tribe, several hundred from the Syriac Christians, and an additional three hundred foreign fighters who joined the ranks of the YPG's forces (Barfi, 2015).

However, it is important to mention that the PYD has enforced mandatory conscription for both boys and girls since 2014 (Danish Immigration Service, 2015). This law applies to all individuals aged 18 to 30 living in the three Kurdish cantons, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. According to regulations in the PYD-led regions, conscripts are expected to fulfill their service obligations exclusively within their respective local regions and are not intended to participate in frontline operations. However, in reality, conscripts have been assigned duties beyond Kurdish-majority areas, such as Raqqa and Manbij (Allsopp, 2019). Despite opposition from many civilians, mandatory conscription remains in place (Al-Jabassani, 2017).

[8] Yekîneyên Parastina Jin.

The YPG and YPJ follow the principle of justified self-defense, which dictates that all military actions are in response to aggression (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016). When subjected to attacks, these forces retaliate, while still considering the potential for diplomatic involvement. As highlighted by Çinar Sali (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016):

> "Every being has to create methods of self-defense according to its way of living, growing, and connecting with others. The aim is not to destroy an enemy but to force it to give up its intention to attack. Guerrilla fighters discuss this as a defensive strategy in a military sense, but it works in other areas as well. It's a method of self-empowerment. The YPG and YPJ attribute great meaning to defense. National armies serve the state, but they leave the people without defense."

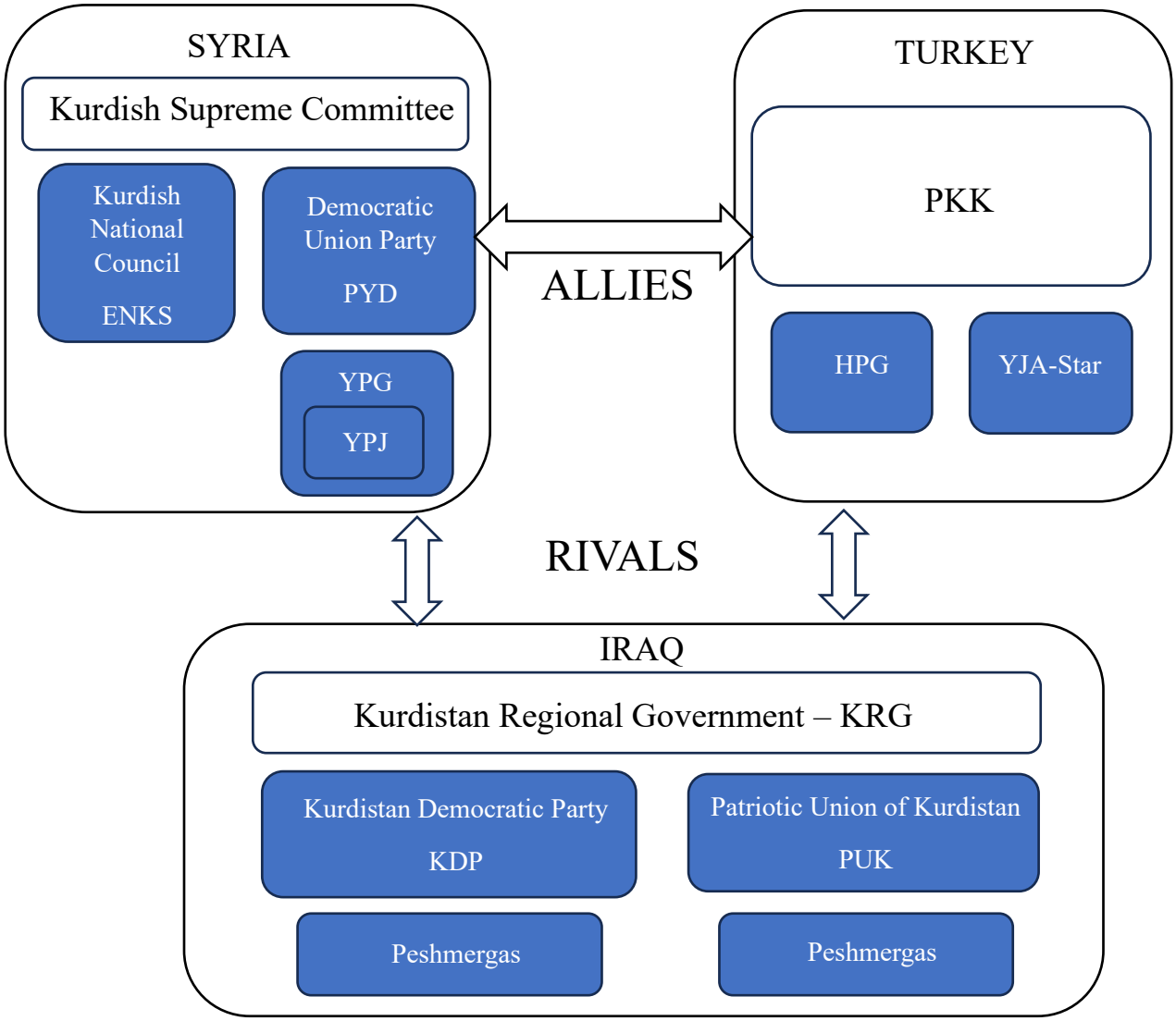

Figure 2: Principal Kurdish parties and armed groups

The recent media interest in female combatants within the ranks of the Kurdish guerrilla fighting against the Islamic State in northern Syria has introduced Western audiences to the active role of women in Kurdish political violence. However, women's involvement in the Kurdish movement is not a recent phenomenon but rather rooted in a historical commitment. The portrayal of women as warriors is frequently used to characterize them and can be identified as far back as the 1800s, illustrated by the well-known Kurdish female fighter Kara Fatima Khanum. She gained prominence as a war leader, commanding a battalion of men during the 1852 conflict against Crimea (Beyler, 2020). The history of their people, marked by warrior population, armed struggle and desire for self-determination, has led Kurdish women to engage in both politics and in military. These engagements have been diverse, including participation in partisan formations, but taking up arms and fighting alongside their male counterparts has been their initial contribution (Begikhani, 2020).

It is within pro-PKK organizations that the phenomenon of female involvement has gained the most momentum (Grojean, 2019). Since the establishment of the PKK in 1978, the organization has welcomed a substantial number of women. Its internal policy places the liberation of women as one of its main pillars. It is one of the first left-wing organizations to establish mixed battalions rather than auxiliary units for women. After a two-year experiment, exclusively female combat units were formed in 1995 (now known as the Union of Free Women-Star, YJA-Star, distinct from the People's Defense Forces, HPG, which are male or mixed) and an autonomous women's party was founded in 1999 (the Free Women of Kurdistan Party, PAJK). Today, over 40% of guerrilla fighters are women, and co-leadership has been established in all political and military organizations of the party (Grojean, 2019). In Syria, the PYD, which draws its ideology from the PKK, has consistently encouraged women to join the ranks of its militias.

In contrast to these two organizations, within the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzani family in Iraq, women are not combatants, although they can become police officers (Darden, Henshaw, Szekely, 2019; Grojean, 2019). The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani, the main rival of the KDP for two decades, established its first female unit in 1996. While these 500 to 600 female fighters (among 150,000 to 200,000 peshmergas) were primarily responsible for border surveillance and were not intended for combat, the war against the Islamic State led some of them to join the front after 2014, an operation that was later halted due to a lack of funding (Darden,

Henshaw, Szekely, 2019; Grojean, 2019). This variation among each of the parties stems, as I stated in Chapter 1[9], from the claimed ideology. The Iraqi Kurdish parties, despite officially being left-leaning, ultimately adhered to tribal rules defined by the promotion of traditional values.

The experiences of Kurdish female fighters challenge certain feminist theories[10] that contend against women's involvement in warfare by claiming it is primarily a male endeavor, and women are inherently peaceful. The situation of Yezidi women, who are a Kurdish-speaking religious minority primarily residing in Iraq, serves as an example. They were targeted by ISIS and became victims of war, facing various forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery. This illustrates that avoiding combat does not provide protection from the severe repercussions of armed conflicts (Begikhani, 2020).

Throughout their varied experiences, Kurdish women have encountered numerous obstacles, many of which are deeply embedded in the patriarchal system. Confronting both inequitable traditional norms and state violence simultaneously constitutes a formidable endeavor, demanding considerable dedication and unwavering vigilance. Kurdish women hold a steadfast belief that achieving true liberation requires a progressive political initiative rooted in equal rights and social justice (Begikhani, 2020).

3.2. Jin, Jîyan, Azadî: a women's revolution in Syria

"A country can't be free unless the women are free."

Abdullah Öcalan, 2016

3.2.1. The rise of ISIS in Syria

The claim is frequently made that the 2003 American invasion of Iraq played a substantial role in fostering the growth of terrorism. It is contended that ISIS found its origins in the Iraqi civil conflict triggered during the period of American occupation from 2003 to 2011. The disbandment of the army, the large number of detainees, and the escalating unemployment led to the emergence of anti-American and broader anti-

[9] See chapter 1, "women's participation in rebel movements."
[10] See Chapter 1, "theorizing women and war."

Western sentiments (Hamel, 2015). Driven by this sentiment, many former members of the Iraqi army joined what would later evolve into the Islamic State due to economic motives.

From 2004 onward, a terrorist organization under the leadership of Jordanian figure Abu Musab al-Zarqawi surfaced in the mainly Sunni regions of the divided Iraqi nation. Initially known as “Tawhid and Jihad,” the group later underwent a name change to become Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its peak influence occurred between 2004 and 2006 when it effectively positioned itself as the core entity behind the “jihadist resistance” against the American presence and the recently formed Shiite administration in Iraq, which was backed by the United States (Guidère, 2016). After Zarqawi's death in June 2006 due to a U.S. operation in Baqubah, various leaders within the jihadist sphere opted to unite their efforts under a single flag, resulting in the emergence of the “Islamic State in Iraq” (ISI) (Negus, 2015). This fresh entity designated an Iraqi citizen named Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader, although he was subsequently killed in 2010, just before the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. This transition then ushered in another Iraqi figure, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who rapidly propelled the organization into novel dimensions (Sherlock, 2014).

From 2007 to 2011, the group engaged in low-intensity guerrilla actions and experienced a steady decline in territory due to the counterinsurgency measures carried out by the U.S. military. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of American troops by the end of 2011, coupled with the almost simultaneous eruption of the civil war in neighboring Syria, breathed new life and unforeseen opportunities for growth into the “Islamic State in Iraq.” Baghdadi sent one of his supporters, Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, to Syria in August 2011 to form a fresh faction (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). By January 2012, Joulani had succeeded in setting up the Al-Nusra Front. This group rapidly transformed and expanded, eventually emerging as one of the most influential rebel entities within Syria (Dorronsoro, Baczko, Quesnay, 2016). Many of its members become involved at an early stage alongside the armed opposition against the Syrian regime, fighting against loyalist troops. It is widely recognized today that numerous Salafists were released from Syrian prisons by the Damas regime to join the ranks of the Free Syrian Army (Pilidjan, 2019). During that period, they, like other factions within the armed opposition, received support from both Sunni Arab nations (Gulf countries) and Western nations (such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States), all of which were vehemently against the

continued rule of Bashar al-Assad (Guidière, 2016). This strategy of “jihadizing” opposition movements pursued by the regime aimed to undermine the credibility of the democratic opposition in the eyes of Western nations. However, these fighters started not only to join the Islamic State but also brought along other soldiers with them.

Initially embedded within the ranks of the primary insurgency force, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the fighters of the “Islamic State in Iraq” (ISI) swiftly made their mark, drawing on their acquired expertise from engagements against American forces in Iraq. Their military distinction emerged through striking operations, leading them to outshine other factions. By 2012, they coalesced into a resilient jihadist nucleus, all the while remaining an integral facet of the armed opposition against the Syrian regime, backed by Russia and Iran.

Starting in 2013, the decline of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) became evident, and most active fighting forces aligned themselves with jihadist groups (Afp, 2014). However, two organizations competed for the allegiance of these fighters: the “Al-Nusra Front,” led by the Syrian figure Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, and the “Islamic State,” led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from Iraq. Both leaders were committed to the jihadist cause and had a longstanding association. Al-Joulani upheld an Islamic nationalist perspective, aiming to preserve Syria within its recognized borders, while Al-Baghdadi advocated for redefining borders to establish a transnational entity uniting the Sunni population across the region, extending from Yemen to Lebanon (Lussato, 2014).

In April 2013, Al-Baghdadi proposed the unification of jihadist forces in Syria and Iraq under his authority, and he announced the establishment of the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (also known as Daesh, although the organization does not acknowledge this name considered degrading). However, Abu Mohammed al-Joulani rejected this proposal and swiftly pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri (Guidière, 2016). Al-Zawahiri promptly endorsed him and declared the transformation of Al-Nusra Front into an official subsidiary of the organization in Syria, named “Al-Qaeda in the Levant” (AQAL).

This declaration triggered an internal conflict that led to hundreds of casualties among the jihadist factions and established Al-Baghdadi's dominance (Guidière, 2016). Leveraging the desertion of members from Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch and the influx of numerous foreign fighters offering support, ISIS initiated a campaign to capture regions

primarily inhabited by Sunni populations. On June 29, 2014, symbolically corresponding to the first day of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar, Al-Baghdadi declares the “restoration of the Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq (Rfi, 2014). A few days later, on July 11, 2014, Al-Joulani, the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Levant (Syria), responds by proclaiming the “Emirate of the Levant,” modeled after the Taliban's “Islamic Emirate,” and vows to control the borders of his self-declared “Emirate” in relation to the newly proclaimed “Caliphate.”

The matter of borders holds significant importance for ISIS, as it seeks recognition not merely as a terrorist group but as a legitimate state entity (Pilidjan, 2019). This declaration of a caliphate occurred when the jihadists had established a certain level of territorial presence, lending them a certain degree of legitimacy. Consequently, ISIS can assert its enforcement of Sharia law within a designated territory, complete with its own institutional framework. This distinction sets it apart from other entities like Al-Qaeda, which offers little beyond terrorism and an ongoing war, along with a distant and implausible vision of a caliphate establishment (Luizard, 2015).

ISIS's territorial expansion strategy in Syria was initiated in 2013 after its separation from Al-Nusra Front. The seized areas encompassed regions formerly held by the Free Syrian Army and other Salafist groups. For instance, Raqqa, previously under the control of the Al-Nusra Front, was captured (Pilidjan, 2019). Following its capture in 2014, Raqqa was declared the capital of the nascent state. Over the course of 2014, the organization's territorial gains became more cohesive and stable. The Aleppo governorate also came under ISIS control, wrested from Al-Nusra Front. This Syrian campaign adhered to a particular approach: involving the infiltration of Iraqi jihadists into Syrian territory and enlisting Syrian jihadists. Even though both Syrians and Iraqis shared leadership within the ISIS hierarchy, Luizard (2015) highlights the inclination of Iraqis to position themselves as leaders, with Syrians expected to integrate into their movement.

It is widely recognized that the Syrian conflict presented ISIS with a distinct chance to reconstruct itself and amass the formidable strength it holds today. Additionally, these territories faced daily airstrikes from an international coalition aiming to pinpoint ISIS militants; however, due to their integration within the local population, the occurrence of “unintended casualties” is rising. In their attempt to isolate the terrorist group politically and economically, both regional and international forces unintentionally

supplied it with a vulnerable population, a crucial element for its emergence as a proto-state.

3.2.2. The YPJ against Daesh

Before delving into the YPJ/YPG struggle against ISIS, I will first briefly present the YPJ and the motivation of women to join such organizations. YPJ fighters garnered global recognition due to their successful resistance against ISIS' attempted siege of the city of Kobanî in Rojava. But their involvement in violent non-state actor-hood is deeper than this battle and requires a better analysis. Taking into account that women make up 40% of YPG (Lazarus, 2019) and that they fought and commanded alongside men in all the battles led by the YPG, I will use the term YPG/J while analyzing their involvement.

As I stated above, the YPJ is an all-female battalion composed of approximately 24,000[11] (Perry, 2017) Kurdish and international women. Yet, until 2016 when they became an independent army, the YPJ were not the female counterpart of the YPG since the latter designates the entire Kurdish army in Syria. It is a women army inside the army assigned with specific tasks, although women are fighting in the YPG alongside male as well.

One of the fundamental tenets of the YPJ/YPG revolves around the concept of legitimate self-defense, as discussed by Knapp, Flach, Ayboga (2016), and Dean (2019). This principle is epitomized by what Öcalan termed the “Theory of the Rose,” wherein he likens the defensive mechanisms of living entities, such as roses with thorns, to the objective of safeguarding life from potential harm rather than launching offensive actions (Çiçek, 2015). This principle finds its articulation in Article 15 of the Social Charter, stipulating that the People's Protection Units operate in accordance with the universally acknowledged inherent right of self-defense. This right is not intended for aggressive acts against adversaries; rather, it constitutes a response to external threats and serves as a safeguard for both society and the core tenets, as well as the ideologies and values rooted in Rojava.

[11] In 2016, according to the YPG spokesperson.

The establishment of the YPJ served a purpose beyond combatting the prevailing adversary; its essence lay in constructing a transformative society that embraces women as integral components of that society. In an interview conducted by the YPJ Press Office, Nesrin Abdullah, the High Commander of the YPJ, outlined three primary objectives of this women-led military organization (Sharif, 2018):

> "The main goals of YPJ are:
>
> - Unity of women worldwide
> - Build a new army culture
> - Build a free, democratic, ecologic society, which increases the equality among people." (The High Commander of YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah, YPJ PRESS OFFICE, 2016).

In addition to resistance, ideology has held a significant influence in attracting Kurdish women to join the YPJ (Tank, 2017). A single-minded focus on the YPJ's struggle as a military one would be oversimplified and misconstrued - at its core, it stands as an ideological endeavor (Dean, 2019). The core objective of the YPJ, and at its very essence, is to dismantle the patriarchal structures that form the foundation of ISIS, thereby aiming to defeat the adversary. As Nisrîn Abdullah further elaborates (Dean, 2019):

> "The YPJ is not just an army – you have to see it in its wider context. Of course, it is a defense force, but it is also a social movement with its ideologies and philosophies. If we didn't have these ideas, we wouldn't have been able to make the revolution as it is now. That is why we don't see ourselves as just soldiers." (The High Commander of YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah, 2016)

According to Dirik (2015; Tanke, 2017), the struggle of women against ISIS encompasses not only a military dimension but also a philosophical and existential one. It entails resistance not only against the "feminicidal tendencies of ISIS but also against the prevailing patriarchy and rape culture within their own community" (Dirik, 2022). The basis of the YPJ's ideology lies in Jineology, a distinct manifestation of Kurdish feminism that places the liberation of individuals, both men and women, from traditional gender and patriarchal structures as a fundamental pillar of a democratic confederalist

society (Düzgün 2016, Dirik, 2022). In the context of the YPJ and YPG, the duty of defense comprises two core aims: on a military front, it centers on protecting the Kurdish population, while from a political and ideological perspective, it revolves around educating individuals about the principles of democratic autonomy and promoting these ideals.

In the three Kurdish cantons, the Women's Military Academy has been set up for women joining the YPJ (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016; Dean, 2019). They receive complete training on weaponry to survive during the conflict. They are also taught history, sociology, politics, language and women's right. Education is essential for women to understand the ideology developed by the PYD. Women can enroll in the YPJ through the centers present in all large cities.

Although in theory, all women who desire to do so can join the YPJ, certain criteria have been established. Minors or only children are not accepted, and the same goes for families who have lost multiple children for the cause. Mothers are generally declined by the YPJ, although some have managed to become part of the armed forces. In exceptional instances, the YPJ does admit underage girls in cases of forced marriage or family violence, or if their parents have been killed by the Turkish army or by ISIS. In such cases, the YPJ provides them with education, sustenance, and shelter, while keeping them away from combat activities (Hébert, 2019). In June 2014, both the YPJ and YPG signed the Geneva Convention against the recruitment of child soldiers (Sharif, 2018). However, despite observed efforts, investigations by NGOs like Amnesty International and UN delegations suggest that the enforcement of this law is not fully effective, as isolated cases have been identified (Dean, 2019).

The creation of the YPJ has often been associated with the notion that Kurdish society and Kurdish women are more liberated than in the rest of the Middle East. In reality, the emancipation of Kurdish women varies greatly depending on their social class (Carrier, 2022). Kurdish society is traditionally highly patriarchal and archaic, with forced marriages and honor crimes still prevalent practices in areas and regions not under the control of the PYD and YPG/YPJ (Hébert, 2019). Since power is rooted in strength, their presence in the military serves as a guarantee for them to attain rights during times of war and to build a viable future (Hébert, 2019). Given the significance of the warrior figure in Kurdish cultural tradition, active female participation in the war lends a certain

legitimacy to their demands. According to the latest report from the YPG Media Center in 2016, 15% of women who wish to engage in the struggle within the ranks of the YPJ see the movement as a way to start living anew. In this sense, Destan, a YPJ fighter at Kobanî, told a journalist in October 2014:

> "I had never thought that a woman could be coequal with a man. In our family, men were always dominant, and I considered it entirely normal and accepted it as legitimate … Only in the YPJ did I come to understand that male dominance is not a normal part of life but on the contrary, that it goes against the natural order. This realization awakened an enormous feeling of freedom within me" (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016).

Participation in combat indeed challenges gender norms within conservative Kurdistan, but many female fighters have also explicitly expressed the idea that the Kurdish vision of a new society demands that they take charge of their own defense (Curtis, 2022). As Mizgîn Mahmoud, a YPJ fighter, stated in an interview (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016), "As a young Kurdish woman, I am ready to accept my responsibility in the Kurdish revolution. So I had no fear of signing up with the YPJ to help make women more secure." Furthermore, the assault by ISIS on Syrian and Iraqi Kurds in 2014 transformed the struggle against this shared adversary into a unifying call for Kurdish women (Sarif, 2018). Heval Aryan expressed that their struggle fundamentally represents a fight against the existing system, as they view Daesh as an outcome of the male-dominated structure (Dean, 2019).

Before delving into the section about the battles led by the YPJ and YPG, I would like to mention that all major battles have been co-led by both a man and a woman, and decision-making and strategic processes must include at least 35% of women (Dirik, 2022). Therefore, in many articles, only the YPG is mentioned. It is important to keep in mind that when talking about the YPG, slightly less than half of its members are women and belong to the YPJ.

ISIS initially directed its attacks toward the Kurds for a range of factors. The Kurds have historically been regarded as opponents of the Baathist party (Gunter, 2019). Their cooperation with the United States in the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the seizure of contested territories near Kirkuk (Iraq) subsequent to ISIS' territorial

advancements in the area in June 2014, and their assistance to Yezidis, Christians, and other minority communities, have collectively shaped this perspective (Lomhus, 2021).

The Sinjar crisis

In the initial phase, the territories controlled by the PYD in Syria were not directly affected. The first offensive against the Kurdish villages in Syria around Kobani in July 2014 failed facing the determined resistance from the fighters of the YPG/J. After a month of fighting, the YPG/J announced the death of 690 jihadists and that the city of Kobani was out of danger.

From August 2nd to 7th, 2014, a new offensive by ISIS caught the Iraqi Kurds off guard (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016). In Sinjar, the Peshmerga (Iraqi Kurdish armed forces) offered little resistance; they abandoned the city and withdrew to mountainous areas. This retreat was perceived as a betrayal by the affected populations (Desoli, 2015). ISIS seized these areas, which were primarily inhabited by Kurdish Yazidi populations. Iraqi authorities reported that thousands of Yazidis were killed, and hundreds were abducted (Pauwels, 2019). As for the fate of Yazidi women, they were tortured, burned alive, or used as sex slaves and war trophies.

Furthermore, between 50,000 and 60,000 Yazidis sought refuge on Mount Sinjar, where they quickly found themselves surrounded by ISIS forces that had taken control of the surrounding plains (Desoli, 2015). The only forces to organize protection and rescue for the Yazidi civilian population were the YPG/YPJ and a few fighters from the PKK (Follorou, 2014). Through a counter-offensive, the Syrian Kurdish forces managed to evacuate 200,000 Yazidis by creating a humanitarian corridor to Syrian Kurdistan (Follorou, 2022). The success of the Yazidi evacuation was mainly attributed to the foresight of the YPG/J. The operation began on August 3rd, as the PYD had feared for months that the Islamic State, which it was already fighting on Syrian soil, would attempt to attack from the south.

Their critical and highly publicized situation was used by the United States to justify the initiation of an airstrike campaign against ISIS and the formation of an international coalition against the Islamic State (Le Figaro, 2014). Indeed, on August 15th, the UN adopted Resolution 2170 condemning ISIS's terrorist acts violating human rights and reiterating its call for every state to counter the incitement of terrorist acts. The

coalition led by the United States brought together major European armies, Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The initial interventions (mostly aerial and predominantly carried out by the United States) began in August in Iraq and September in Syria. Thus, by October 2014, the United States claimed responsibility for 90% of the 2000 raids conducted since the beginning of the conflict.

After the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States was reluctant to deploy ground forces and sought assistance from local actors. Syrian Kurds proved to be the most effective ally as the Free Syrian Army (ASL) itself included jihadists, and Turkey was not inclined to engage in combat against the Islamic State. The partnership between the international coalition and the Kurds, therefore, began in 2014.

The Kobane siege

Restricted in its expansion within Iraq due to the coalition's airstrikes, ISIS initiated a fresh offensive in Syria against the city of Kobani on September 13, 2014 – a place considered the Kurdish capital (Desoli, 2015). The immediate loss of numerous villages during the initial days of the clashes placed the YPG/J in a challenging position. In this notable battle, leadership was shared by General Nalin Afrin, a woman in her forties. Surrounded on the south, east, and west by ISIS, the Kurdish forces found themselves cornered on the city's northern side (Desoli, 2015). Concurrently, Ankara deployed its army to the border, hindering any movement of human reinforcement or supplies (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). About two thousand civilians sought refuge in Turkey. Leveraging this situation, the United States expanded its airstrikes to include Syria. Notwithstanding, ISIS militants persisted in their advance, gaining entry to certain districts of Kobani by October 5 (Jégo, 2015). On that very day, a YPJ cadre named Arin Mirkan thwarted an ISIS tank's entry into the city by sacrificing herself, eliminating approximately twenty jihadists (Cirovoglu, 2015; Dirik, 2022). This act would subsequently symbolize Kurdish defiance against ISIS. Within the Kurdish military structure, commanders consistently lead their troops from the forefront (Hébert, 2019). The YPG/J's vulnerability in this besieged area, compounded by a lack of strategic depth, troops, and heavy armament, suddenly became glaringly apparent.

General Afrin explained her approach to guerilla tactics within Kobane:

> "IS is relying on 'heavy weapons' like tanks and artillery fire, but in the slim streets of Kobani YPG/YPJ fighters have fought back 'with ambushes and traps, creative defense tactics and a sacrificial determination…" (Télésur, 2014).

YPJ Commander, Azime Deniz, further elaborates on the ground situation:

> "Our tactics mainly advanced by holding and protecting every single house, street, and neighborhood we captured. In other words, we didn't pursue the offensive in the form of hitting, striking and retreating. We made advances by holding the areas and positions where we hit and struck the enemy" (ANF, 2014).

Throughout the entire month of October, the clashes in Kobani became the most widely covered event of the Syrian crisis, showcasing images of female fighters for the first time. In Western media, the YPJ quickly became known as the "Angels of Kobane," hailed as "America's latest allies," and champions of principles such as secularism and democracy in the face of extremist theocracy and totalitarianism (Hussain, 2022). After a series of negotiations and American pressure, Turkey eased border controls; in the months of November and December 2014, the passage of YPG/J militants, supplies, and foreign journalists became smoother (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). This shift in the situation allowed the YPG/J, supported by coalition airstrikes, to gain the upper hand in the battle and expel the last ISIS fighters on January 27, 2015. In four months of combat and airstrikes, the city had been devastated, and the surrounding countryside completely depopulated. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2015), around 500 YPG/J fighters lost their lives in the Battle of Kobani. As per Nash, Searle, and Rodriguez (2021), ISIS losses were estimated to be around 2,000 fatalities.

The Syrian Kurds had overcome a historic ordeal, marking the first major defeat of ISIS, but at the cost of a heavy toll of blood and suffering. The destruction of homes and infrastructure was extensive. The civilian population remains displaced between Turkey and other parts of Syria, with the prospect of returning still distant. However, for the PYD/YPG, the outcome of the confrontation remained largely positive: human losses were offset by increased morale, an unprecedented alliance with the United States, aerial coverage by the coalition, as well as the high media coverage of the battle and the emergence of feelings of gratitude and solidarity abroad.

Kobane is a decisive victory for Kurdish women fighters. Commander Rosa states in the documentary *La Guerre des Filles* (Sauloy, 2016), “In this war, women found themselves at the forefront of the battles. Everyone thought it would be impossible, but we, the YPJ, made it possible.” She adds, “During the clashes, we realized that Daesh couldn't stand fighting against us.” Indeed, Nesrin Abdullah, the head of the YPJ, asserts that “the X-factor that broke Daesh's supremacy is the woman.” Some fighters even suggest that if jihadists die at the hands of a woman, they will not go to paradise, and for this reason, they fear fighting women more than men. Since this battle, the YPJ has been advancing on all fronts.

Other major battles

During the year 2015, with the support of the coalition, the YPG/J made significant advances in northern Syria. On February 21, 2015, in the Hassakeh Governorate, the YPG/J launched an offensive on the town of Tall Hamis (Reuters, 2015), located east of Hassakeh and held by the Islamic State. However, the jihadists reacted and in turn attacked Kurdish and Syriac positions to the south of the town of Tall Tamer, situated to the west of Hassakeh and held by the Kurds. In Tall Hamis, the Kurdish offensive was successful, with the town being captured on February 27, followed by the capture of Tell Brak the next day (Mathieu, 2015). In Tall Tamer, the fighting was more inconclusive, as the jihadists seized several Christian villages and attempted to advance towards Tall Tamer and Ras al-Ain. By the end of May, the ISIS offensive was eventually repelled, and Kurdish and Assyrian forces regained the lost ground (OSDH, 2015).

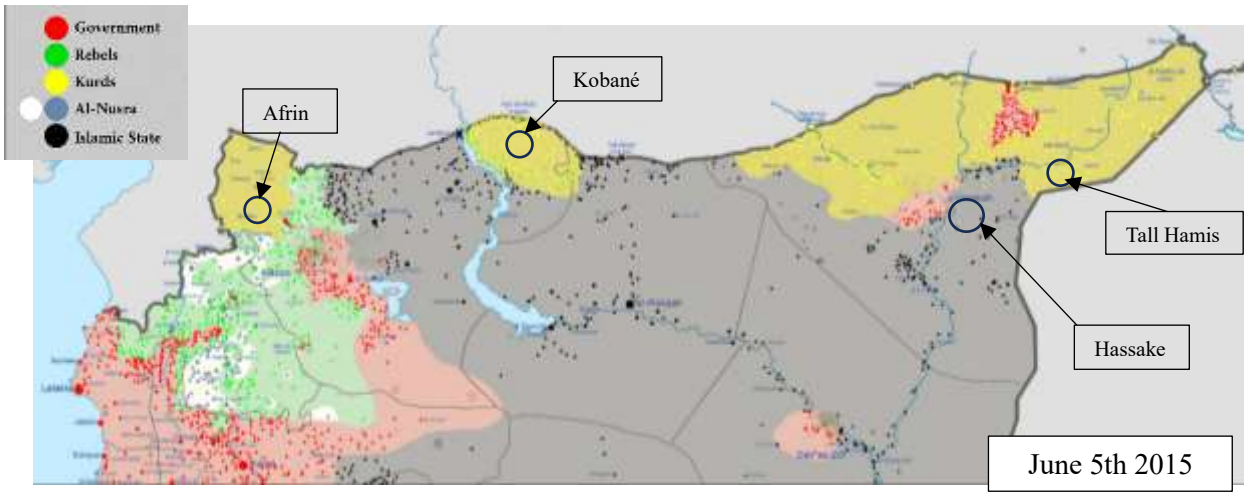

Figure 3 : Map of the evolution of territorial gains on June 5th, 2015
Source: Le Monde, 15th May 2016

After pushing back the Islamic State near Tall Tamer and Ra's al-'Ayn, the YPG/J, supported by the coalition, launched a counter-offensive on the town of Tall Abyad, located on the Turkish border between Kobané and Ra's al-'Ayn (BBC, 2015), and captured it on June 16. The Islamic State then suffered its largest strategic defeat in Syria since the proclamation of the caliphate a year earlier. Tall Abyad is crucial for the jihadists as it links the Turkish border to Raqqa, the stronghold of the Islamic State (Rfi, 2015). Therefore, it loses an important crossing point for foreign jihadists into Syria and a route for smuggling oil to Turkey. For the Kurds, this victory is also strategic; they can connect the Kobané canton in the west to the Cizir canton in the east, unifying these two territories (Rfi, 2015; Hébert, 2019). In Hassaké, the soldiers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the YPG/J, usually in conflict, form a united front against an Islamic State offensive on June 25, 2015 (L'obs, 2015). One month later, the two Syrian forces managed to push back the jihadists from the city.

On October 10th (Hébert, 2019), under the impetus of the Americans, the YPG and YPJ, along with other forces, joined the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This mixed force is composed of Arab, Turkmen, Assyrian, Christian, and other minority militias. They all share a common goal (European Union Agency for Asylum, n.d): the defeat of ISIS and other jihadist groups in Syria. Besides the military aspect, the multi-confessional and multi-ethnic alliance also has a political objective: the creation of a secular, democratic, and federal Syria. The YPG/J is the predominant force within this alliance (Mellen, 2019).

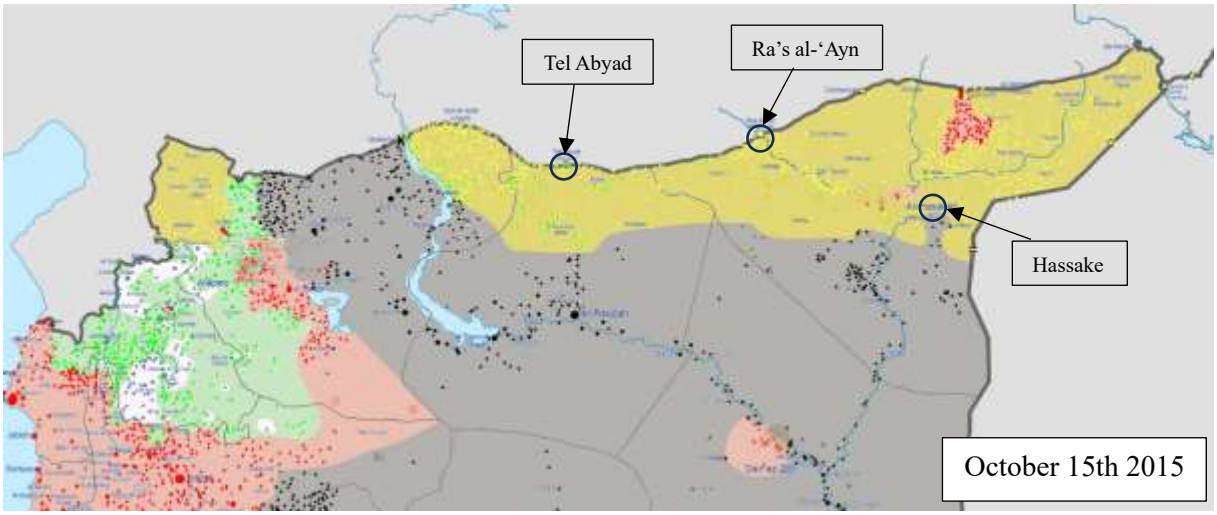

Figure 4 : Map of the evolution of territorial gains on October 15th, 2015

Source: Le Monde, 15th May 2016

On October 31, 2015, the YPG and their allies, now united within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), launched an offensive against ISIS in Al-Hol. They captured the city in November, as well as more than 1,000 square kilometers along the Iraqi border. In January 2016, the SDF advanced towards Raqqa, capturing numerous towns like Manbij. The comprehensive offensive to push ISIS out of Raqqa was launched on November 6, 2016.

According to Nesrin Abdullah, the High Commander of the YPJ, the year 2016 was distinct from previous years. This was notably because the YPJ gained independence from the YPG and became the sole and dedicated female force within the SDF (ANF, 2017). This unique situation allowed the YPJ to "participate autonomously in the Wrath of Habur, Elîn, Cudi, Manbij, and Raqqa operations. The Raqqa operation is still ongoing." She further adds (ANF, 2017):

> "YPJ carried out its mission in Cizire and had a leading role in all planned operations. These initiatives were not defensive; they were liberation operations. We were attacking ISIS gangs and liberating the lands that they occupied."

The actions carried out by the YPJ in the Arab areas liberated by the women's unit had a significant impact on these populations. Indeed, many were impressed by the active involvement of women in military and strategic affairs. This had a significant influence on the formation of new women's battalions. An increasing number of women wished to participate in YPJ training in the liberated areas. In 2016, an Academy of Arab Women and the Battalion of Free Arab Women were established. Nesrin Abdullah asserts that this is the result of the YPJ's efforts (ANF, 2017).

In Raqqa, the initial phase of the offensive against ISIS was co-led by Rojda Felat, a commander in the YPJ. She led, under the banner of the SDF, 15,000 Kurdish and Arab fighters, supported by US special forces[12] and coalition aircraft (Coghlan, 2016). On June 29, the SDF completed the full encirclement of the city (Centcom, 2017); by early August, they controlled half of it (Dadouch, 2017). Ultimately, Raqqa was entirely captured by the SDF on October 17 (BBC, 2017).

[12] The Obama administration sent, in 2016, 10 special forces soldiers and 50 soldiers to assist the SDF in the organization of the different attacks (AFP, 2015, November). In early 2017, the United States officially claims to have 500 troops in Syria. However, the numbers involved are often above authorized levels.

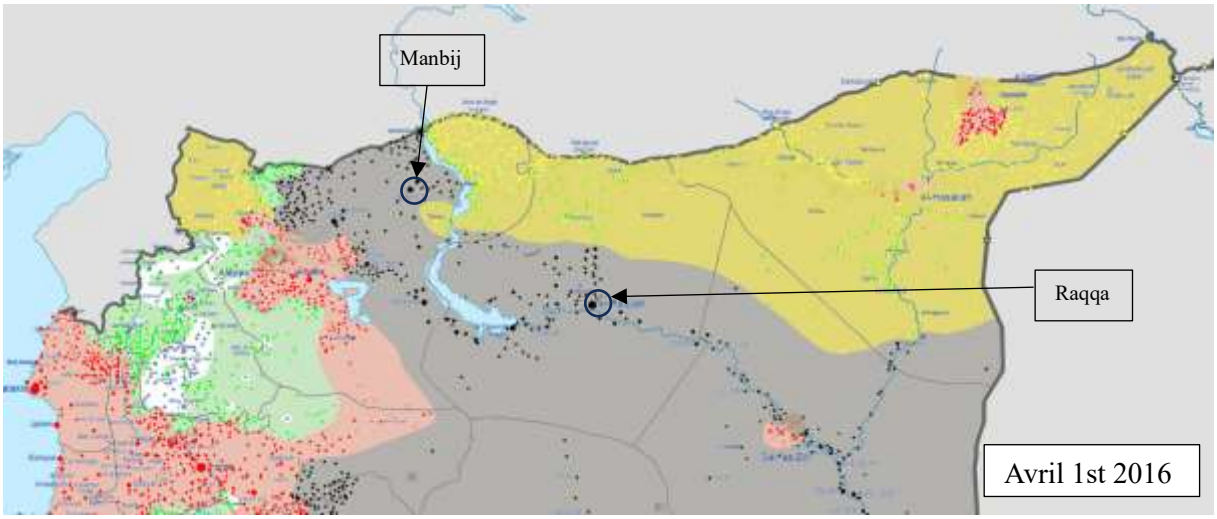

Figure 5: Map of the evolution of territorial gains on Avril 1st, 2016

Source: Le Monde, 15th May 2016

The YPJ led an active six-year-long war against Daesh and lost several thousand women along the way (Dirik, 2022). According to statements in April 2018 by US General Jonathan Braga, over 4,000 fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces have been killed against the Islamic State (Gélie, 2018). On March 23, 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced that they mourned 11,000 deaths and 21,000 injuries within their ranks after five years of war against the Islamic State (SDF, 2019). At the end of five years of combat, 10,000 Islamic State jihadists were taken as prisoners by the Syrian Democratic Forces (YPG, 2019).

I have read several articles arguing that the Kurds were strong support for the coalition against ISIS. I want to emphasize that Kurds, as early as 2012, engaged in the fight against Islamic terrorism. The Kurds, in Syria in this thesis, sacrificed numerous lives for the stability of the region and, consequently, the security of the West. Faced with a better-armed Islamic State, the Kurds employed a highly adaptable strategy, allowing them to respond flexibly to various attacks carried out by ISIS (Hémez, 2016). Coalition airstrikes alone would not have been sufficient to prevail against ISIS. Aerial superiority is certainly important to win a war, but a ground action is essential to defeat an enemy. It is the Kurdish militias that provided us with this ground force. Furthermore, according to Hébert, a YPG international fighter, Raqqa's takeover has never been a goal for the YPG/J. If the SDF/YPG engaged in the battle, it is only because the coalition insisted on and to "defend humanity" from the threat of Daesh.

Nisrin Abdullah states, “The revolution of Rojava and that of women is not confined to our armed forces. Our revolution is social, political, diplomatic, and structural. We are making every effort to build democratic autonomy. The women's defense units actively participate in all the plans implemented by the forces of Democratic Syria.”

3.2.3. The Rojava Experiment: a political microcosm

Rojava has been receiving significant media coverage in recent years from Western media due to its radical left-wing political project, which is in many ways a departure from the political climate of neighboring countries. This project is inspired by the writings of intellectual Abdullah Öcalan and advocates for "democratic confederalism" as a new norm of political organization. Democratic confederalism is based on the emancipation of women, social ecology, and direct democracy (Loez, 2021). In addition to this more democratic transformation, the movement does not aim to separate Rojava from Syria to create a nation-state. They “recognize that the nation-state has made Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, and Syria a hub for the chaos happening in the Middle East and has brought problems, serious crises, and agonies for our peoples.” (Social Contract, 2016). Therefore, the aim is to develop a federal system within the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) controlled areas, rather than seeking to establish a separate nation-state.

In 2012, the PYD proclaims autonomy and establishes local committees in Afrin and Kobané, where the party's principles, influenced by libertarian thinkers and activists like Murray Bookchin, are disseminated (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2014). Associations and cultural centers for women and youth guided by the PYD are established, turning Syria into a unique political laboratory. Following the creation of the SDF in October 2015, the PYD and the Arab, Assyrian, Turkmen, Armenian, and Christian factions that make up this alliance announced in 2016 the de facto creation of the Autonomous Administration of Northern East Syria (AANES). This region adopts a constitution known as the “Social Contract for the Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria.” The preamble of this social contract asserts the aspiration to establish a democratic society:

> "Within the consensual democratic federal system, all segments of the population, especially women and youth, will establish their democratic organizations and institutions. The democratic federal system ensures the free practice of all political, cultural, and social activities, enabling everyone to enjoy the benefits of a free and equal life." (Social Contract for the Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria, December 27, 2016)

The Rojava model thus seeks to transcend the "minority issue" and Kurdish ethnic references for a more homogeneous region. For instance, Article 16 of the Contract ensures fair representation for all ethnic groups in administrative institutions, based on their demographic weight, within each of the regions encompassed by Rojava.

In practice, this model is built upon the power of popular communes, where everyone has an equal right to vote and speak (Enzinna, 2016). The commune serves as the political lever through which each individual can have a say in decisions affecting their daily lives and those of their peers. The 3,000 communes (Biegala, 2019) are organized at the village or neighborhood level, ranging from 30 to 400 households, and hold sovereignty in various areas: equitable distribution of wealth and land, or matters related to the daily life of the community (Hébert, 2019).

At a higher level, there are neighborhood (or village) councils that encompass between 7 and 30 communes (Hébert, 2019). Their actions are coordinated by district assemblies (which include a town and its surroundings), where representatives from the people sit. They can be revoked at any time and have an imperative mandate that is not combinable with other functions and is limited in duration (Rojava Information Center, 2019). The district councils appoint delegates who sit at the canton level, the seven cantons of Rojava (Cizire, Kobanê, Raqqa, Manbij, Tabaqa, Deir es-oz, and Afrin, now occupied by the Turkish army). In addition to coordinating resource allocation and implementing decisions made by the communes, the cantons are responsible for public security. The Asayish is a popular and local self-defense force organized at the level of each canton (Rojava Information Center, 2019). They have sovereignty over their territory but are accountable to the elected representatives of the controlling cantons. This system of regulation ensures that this "popular police" does not become an instrument of repression and oppression in the future (although in practice, this police has been accused of several abuses against Arab populations). The goal of this political organization is to

establish genuine local democratic autonomy. Thus, the Asayish are responsible for order and security in their canton, currently against the threat posed by Daesh, but also in theory against the armed forces of Rojava if they were to become a threat to the people's freedom in the future.

The communes therefore appoint representatives who sit within various assemblies forming a geographical and political pyramid, with the canton at the top (Rojava Information Center, 2019). These assemblies are connected to thematic commissions responsible for guiding their decision-making on topics such as human rights, ecology, women's rights, economy, justice, education, security, and more. Within these commissions, delegates from the popular assemblies, as well as representatives from various associations, participate (Schmidinger, Schiffmann, 2018). A resident of Rojava, present in their communal assembly and being a member of an association, thus has a dual opportunity to have a direct and individual influence on society.

The most powerful organization in Rojava is the TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society). The TEV-DEM is an “umbrella body for civil society, supporting, coordinating, and ensuring that the voice of civil society is fed into the political and administrative aspects of the system. It acts as a 'counter-power' to the Autonomous Administration and organizes on a federal basis from the local to the inter-regional level” (Rojava Information Center, 2019). Through local popular assemblies and thematic meetings, the TEV-DEM sends representatives to consult the people, ensuring that their demands are properly conveyed (Hébert, 2019). This dual mechanism of consultation, along with the recallability of elected officials, guarantees certain popular sovereignty over the legislative bodies of Syrian Kurdistan. The PYD holds the majority within the TEV-DEM and therefore has considerable influence on matters requiring centralized treatment (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). The PYD's hegemony over the broader Kurdish landscape hampers political plurality, and despite visible improvements, freedom of expression remains imperfect. Each canton has twenty ministries, all controlled by associates of the PYD.

An important element to mention is the central role played by women in political institutions (Deniel-Laurent, 2016). As I mentioned earlier, Kurdish and Arab society remains highly patriarchal. However, in Rojava, all institutions are gender-balanced, multiconfessional, and multi-ethnic. Women hold at least forty percent of seats in political

bodies, leadership positions are co-led by a man and a woman, and they participate in gender-segregated assemblies discussing topics they consider most relevant to them (Hébert, 2019). In addition to the Women's Council, there are also Women's Houses (Mala Jin) (Daniel-Laurent, 2016). These structures welcome women who want to discuss their social issues with others and collectively find solutions. Moreover, women's academies are established. The idea is that a deep historical consciousness will empower women to independently devise solutions to current issues (Daniel-Laurent, 2016). Courses on male domination are organized in universities to provide women with the intellectual tools for empowerment (Schmidinger, Schiffmann, 2018). Beyond politics and education, the third pillar of this "female sovereignty" is, of course, the role women play militarily, which I will not delve into further due to the explanations given above. In the legislative councils of cities, female fighters collaborate with civilian women in all decision-making processes. Arab and Kurdish women sit alongside Christian, Assyrian, or Assyrian-Chaldean women.

This political model evolves, in connection with the conduct of the war. The Syrian Democratic Council was established in late 2015 to politically structure the territorial expansion of the SDF. The Syrian Democratic Council aims to represent, in their diversity, all populations living in the newly liberated autonomous zones. This council is composed of three assemblies (legislative, executive, and municipal) and serves as the supreme political body of the new federal system in northern Syria (Schmidinger, Schiffmann, 2018). Representatives from each canton sit on this council, encompassing all territories and populations liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces. The essence and main principles of this model are defined, but due to its youthfulness and the instability of the Syrian military situation, it will likely undergo further developments in the future.

While in theory this project seems democratic, in practice the power is heavily centered on PYD hands. The administration has been accused of media censorship and authoritarianism. According to Nadim Houry (Biegala, 2019), "Rojava is not a flawless democracy. Political opposition when present, is poorly tolerated, and the justice system is rudimentary... Nonetheless, the administration operates effectively, and Rojava has managed to maintain a significant level of security within its territory; these are the Syrian cantons with the lowest crime rates." The SDF have liberated a zone four times bigger Lebanon, creating a genuine anti-terrorist shield in the north of the country. By imprisoning ISIS combatants, monitoring twenty-six camps and engaging in anti-terrorist

operation, they are preventing from a resurgence of ISIS. Although this political experiment is currently the most democratic system in Syria, it is facing important challenges and threats, beginning with Turkish attacks.

Chapter 4. Turkish attacks against the Kurds in Syria: challenging the stability of the region

The analysis of the Kurdish women militia in Syrie (YPJ) allowed us to gain a better understanding of the key role they played in the fight against ISIS, as allies of the US-led coalition and the context in which the development of the semi-autonomous region (AANES) took place. This last chapter aims to expose the security issues related to Turkish attacks and interventions in Northern and East Syria.

As stated by Amnesty International (2004), the effects of conflict disproportionately impact women, who encounter heightened difficulties in seeking justice (Aragonès, 2020). As in every war, Kurdish women are the first victims of these attacks, especially YPJ women. Because PYD/YPG/J is linked to the PKK, Erdogan sees in the semi-autonomous project a major terrorist threat next to its borders. Indeed, as Aliza Marcus (2016) argues: “Ankara, for one, has long worried that what happens to Kurdish minorities in Iraq, Syria or Iran would strengthen Turkish Kurdish separatists or legitimize international calls for Turkey to grant Kurds national rights.” It will appear unconvincing for Turkey to justify its refusal to grant autonomy to its Kurdish minority if Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have autonomy. When nearly half of the Kurdish population in the region is successfully self-governing, asserting that Kurdish desires are unclear becomes difficult.

However, Erdogan has not always been as aggressive towards the PKK and the PYD. His political arrival in 2002 created favorable conditions for dialogue between the Turkish government and the PKK. In 2012, an attempt at peace was initiated through Ocalan, an indispensable figure in achieving lasting peace (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). The “peace process” encompasses various aspects: direct dialogue with Ocalan, recognizing the PKK as a central actor in the Kurdish issue, withdrawing PKK forces from Turkey, and an immediate and indefinite ceasefire. However, the AKP's and the Kurdish movement's visions remain distant. For Erdogan, acknowledging the existence of the Kurdish identity in Turkey should coincide with the tacit acceptance by Kurds of Turkey's Turkish and Sunni identity (James, Tejel Gorgas, 2018). On the other hand, the key Kurdish players demand the official recognition of their “national group” in a potential new constitution, equality with Turks, and the resultant rights in educational

(teaching in their mother tongue in public schools) and administrative sectors (autonomy in southeastern Turkey). Erdogan, however, seems primarily focused on eradicating the PKK. In September 2013, the party announced the suspension of the withdrawal of its fighters from Turkish territory[13]. But the greatest obstacles are yet to come.

In July 2012, as the Syrian government partially withdrew from Northern Syria, allowing the PYD to control the Kurdish regions of the country, it established "Kurdish" schools, armed militias, and autonomous local committees, following its new slogan: "democratic autonomy." In 2014, it announced the creation of three autonomous cantons in northern Syria, which is perceived in Turkey as a major threat to national security. The capture of the border town of Kobanê by the Islamic State and the demonstration of solidarity from Kurds in Turkey during the "Battle of Kobanê" only heightens the fears of Kurdish fervor in Turkey. This series of events leading to the autonomy and legitimacy (especially from Turkey's allies) of Kurds in Syria generates increasing hostility from Turkey towards the PYD and its armed branches.

This hostility leads Turkey to employ coercive means, including military actions that are sometimes considered war crimes by the UN and NGOs. The intensification of the conflict between the Kurds and Turkey could potentially create a dilemma for Western forces. They might find themselves compelled to decide between supporting a strong NATO ally, which has caused frustrations, and a potential ally that has surpassed all predictions (Barfi, 2016).

4.1. A willingness to expel Syrian Kurdish forces from Turkish borders

Discriminated against for decades by the Syrian regime, the Kurds of Syria have managed to capitalize on the chaos of the Syrian conflict, drawing inspiration from their neighbors in Iraqi Kurdistan, and establishing de facto autonomy in the territories they control in the northern parts of the country. Emphasizing their "neutrality" in the civil war that pitted the regime against the rebellion, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, they have been the ground force of the anti-jihadist coalition. However, while ISIS seems

[13] A large number of those combatants went to Syria and Iraq. Many of them became militants for the PYD and took part in the formation of the YPG.

to be defeated, its fate is far from settled. As argued by Barfi (2016), in contrast to Washington's perspective, Turkey regards the SDF/YPG as the primary threat to its war-afflicted neighbor, with the Syrian regime coming in a secondary position. The Islamic State ranks lowest on the list of perceived threats. Thus, the Turkish government has implemented several initiatives to eliminate Kurds from its border.

4.1.1. Turkey's ambiguous relationship with jihadist groups

The evidence upon which I base this section comes from field investigations conducted by journalists in Syria or Turkey. Several researchers, such as David L. Phillips, Director of the Program at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, have conducted detailed investigations into the links between ISIS and Turkey. However, I fully acknowledge this information is often based on various sources and there may be differences of opinion and interpretation. I have not come across any official statements or investigations originating from Western countries. Of course, it is unlikely that these countries are unaware, given the intelligence services, of the unofficial relationships between the terrorist group and Turkey. Turkey has never acknowledged this cooperation with jihadists. It is important to note that Turkey was not an ally of terrorist groups since itself has been a victim of hostage takings and attacks by ISIS. I however tend to argue that terrorist groups and Turkey had the same interests which benefited their regional aspirations.

In 2014, as twenty-two nations united in a coalition against terrorism in Syria and Iraq, Turkey stood out as a notable omission. Prominent Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, apprehensive about the potential impact on an already volatile Middle East, criticized this arrangement and aligned themselves with the international coalition. Despite its extensive border with Iraq and Syria and its NATO membership, Turkey remained inactive for over a year.

Convinced in the autumn of 2011 that the Damascus regime was destined to fall, similar to those of Ben Ali, Mubarak, or Gaddafi, Turkey offered staunch support to the Syrian opposition, particularly to the Muslim Brotherhood, which appeared to be its most robust component (Marcou, 2015). As the country slid into civil war in 2012, it was radical Islamists (more or less linked to al-Qaeda) who emerged as the driving force of the military entities combating the Syrian regime. By October, through the voice of

Hillary Clinton (then Secretary of State), the Americans began to question the unwavering support they had provided to the Syrian opposition thus far. The Turks, on the other hand, were less discerning (Marcou, 2015). The structure of the Islamic State presented two advantages to Ankara: it was a force opposing Bashar al-Assad and, it targeted the Syrian Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose autonomy Ankara sought to contain out of concern that it could serve as a rear base for PKK Kurds (Marcou, 2015).

Indeed, as paradoxical as it may appear, Turkey felt more threatened by the emergence of a Kurdish force in Syria, which could potentially strengthen Turkish Kurds, than by the Islamic State, whose direct threats against Ankara are weak, at least absent from the public discourse of Islamic State leaders in 2014 (Balci, 2014). However, Turkey's concern is not solely about security; it is also, and primarily, of a political and geopolitical nature, especially concerning the Kurdish issue. Faced with the guerrilla warfare led by the PKK since 1984, Ankara fears the regionalization of the Kurdish question (Balci, 2014). Powerful in a part of Iraq where they enjoy a near-independent autonomy, the Kurds are a rising force in Syria and on the international stage. Therefore, the Syrian crisis also benefits Turkish Kurds who strive for greater political, cultural, and ethnic recognition from the Turkish authorities. The Kurds, particularly the PKK and the PYD in Syria, were among the first to oppose, albeit with relative effectiveness, the Islamic State, garnering admiration from the international community. Thus, since 2012, Turkey has passively contributed to the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in various ways.

The limited control exerted by Turkish authorities at the borders and southern airports of Turkey was such that traveling across the country had become simple and convenient, making it the preferred route for jihadists (Bonzon, 2014). An ISIS smuggler encountered by a CNN journalist at the Turkish border claimed to have “moved about 400 people across the border (into Syria) in a month” on his own (Walsh, 2013). In 2014, American reporter Serena Shim died under suspicious circumstances in Suruç, Turkey, after filming convoys of Islamist militants departing from Turkey to support ISIS during the siege of Kobanê (Hall, 2014; Greenslade, 2014). These individuals reportedly crossed the Syrian border legally, hidden in trucks bearing the logos of the World Food Program.

It was also through this border that a significant portion of weapons, equipment, and supplies destined for ISIS and other radical groups were transported (Faiola, Mekhennet, 2014). In October 2014, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (a candidate in the last

presidential election against Erdogan) disclosed documents from the Adana Office of the Prosecutor, revealing Turkey's supply of weapons to terrorist groups. He also presented transcripts of interviews with truck drivers who delivered the weapons to the terrorists (Phillips, 2016). Indeed, in May 2015, a Turkish newspaper published photos and a video of mortar shells hidden beneath medications in trucks, supporting the hypothesis of arms deliveries to extremist Syrian groups in 2014 (AFP, 2015; Benbassa, 2016). This operation turned into a political scandal when official documents published on the Internet indicated that the trucks belonged to and were operated by the Turkish Intelligence Services (MIT) (Phillips, 2016).

Myriam Benraad, a French researcher and political scientist, stated (2016) in a hearing on ISIS's means at the National Assembly that "regarding our allies in the region, Turkey has served as an interface for ISIS trafficking." A YPG commander interviewed by Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016) indicated:

> "There [on the other side of the Syrian border, in a Turkish village] under the eyes of the Turkish Army, the jihadists openly sell the booty they have plundered from the villages of Rojava, everything from faucets to house doors. They can cross the border into Turkey whenever they feel the need. Dozens of witnesses in the YPG and YPJ have seen it happen—just a few days before we were there, 22 trucks crossed over."

This support was also evident through the medical care provided to jihadists in Turkish hospitals. Several fighters were interviewed while recovering in Turkey, stating, "Had Turkey not shown such understanding for us, the Islamic State would not be in its current place. It [Turkey] showed us affection. A large number of our mujahedeen [jihadis] received medical treatment in Turkey" (Salomon, 2014). This was particularly evident during the battle of Kobanê.

Finally, in June 2014, the Turkish newspaper Radikal, known for its denunciations of human rights violations and press freedoms, announced that the then-Turkish Minister of Interior had signed a directive:

> "According to our regional gains, we will help al-Nusra militants against the branch of the PKK terrorist organization, the PYD, within our borders...Hatay is a strategic location for the mujahideen crossing

> from within our borders to Syria. Logistical support for Islamist groups will be increased, and their training, hospital care, and safe passage will mostly take place in Hatay...MIT and the Religious Affairs Directorate will coordinate the placement of fighters in public accommodations" (Philipps, 2016).

Indeed, according to Mroue (2014), an AP news journalist, the Islamic State group launched attacks on the Syrian border town of Kobani from Turkey, although Turkey denied that the fighters had used its territory for the raid. More than forty suicide attacks were allegedly carried out by jihadists coming from a passage near the Turkish border post. Journalist Pierre Barbancey, who was present on-site, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) both noted that the muddy tracks left by the suicide vehicles originated from the Turkish border.

Turkey finally joined the international coalition on July 25, 2015, after experiencing a terrorist attack on its territory. It authorized the United States to use the Incirlik air base for bombing ISIS. The following night, Turkey conducted its first airstrikes against ISIS positions in Syria, but it also carried out more numerous strikes against Kurdish positions in Syria and Iraq. By August 1, several dozen airstrikes had been launched against the YPG to halt their advance along the Turkish-Syrian border, while only three had been conducted against the Islamic State (Afp, 2015). According to Barfi (2016), "Washington's tolerance of Turkey's moves is often attributed to its vital geographic position. The Turkish border with Syria allows it to control the flow of U.S.-backed fighters and war materiel. Turkey hosts the Incirlik Air Base, which Washington believes is crucial to the anti-IS campaign."

4.1.2. Since 2016: a succession of Turkish military interventions in Northeastern Syria

Since August 2016, Turkey has militarily intervened in Syria, notably during three offensives: the "Euphrates Shield" operations (August 24, 2016 – March 29, 2017); the "Olive Branch" during the Afrin battle (January 20 – March 18, 2018); and more recently, the "Peace Spring" operation, which took place between October 9 and 22, 2019. Since May 2022, Turkey has been threatening a fourth ground intervention against Kurdish forces. Turkey's main objective is to establish a buffer zone between Kurdish forces, its

population, and the Turkish border. According to Jean Marcou, a researcher specializing in the Middle East region, these offensives are “a continuation of a strategy pursued for several years, aimed at eradicating or at least diminishing the influence of the Kurds in Syria and their territories, and preventing the formation of an autonomous region in Rojava” (Oriol, 2019).

In the summer of 2016, the area stretching from the border post of al-Rai to the city of Jarablous was the last controlled by the Islamic State along the Turkish border (The Associated Press, 2017). This area was coveted by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), dominated by the YPG, who aimed to unify their territory from Afrin to the Hassakeh governorate following the self-proclamation of a federal region in Rojava (Enault, 2016). The Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, deemed the creation of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria “absolutely unacceptable”, as Kurdish forces were gaining ground in their offensive against jihadists and aspired to connect the regions under their control (Gouësset, 2016).

In August 2016, Ankara launched its first ground military operation in Syria. Ostensibly, the goal was to attack the remaining positions of the Islamic State along the Turkish-Syrian border. Incidentally - and the Turkish government did not hide this fact - it was also aimed at thwarting any Kurdish aspirations to seize this portion of Syrian territory, which would enable territorial continuity across the entirety of Rojava (Kasapoğlu, 2017). Thus, the “Euphrates Shield” operation, conducted by the Turks from August 24, 2016, to March 29, 2017, aimed to establish a buffer zone south of the Turkish-Syrian border, to be held by the Syrian armed opposition.

On February 28, 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the next objective of his troops would be the city of Manbij, held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (Reuters, 2017). To safeguard against a Turkish offensive, the Syrian Democratic Forces decided in early March to hand over several villages to the Syrian government to establish a buffer zone (Kaval, 2016). This deployment was carried out with the agreement of Russia and the United States. Erdoğan then expressed his “regret over the interest shown by Russia and the United States in the terrorist organization” (Jégo, 2017). The Turkish military and the rebels engaged in the Euphrates Shield operation found themselves completely blocked, unable to advance further to the south – facing the Syrian army, allied with Russia – or to the east and west – facing the Syrian

Democratic Forces, allied with the Americans (Imbert, 2017; Jégo, 2017). On March 29, Turkey announced the end of the Euphrates Shield operation (Al Jazeera, 2017).

While it allowed for the reaffirmation of Turkish regional power, this operation also highlighted the limitations of the Turkish military tool, which reportedly faced significant challenges during the offensive[14]. Furthermore, this offensive, contrary to international law and the ongoing conflict resolution processes (Meurey, 2018; Poniatowski, Todeschini, Danesi, 2018), and carried out against fighters who played a decisive role in the fight against ISIS in Syria, only added to the Syrian chaos and the threats facing a great number of civilians.

Erdoğan waited for nearly a year before launching another "Olive Branch" offensive in January 2018, specifically targeting the Kurdish YPG forces. More precisely, this offensive aimed at the Afrin canton – a Kurdish city under PYD control since 2011[15] and close to the Turkish border. This operation came after the United States announced the creation of a "border security force" composed of the SDF and other recruits in Northern Syria to prevent the resurgence of jihadists (Reuters, 2018). Erdoğan stated that it was necessary to "strangle it before it's even born" (Miley, Yildiz, 2019). The objectives of this operation are quite ambiguous. It is likely driven by a form of tactical opportunism: the isolated YPG/J forces in the Afrin canton were not directly engaged in combat against the Islamic State (Biegala, 2019). Consequently, they did not have the support of Western, American, and French special forces – NATO soldiers that Turkey, as a member, would have hesitated to confront. Only a small Russian contingent based in Afrin acted as a deterrent against Turkey. However, Erdoğan negotiated directly with Putin for the withdrawal of these forces and Russian non-intervention[16], including their powerful anti-aircraft missile batteries, before launching the offensive on Afrin.

While the SDF calls on the international coalition to "take responsibility" regarding the Turkish offensive (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2018) and accuses Russia of "betrayal," the United States acknowledges "Turkey's legitimate right" to "protect itself" (Trofimov, 2018). Only France declares that "these clashes must stop" as they could "divert Kurdish combat forces, who are alongside us and deeply engaged within the coalition, from the primary fight against terrorism" (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2018). Indeed, over

[14] These difficulties can be explained by the numerous purges done after the military coup in 2016.
[15] See Chapter 2, "The political organization of the Kurdish movement in Syria in the recent period: PYD road to power."
[16] Russia was controlling Afrin airspace at that time.

ten thousand fighters have left the fight against ISIS to reinforce the defense of Afrin (Schmitt, Nordland, 2018). The silence of Western countries that were initially allies of the YPG/J can be explained by several reasons. Turkey is an important and necessary economic partner for most Western nations. It is also the sole NATO member country present in the region. Turkey is also exerting pressure on Europe and exploiting the issue of the numerous refugees it has hosted since the Syrian crisis.

Faced with Turkey's artillery, heavy weaponry, and aerial attacks, many civilians either flee the Afrin region or leave the area. On March 18, 2018, two months after the start of the offensive, Kurdish fighters retreated, and Turkish flags were raised on every corner of the city (Biegala, 2019). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that around three hundred civilians, over fifteen hundred Kurdish fighters including many women, and four hundred rebels allied with Turkey had been killed since the beginning of the offensive. The Turkish military, on the other hand, reported eighty soldiers killed within their ranks (AFP, 2018).

Due to the lack of coordination in U.S. policy in Syria, numerous inconsistencies make it difficult to determine the appropriate course of action on the ground. Starting from May 2018, Kurdish forces are increasingly used as a bargaining chip in the Turkish-American relationship (Lomhus, 2018).

US troops withdrawal from Syria: a military vacuum

In December 2018, following a phone discussion with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Starr and al., 2018), Trump unexpectedly announced the imminent withdrawal of the 3,000[17] American troops after a “historic victory against ISIS” (CAREP, 2019). Nevertheless, this withdrawal took place gradually, and Trump later qualified that 400 soldiers would remain in Syria, with 200 in Rojava (Gunter & Yavuz, 2020). Turkey and the United States reached an agreement to resolve the situation in Manbij, in northern Syria, with the Turks giving up attacking the city in exchange for an SDF withdrawal

[17] Approximate number. A senior American general announced 4,000 troops in Syria in 2017, while the official number was 500 troops. A few days later, the government corrected the number to officially state that there were 2,000 troops present in Syria.

(Miley, Yildiz, 2019). Joint patrols were then conducted between American and Turkish forces.

In August 2019, aiming to avert a third offensive, an accord was forged involving the SDF, the United States, and Turkey, outlining a gradual withdrawal plan for SDF forces from specific towns (Hubbard & Gall, 2019). The primary objective was to establish a "secure zone in northeastern Syria", strategically intended to allow Turkey to secure its borders against perceived threats posed by Syrian Kurdish SDF/YPG forces, while simultaneously creating a safe refuge for some of the increasingly challenging 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey to return (Gunter & Yavuz, 2020). As a result, the SDF subsequently disengaged from the town of Tel Abyad and disassembled their defensive positions in September 2019 (Gunter & Yavuz, 2020). However, for Erdogan, this was not enough; he intended to apply the Manbij model "to Raqqa, Kobane and other important areas controlled by the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG" (Gunter & Yavuz, 2020). Erdogan threatened to conduct a third intervention in Syria to further push back Kurdish forces. This announcement was notably aimed at pressuring the United States and compelling them to end their support for the Kurds.

On October 7, 2019, Trump ordered the accelerated departure of American troops from Syria, aiming to reduce the number to 400 soldiers in Syria, following Erdogan's announcement of a third offensive against Kurdish forces. The American ground forces began a deliberate withdrawal from their bases, outposts, and camps in northern Syria around October 6 (Hubbard and al., 2019). Senior American military officials stated that troops had abandoned bases as far south as Raqqa. This declaration marked a turning point in the Syrian conflict and allowed new actors to enter the scene. Consequently, on October 9, 2019, the Turkish military launched an offensive against Kurdish fighters in Syria, rendering the agreement made between the SDF, the United States, and Turkey in August 2019 obsolete.

In a tweet, Erdogan conveyed that the "Peace Spring" operation was initiated to thwart the emergence of a "terror corridor" along Turkey's southern border. The Turkish military, in collaboration with allied Syrian armed factions (backed by Turkey), launched an offensive with the stated objective of eliminating SDF/YPG militants from a stretch of land spanning approximately thirty kilometers in width and extending four hundred and forty kilometers in length across northeastern Syria (Crisis Group, 2019). As outlined by

Turkish officials, the operation aimed at achieving three primary objectives: ensuring border security, neutralizing terrorist elements, and creating a designated “safe zone” (CAREP, 2019).

Turkish aviation and artillery targeted a hundred and forty kilometers of northern Syrian border towns – Tall Abyad, Ras Al-Ain, Qamishli, Ain Issa, and Kobane – prompting hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee. The Kurds had chosen to participate in the Turkish-American negotiations by demilitarizing in recent months, as part of the agreement with Turkey and the United States. They dismantled their defensive lines in the area that the Americans vacated, believing that the U.S. would protect it.

Both the American withdrawal and the Turkish offensive have drawn heavy criticism on the international stage. The Americans are accused of betrayal and disloyalty towards their Kurdish allies (Breton et al., 2019). A Kurdish fighter asserts, “The Americans sold us out and we do not expect them to help us fight the Turkish troops” (Ward et al., 2019). As for the Turks and their Syrian forces, allegations of orchestrating crimes against humanity have arisen (Todman, 2019). “No matter what some may say, we will not stop this operation,” states Recep Tayyip Erdogan. “We will continue our fight until all terrorists are cleared south of the 32 kilometers” designated for the “safe zone” (AFP, 2019).

To counter the expansion of the offensive to the cities of Kobane and Qamishli, the SDF agreed with the Syrian government and Russia for them to occupy these cities. The senior commander of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, justifies this choice in a Foreign Policy op-ed (2019): “We know we will have to make painful compromises,” but “between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will choose life.” As the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain were captured by Turkey, the United States and Turkey reached a five-day ceasefire agreement to allow the SDF to withdraw from a designated security zone between the two cities (Soylu, 2019). The Kurds, who had not been included in the negotiations, accepted this agreement as the best option and initiated the withdrawal of their forces (Bouvier, 2019).

On October 22, 2019, two hours before the ceasefire's expiration, Turkey and Russia reached an agreement to control the Turkish-Syrian border during a diplomatic summit held in the city of Sochi (Crisis Group, 2019).

Turkey-Russia agreement: the creation of a "safe zone"

By positioning itself as a mediator, this agreement places Russia at the core of the Ankara-Damascus-SDF trio, providing it with an entry point into the Syrian crisis. The Turkish-Russian accord initially addresses one of Turkey's major concerns: to distance the Kurdish YPG forces, considered as adversaries, from its borders. Moreover, another objective achieved by Ankara is the lasting weakening of the Kurdish forces, left behind by their American ally and compelled into an unnatural alliance with Damascus (Lasjaunias, 2019). In this manner, Turkey will retain control over the territories gained during its offensive. The area in question extends between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain. Originally, Ankara had demanded control over an area spanning more than four hundred kilometers (Uras, 2019).

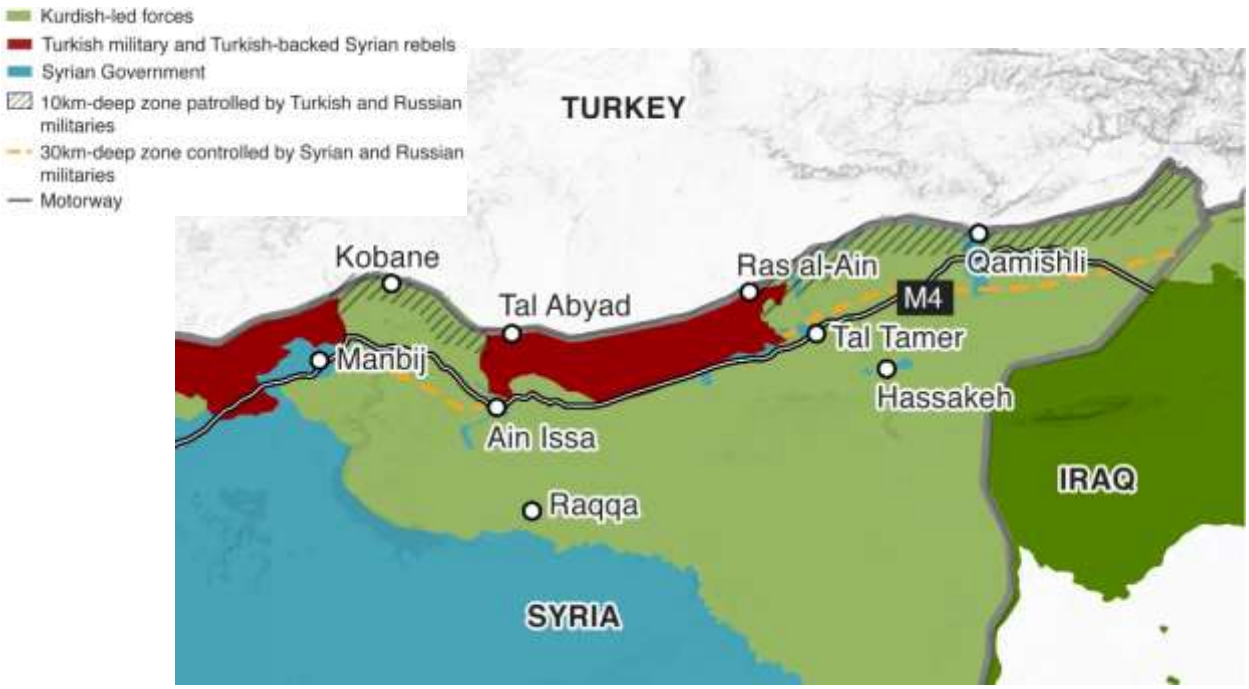

Figure 6 : Map of the « safe zone» agreed in the Turkey-Russia deal
Source: Conflict Monitor, 28th October 2019.

As desired by Erdogan, the Kurdish fighters are required to withdraw to a zone thirty kilometers wide and four hundred kilometers long along the Turkish-Syrian border. Patrols have been tasked with "facilitating" the withdrawal of YPG Kurdish forces and their disarmament within the entire buffer zone defined by the agreement (Afp & Bathke, 2019). This disarmament is a consequential failure for the Kurds, who fear that Turkey-backed Syrian rebel groups may initiate an ethnic cleansing campaign against them or

other minority groups (Hodge, 2019). The withdrawal of the SDF/YPG/J allows the Syrian army and Russia to de facto control the Turkish-Syrian border, except for the area under Turkish siege. In essence, the Russians and the Syrian regime have fully taken over, both militarily and diplomatically, from the Americans in northeastern Syria. Furthermore, joint patrols between Russia and Turkey are being conducted along the border. The Kurdish forces must also withdraw from cities with a majority Arab population. While the AANES (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) has not immediately expressed its stance on this agreement, the Commander-in-Chief of the SDF, General Mazlum Kobane, announced his lack of trust in the Russians and this agreement, as Moscow had already "betrayed" the Kurds during the Afrin offensive in January 2018 (Bouvier, 2019).

Ultimately, this buffer zone aims to relocate two million out of the three and half million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey. However, this so-called security zone is anything but secure, located in the middle of a cross-border conflict. Moreover, one of Turkey's undisclosed objectives is to establish a demographic environment favorable to Erdoğan by settling a population predominantly composed of Arabs who have resided in Turkey, in cities governed by pro-Turkish militias (meaning Syrian rebels) (CAREP, 2019). This zone, which, according to Turkey's criteria, was supposed to extend along the entire Turkish-Syrian border, oddly resembles the Arab Belt project formulated by Hafez al-Assad in 1962[18].

Damas' involvement with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an Arab-Kurdish militia dominated by the YPG, is furthermore a successful move for the Syrian president, allowing him to "reclaim control over 35% of his territory that he had lost," states Mr. Bakawan (Lasjaunias, 2019). This agreement thus signifies the diminishing influence of the U.S. military in the region.

While this agreement ostensibly marks the end of the Turkish offensive and a victory for Erdoğan, Turkish airstrikes have not ceased. In May 2022, Erdoğan threatened to launch a fourth ground offensive in Northern Syria, approved by the Turkish Security Council (Ozturk, 2022). The objective is to gain control over the remaining strip of land, measuring four hundred fifty-eight kilometers, stretching between the Afrin region,

[18] See chapter 2, "The political organization of Kurdish movement in Syria in the recent period: PYD road to power."

captured by the Turks in 2018, and the city of Qamishli in the East, where the Russian army has an airbase. At the heart of this territory lies the city of Kobane, retaken in 2015 by the YPG/J after being besieged by the Islamic State (IS). The timing is opportune. Vladimir Putin finds himself isolated due to the conflict in Ukraine. A significant portion of the Russian contingent in Syria, around five thousand soldiers, has been evacuated to reinforce the Donbas front (Jégo, 2022; Staff, 2022). There was also a weak opposition from Western allies. The Turkish president was convinced that these allies lacked the means to counter his expansionist aspirations in Syria, especially as they were seeking his approval for the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO.

The Rojava Information Center (2022), an independent research organization based in Qamishli, documented at least 68 drone attacks between January and August 2022, resulting in at least 41 deaths and 77 injuries. “Many within the Kurdish forces see this as a tacit agreement between Turkey and the United States, serving as an alternative to Turkey pursuing a ground offensive,” states Dareen Khalifa of the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank (Sallon, 2022). The deployment of Syrian regime soldiers at the border, in line with the 2019 agreement, does not hinder them. On several occasions, Syrian army soldiers abandoned their positions in the face of an attack, forcing Kurdish fighters to step in to defend the front. “We are never the ones initiating a fight; we only retaliate[19],” affirms the spokesperson of the SDF (Sallon, 2022). The agreement stipulates that only Assyrian and Syriac fighters hold the defense lines.

In November 2022, after a bombing incident in Istanbul, Erdogan held the YPG/J and the PKK responsible for the attack. Although the accused never claimed responsibility for the bombing, in response, the Turkish government initiated the “Claw-Sword” aerial operation. More than 25 airstrikes are conducted against Kurdish positions in Syria per day (Rfi, 2022). “A joint planning and launching base for operations against the jihadist group Islamic State (IS) was also targeted by a Turkish drone,” reported the SOHR (France 24, 2022). On January 17, 2023, Erdogan asserted that a ground intervention would soon be launched. Since then, the threat has been tangibly felt, and the Kurds are preparing for an intervention that could be launched at any moment.

Following Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reelection as president, Turkish drones have intensified their assaults on regions under the authority of the Autonomous

[19] See the “Theory of the rose” in Chapter 3, “YPJ against Daesh.”

Administration in the eastern and northeastern parts of Syria. As of early August 2023, SOHR activists have recorded seven instances of Turkish drone attacks in areas held by the SDF, resulting in the deaths of four fighters and injuries to ten others (ANF, 2023).

4.1.3. Alleged war crime by Turkish and Turkey-backed forces in Northeastern Syria: targeting Kurdish women

Turkey and its Syrian militias have been accused by several NGOs, including Amnesty International (2019) and Human Rights Watch, as well as by the United Nations (2020), of committing war crimes in areas under Turkish control.

The United Nations for Human Rights has observed a disturbing pattern of serious violations in these regions, particularly in Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tel Abyad, where increased incidents of killings, abductions, illegal transfers of individuals, confiscations of land and property, and forced expulsions have been documented (OHCHR, 2020). Various UN investigation reports demonstrate systematic violations by Turkish officials and pro-Turkish militias based on ethnic criteria (specifically targeting Kurds), rather than isolated cases (OHCHR, 2020, 2021, 2023, Kaval, 2020).

According to the Rojava Information Center (2023), and the Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2020), there is strong evidence of ethnic cleansing in cities controlled by Turkey. Indeed, the confiscation of properties and unauthorized property sales have become common practices among pro-Turkish forces. As a result of the Turkish invasions, approximately five hundred thousand individuals were displaced from those areas (RIC, 2023). As a result, numerous unoccupied residences and plots of land were claimed by FSA militiamen and their families, along with settlers who came from different regions of Syria and had previously experienced displacement from their original hometowns or cities. Whole families and residents, mostly Kurds, who had not left the area, were compelled to abandon their homes under the threat, of extortion, murder, abduction, torture, and detention (OHCHR, 2020). According to the latest report from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (2023), single Kurdish women have been particularly affected by these property confiscation practices.

Numerous cases of arbitrary detention and torture in the presence of Turkish officials, notably intelligence services (RIC, 2022), have been observed since 2018 and intensified after the 2019 offensive, particularly targeting Kurdish civilians (OHCHR 2023). One of the main reasons is the suspected affiliation with the People's Protection Units. The repression that has befallen the predominantly Kurdish regions in Syria controlled by Turkey and its allies also knows no borders. The United Nations Commission on Syria states (2020) that “Syrian nationals, including women, have been detained in the Ras Al-Ain region, illegally transferred by Turkish forces to the Republic of Turkey, accused of crimes committed in the same region, including murder or membership in a terrorist organization, all by Turkish anti-terrorism criminal law.” This aspect is considered one of the most concerning under international law by the members of the commission (Kaval, 2020; Holmes, 2021).

The most violent violations committed by Turkey and its backed forces have been perpetrated against women (OHCHR, 2020, 2023, RIC, 2022, Kaval, 2020). This “tactic” aimed at instilling fear, however, is not new for Turkey (Duzgün, 2015; Batinga, 2022). In 2003, Ankara was already condemned for the use of sexual violence against Kurdish women.

The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria (2020) describes Turkey's war against women in Afrin as creating “an omnipresent climate of fear that effectively confined them to their homes.” The report adds, “Women and girls have also been detained by fighters from the Syrian National Army [supported by Turkey] and have been subjected to rape and sexual violence - causing serious physical and psychological harm.” To humiliate and demoralize the population, Turkey-backed militias engaged in practices such as forcing male detainees to witness the collective rape of a minor, notes the report, which categorizes this practice as "torture." Women's rights researchers have documented that in 2020 alone, eighty-eight women and girls whose identities are known were kidnapped by Turkey-backed armed groups, averaging an incident every four days. In the first six months of 2022, RIC (2022) recorded thirty-two cases of girls being kidnapped for ransom.

The female fighters of the YPJ are particularly affected. Of sixteen notable strikes that happened in 2022, 32% were targeting only YPJ. In a recent incident, Turkey carried out a drone strike that resulted in the deaths of three women. These women were attending

a conference on women's liberation in Qamishli, Syria. Notably, all three were accomplished YPJ commanders who had actively fought against ISIL. One of these women had been commended by CENTCOM for her pivotal role as an SDF leader, leading forces in combat throughout a significant period of the conflict (NBC, 2022). In October 2022, a Turkish drone campaign targeting the Chamouka school belonging to the YPJ killed six young girls. A survivor states, “The Turks attacked us because they know we are preparing to be the future leaders of our community. It scares them” (Sallon, 2022).

4.2. The risks of further destabilization of the region

The incessant drone attacks and the threat of a fourth ground intervention posed by the Turkish president in May 2022, reiterated in January 2023, could have a destabilizing impact on multiple levels (ACLED, 2023). Particularly, when these actions jeopardize the security of local coalition partners and risk generating prolonged instability in northeastern Syria, providing fertile ground for the resurgence of ISIS, which remains a serious threat to regional, European, and international security.

4.2.1. Syrian Kurds: a geopolitical buffer zone in the northern Middle East

Today, one-third of Syrian territory is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The Kurds currently hold a significant strategic position in the Middle East, at the crossroads of various but highly sensitive issues: from resolving the conflict in Syria to Iranian and Russian interests in the country, as well as oil-related concerns, the Kurdish people have become indispensable for major powers. Indeed, after decades of wars and crises, Syria now constitutes a geopolitical buffer zone characterized by the resurgence of empires at the expense of Western powers and their allies (Balanche, 2023).

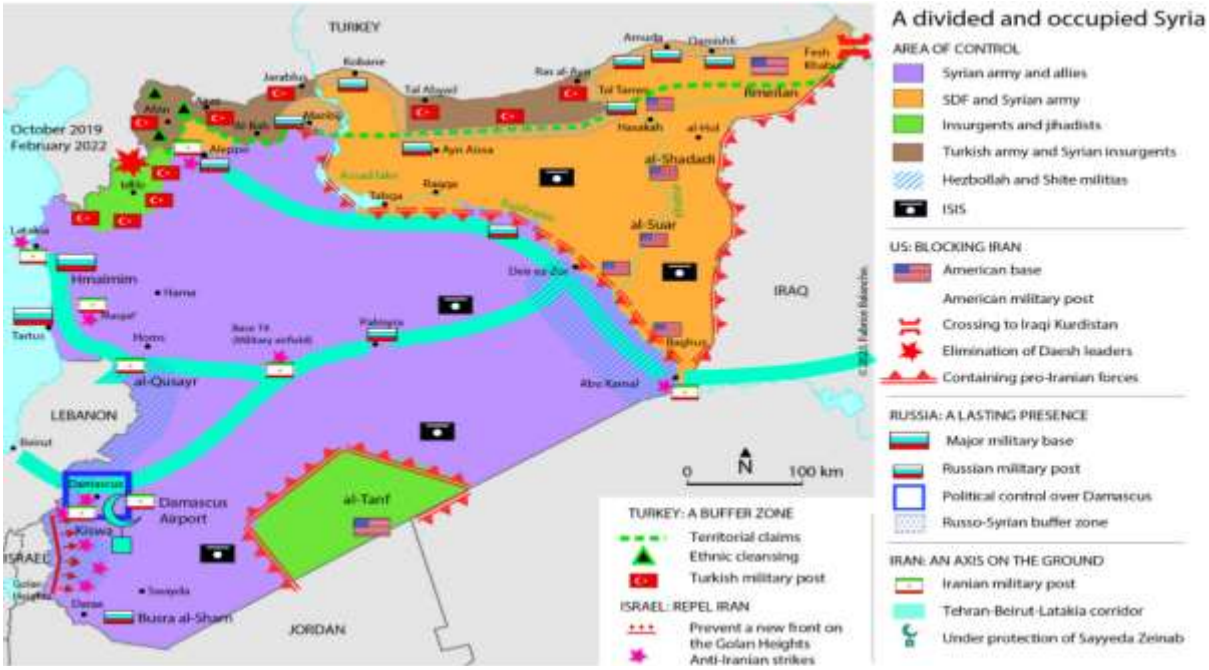

Figure 7 : Map of the territorial division in Syria
Source : Groupes d'études géopolitiques, february 2023

At the regional level, Iran and Turkey are rekindling their aspirations for empire (Balanche, 2023). Turkey's objective is to revive the Ottoman Empire through exerting political and economic ascendancy. The conflict against the PKK/PYD is used, in part, as a justification for legitimizing its military presence and activities in Syria. As for Iran, it continues to strive to protect its western frontier by extending westwards towards the Mediterranean. Turkish operations have heightened rivalries and tensions between Turkey and other regional powers, notably Iran and Saudi Arabia. The drone attacks and invasion threats coming from Turkey are viewed negatively by Iran, which sees it as a highly expansionist foreign policy and a desire to control former Ottoman territories. Like the USSR, Putin is resuming the descent towards warm seas, specifically the eastern Mediterranean, by replacing the United States in Syria. The three nations hold a mutual interest in witnessing the departure of the United States from the region as a means to extend their influence, yet they hold differing views on territorial distribution. This divergence, coupled with the persistence of the modest American military presence, enables Kurdish autonomies to establish a buffer zone amidst these strategic maneuvers. In this area, the strategy of Israel and Saudi Arabia is merely defensive, since it is predominantly under the sway of their opponents.

Confronted by resolute objections from both the United States and Russia, as well as the more inconspicuous yet significant resistance posed by Israel, and notwithstanding

Turkey's lobbying endeavors directed at Moscow and Tehran, the country temporarily suspended its threats of invasion. Nevertheless, there is a renewed inclination to reintroduce these threats. These tools of influence undeniably underscore the pivotal role of the Kurds in the context of regional geopolitics.

A Turkish military operation could lead to lasting consequences. Among the more likely outcomes is the escalation of Russian involvement in areas neighboring the intended Turkish targets (Vugteveen, Farrell-Molloy, 2022). Russia has already begun strengthening its positions near Tal Rifaat, Kobani, and Ain Issa. Additionally, the Syrian regime and its affiliated Iranian militias have taken steps to bolster their positions in the region (Al-Khalidi & Coskun, 2022). These maneuvers might be seen as responses to an assertive Turkey, but due to the lack of direct US support, the SDF will probably need to consider strengthening its cooperation with Russia to ensure its control over the region.

Additionally, the Kurds hold sway over strategically vital oil fields in the Deir ez-Zor region, and they exercise control over the entire northern border with Iraq, extending down to the Euphrates River (Bouvier, 2019). Indeed, more than eighty percent of Syria's oil production is situated within the AANES (Balanche, 2023). Nonetheless, this currently translates to a daily output of under one hundred thousand barrels due to maintenance-related shortcomings. Restoring Syrian production to its pre-war levels would require both peace and substantial investments in the sector. The AANES's second notable asset is its production of agricultural raw materials, as highlighted by Balanche (2023). This region has historically been recognized as a major contributor to Syria's agricultural output. The significant water withdrawals conducted by Turkey from the northern border have given rise to an unresolvable water scarcity problem unless there is an extensive and expensive overhaul of the production approach. As a result, the continuation of the AANES depends on financial backing from the West and the maintenance of the American military presence. The convergence between Syria led by Bashar al-Assad and Turkey under Erdogan's leadership, facilitated by Russia's involvement, is anticipated to culminate in a collaborative endeavor targeting the AANES (Balanche, 2023).

The support provided by the international coalition to the Kurds and their Christian and Arab allies (SDF) to defeat ISIS had led, after a victorious war, to the establishment of a genuine anti-Islamic shield in northern Syria, as demonstrated by the map above. This area, which is four times the size of Lebanon, is guarded by the SDF and

a small contingent of American soldiers, safeguarding from the resurgence and growth of terrorist groups in the region.

4.2.2. The specter of a return of ISIS

As early as 2015, the leadership of the Islamic State anticipated the loss of the territories under their control. They envisioned a retreat to the desert areas of the region and a return to guerrilla warfare. The caliphate was never an ultimate goal in itself. Nevertheless, its establishment served to create the foundational myth of a resilient movement destined to endure clandestinely. Thus, contrary to what Trump may have announced in 2018, ISIS was never truly defeated, and the risk of its resurgence remains significant.

In 2019, after several years of an exemplary military campaign, we established an effective "anti-Islamist shield" in northern Syria. The coalition had the SDF reliable and determined allies who managed to rally the Kurds, Christians of the region, and the Arabs opposed to the Jihadists - now forming a slight majority of the SDF. However, according to Franceschini (2022), the current situation in northern Syria is close to that of 2013.

After the departure of coalition forces, over ten thousand ISIS fighters were imprisoned in twenty-six "makeshift" prisons managed by the SDF in northern Syria (Bouvier, 2019; Operation Inherent Resolve report, 2023). Currently, due to financial and material constraints, the fighters' families are consolidated into three camps: Roj Camp, Al Hol Camp, and Ain Issa Camp. Two high-security prisons located in the northeastern part of the country in Derek and Hassakeh are specifically designated for fighters, especially foreigners whom their countries are reluctant to repatriate. These camps and prisons pose a real security risk to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as they continue to be centers of radicalization: "The Islamic State system is still being implemented there," warns a member of the SDF leadership (Sallon, 2022). In Al Hol Camp, where more than four thousand SDF personnel are mobilized, fifty thousand prisoners coexist in humanitarian conditions that international organizations regularly denounce (OHCHR, 2020). The wives of fighters are particularly distinguished by their unique fanaticism. A YPJ commander states that she found "classes for ideological training or self-defense. They have their own courts, they practice torture and executions, beheadings in tents and tunnels to punish those who are outside their system."

More importantly, “al-Hol is […] a threat to the whole world. […] ISIS indoctrinates the children in the camp and thus a new generation of mercenaries grows up. If no measures are taken against the reorganization of ISIS, we will face big problems tomorrow” YPJ spokesperson, Ruksen Mihemed argued (RIC, 2022). In November 2022, Turkey targeted SDF guards of the al-Hol camp, killing six of them. Therefore, the most immediate risk of a Turkish offensive comes from those ISIS camps monitored by the SDF.

The remaining ISIS fighters have organized themselves into sleeper cells. In June 2023, the Rojava Information Center documented twenty-four attacks in northern Syria an increase of 85% compared to May 2023. They regularly place improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along the roads, especially on the routes used by Kurdish security forces or the Coalition. In January 2022, a group of jihadists launched an attack on the prison in Hasakah, resulting in the release of several detainees and the deaths of three hundred SDF members (Sallon, 2022).

The international community is alarmed by the real risk of a resurgence of ISIS in Syria following a Turkish offensive. Indeed, ISIS is at risk of regaining strength by default: the Kurdish forces, which had been primarily responsible for anti-terrorism operations in Syria, will be heavily engaged against Turkish forces and their Syrian allies. They will no longer be able to combat the dormant ISIS cells, which pose a lesser threat to the AANES than Turkey does (Coles, 2015). Kurdish officials have repeatedly stated that in the event of a Turkish attack on their territories, they would be unable to ensure the integrity of detention facilities. Units of the SDF have already been redeployed from the Al-Hol camp and the Deir ez-Zor region to the Turkish border. “Our battle against Turkey is played out at the intelligence level: We must focus our intelligence services on this fight rather than on searching for ISIS cells,” explains Mazloum Abdi, the camp commander (Sallon, 2022). He also adds, “Three months ago, we arrested an ISIS cell that had plans to attack the Al-Hol camp when the Turkish offensive was launched to free the population.” He calls on foreign countries to repatriate their citizens, including France and Canada, which have halted their repatriation processes.

In parallel, the reassignment of Kurdish penitentiary forces to the front line will lead to a significant increase in the already substantial security instability in the detention centers where ISIS fighters and sympathizers are held. The risk of ISIS gaining control over these prisoner camps, where jihadist activism has far from diminished, is a reality

that European countries fear. The Islamic State's intention to carry out attacks on the Old Continent remains intact; the reintegration of tens of thousands of fighters and sympathizers seeking revenge and jihad will, in this regard, be an asset that the leadership of the terrorist organization will know how to exploit to its particular advantage.

This continuously volatile security environment adds to the severity of the humanitarian situation in which the Syrian population, especially the Kurds, finds itself, threatened by Turkish airstrikes.

4.2.3. The exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis

After twelve years of crisis and war in Syria, civilians have been the primary victims of attacks carried out by the various parties involved in this conflict (UNCHR, n.d). The three ground offensives and the latest Turkish aerial offensive have exacerbated the already deep humanitarian crisis in the country. Approximately five hundred thousand people have fled attack zones since the Battle of Afrin in 2018, and out of the three million people living in northern Syria, 1.8 million depend on humanitarian assistance (UN Press, 2019). In 2020, Russia used its veto at the UNSC to cancel three out of the four UN cross-border aid points (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Northern Syria relies on a single cross-border aid route from Turkey. The humanitarian situation in the northern part of the country is therefore already extremely critical.

Although drone strikes and the threat of a ground intervention target Kurdish armed forces, civilians are also predominantly affected, and face numerous discriminations based on ethnic criteria. The relentless strikes in this region have destroyed numerous infrastructures, causing water shortages and power outages. Adam Coogle, the Middle East Division Director at Human Rights Watch, states, “Syrians are already experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe, a growing displacement crisis, and a free-falling economy. Turkish military strikes risk worsening an already untenable situation for Kurds, Arabs, and other communities” (Relief Web, 2022). Thus, given the current humanitarian conditions, a Turkish ground offensive targeting cities like Qamishli and Kobane would likely result in the massive displacement of thousands of people, necessitating additional humanitarian assistance that may not be provided. Indeed, following the 2019 invasion, UNICEF, the International Red Cross (IRC), CARE

International, and other aid organizations suspended their services and evacuated foreign staff, which further worsened the humanitarian crisis at the time (Stewart, 2022).

Furthermore, one of the reasons behind the offensive is to expand the territory reserved for the formation of a “safe zone.” However, a conflict zone like the ongoing one in Northern Syria is anything but secure (Nevett, 2019). Added to this are the abuses and war crimes orchestrated by the Turkish rebel groups described in the previous section. Human Rights Watch (2022) has indicated that “This record of abuses makes it extremely unlikely that Turkey's proposed 'safe zones' will be safe,” and instead, they could worsen the security and humanitarian situation in the area.

Ultimately, Turkish President Erdoğan is employing a non-lethal weapon to impact Syrian Kurds, a tactic that most Western leaders have not fully grasped: water. Erdogan can quietly wage a war of attrition against Kurdish civilians, a strategy as silent as it is devastating in its long-term effects. Turkey has constructed several dams to control the flow of the Euphrates, reducing it from five hundred cubic meters to two hundred cubic meters per second (Chesnot, 2021). Additionally, Turkey and its supported local forces gained control of the Allouk water station during their offensive in northeastern Syria in October 2019. As stated by OHCHR (2020), “Armed groups affiliated with Turkey, who control the Allouk water-pumping station, have repeatedly disrupted the water supply, affecting access to water for nearly one million people in the city of al-Hassakeh and its surroundings.” Hospitals in Hassakeh continually report cases of poisoning, leishmaniasis, or cholera due to the lack of water sterilization and filtration (Sallon, 2022). In return, the SDF has disrupted the electricity supply to Ras al-Aïn using the power plant under their control. However, denying access to essential services such as water and electricity is extremely detrimental and endangers the lives of numerous civilians (UN Press, 2020).

Thus, the deterioration of the security and humanitarian environment in northern Syria could lead to a massive migration of Syrian refugees fleeing Turkish attacks. Such a migratory wave could have destabilizing consequences for the region and place a burden on neighboring countries like Iraq, which already hosts 224,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, n.d). Furthermore, any opposition from the European Union to a Turkish invasion would prompt Erdoğan to threaten Europeans with “opening the gates and

sending the 3.6 million refugees," as he did in 2019. A Turkish offensive could result in "a Kurdish migratory" wave towards Europe.

Policy Recommendations

A comprehensive analysis of the situation in Rojava (AANES) highlights several security challenges that could intensify in the event of a Turkish invasion, potentially destabilizing not only Syria but also the broader Middle East region and the West. These two main challenges include the resurgence of the terrorist group ISIS and an exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, leading many to flee to neighboring countries and Europe. These challenges are, among other factors, the result of a historical "war" between two actors, Turkey and the Kurds, specifically the Syrian Kurds in this thesis. It is now more crucial than ever to find a peaceful solution. Therefore, this section aims to provide recommendations that various stakeholders could implement to mitigate these risks.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and NATO's importance on the international stage, Turkey, a crucial actor within the alliance, should not be isolated, especially as it seeks closer ties with Russia and Damascus. However, in this equation, the fate of the Kurds, the ground force of the coalition against ISIS, must also be considered. It is essential to adopt a comprehensive and balanced approach that includes support for the Kurds while considering the broader regional dynamics to achieve a lasting solution.

Maintain a strong opposition to any new Turkish offensives against the Kurds

A Turkish intervention would be extremely detrimental to the security and humanitarian situation in the region. Western countries, allies of both Turkey and the Kurds, can support Turkey's territorial integrity against potential Kurdish attacks and maintain pressure on the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) against any attacks. However, Western nations must continue to strongly oppose drone attacks and the threat of intervention on Syrian territory. To achieve this, the United States could increase its troop presence in the country and along the Turkish border. European countries should also deploy troops in Syria alongside the United States and develop a common policy. France, the United Kingdom, and Germany have withdrawn from Syria to reinforce their troops in Iraq. A burden-sharing approach is needed.

The international community, especially Western countries, must also exert diplomatic pressure on Turkey through official channels. In 2019, the UN Security Council failed to condemn the Turkish offensive due to Russian and American votes. Therefore, a clear and explicit condemnation of Turkish drone attacks on Kurdish forces must be issued. Acting in harmony and defining a coherent policy will maximize the effectiveness of diplomatic pressure.

Urge all parties to the conflict to respect the Geneva Convention

As the occupying power, Turkey is obligated to ensure the safety of the civilian population and maintain law and public order. Currently, its armed forces are failing in these obligations. Turkey cannot evade its responsibility by using Syrian armed groups to commit these crimes. Turkey must cease the violations committed by pro-Turkish armed groups by conducting thorough and transparent on-the-ground investigations. To achieve this, Turkey should allow international observers and NGOs into its "safe zone." Turkey should also urge factions that have committed crimes to leave the areas under its control and to be tried under international humanitarian law. Additionally, Turkey should commit to assisting victims in rebuilding their lives or providing them with compensation.

All parties to the conflict must respect international humanitarian law, which obligates them to take all possible precautions to avoid or at least minimize harm to civilian populations. Western countries could consider strengthening or expanding existing sanctions to include other groups/entities in the event of violations of the Geneva Convention.

Restarting peace talks between Turkey and the PYD/SDF

Turkey will not be able to resolve its cross-border conflict with the PYD/YPG through a military solution. On the contrary, this will only deepen the divide and resentment between them and push away any peaceful solutions. The first three offensives in Syria did not in any way solve the Kurdish issue. Therefore, the EU and the United States should urge Turkey to restart a peace dialogue with the Syrian Kurds, similar to the one initiated in 2012. The United States could appoint a special envoy to find a consensus

between the two parties. Thus, the United States should propose peace proposals by evaluating policies that have not worked previously.

To this end, an objective reassessment of the threat posed by the SDF/YPG to Turkish territory should be conducted to understand if Turkish attacks are justifiable and legitimate or if they serve an internal political agenda. Turkey justifies these offensives by the fear that the SDF/YPG could use this autonomous region as a rear base for the PKK. This fear is understandable given the ideological and historical connection between the PKK and the PYD. However, this does not reflect reality. A study by Holmes (2021) shows that between 2017 and 2020, the Turks launched 3,319 attacks against the SDF/YPG or civilians compared to 22 attacks orchestrated by the Kurds on Turkish territory, and only in response to the Peace Spring operation in 2019. Of these twenty-two attacks, only twelve could be verified. We are dealing with a profoundly asymmetric conflict.

Faced with gender-based violence in this cross-border conflict, it would be wise to involve women in these negotiations and promote their participation. The United States could implement the Women, Peace, and Security strategy adopted by the United Nations. This strategy would help address Turkish policies that have a devastating impact on Kurdish women.

The political control and economic challenges have made the Kurdish leaders in the AANES much more pragmatic compared to the early days of autonomy. The PYD and its armed forces YPG/J should detach themselves from or reduce the influence of the PKK within their ranks. This separation would facilitate negotiations with Turkey and allow Syrian Kurds to build closer ties with Iraqi Kurds.

Finally, the United States could advocate for a border security force that is acceptable to both parties. Such an initiative could be established by the UN, similar to the Green Line in Cyprus, although Russia might use its veto. Therefore, the creation of an independent and neutral organization, like the Multinational Force and Observers that monitor the Israel-Egypt border, could be an alternative.

Continue to provide financial and military support to the SDF to efficiently counter the resurgence of ISIS

The SDF's capacity to confront ISIS depends on ongoing U.S. military assistance, as well as reduced threats from Turkey and the Syrian regime to its governance. As I write these lines, the SDF is "moderately capable" of conducting anti-ISIS operations independently. They still rely on support from the international coalition. Therefore, given the persistent threat posed by ISIS and the resurgence of attacks, the coalition needs to continue its efforts with the SDF and potentially even increase its support. However, these efforts could become counterproductive if Turkey continues its attacks. Hence, it is first necessary to find a peaceful resolution to this longstanding conflict.

Faced with the overpopulation of fighter camps and extremely precarious living conditions, countries with nationals in camps administered by the Syrian Democratic Forces should repatriate them as quickly as possible. These camps pose a significant danger due to the lack of resources to secure the infrastructure. These countries must take responsibility.

Include the Kurds in UN negotiations on the future of Syria

With over two and a half million people, the Syrian Kurds are indispensable actors in resolving the Syrian crisis. Moreover, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is currently the most democratic actor in the country. Kurds are absent from the Syrian Constitutional Committee established in 2019 under the auspices of the UN. Kurdish representation in this UN-promoted committee would strengthen the broader process of political transition in Syria. As for the peace talks proposed above, the UN should promote the participation of women in this committee through its Women, Peace and Security resolution.

Due to widespread tensions between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey, the unresolved nature of the Kurdish question in Syria has been one of the greatest sources of instability. Therefore, until the regime, the opposition, and the Kurds have not found a compromise, the cross-border conflict with Turkey will not end.

Conclusion

This research work has focused on the Kurdish female fighters, the YPJ in Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan. The thesis aimed to analyze the involvement of the YPJ in the fight against Daesh and the implications of Turkish attacks against the YPG-YPJ. To this end, after a comprehensive study of the topic, it is possible to draw some conclusions addressed in each of the four chapters.

The research begins by establishing a theoretical framework and a literature review on women and war. I have found that the feminist academic debate on women's military participation is divided into two opposing groups offering a dense and complex body of knowledge on this subject. On the one hand, the "right to fight" scholars argued that engaging in war activities could help women gain equality and change the male environment from the inside. On the other hand, the "anti-militarist" scholars stated that war usually imply sexual violence and a macho environment, and women, as the prime victims of such enterprise, should advocate for peace. The literature review highlighted that while women are active in regular armies and most rebel movements, their roles and numbers vary. I have found that women in regular armies are still banned from combat roles in most countries and face gender-based discriminations. Focusing on the rebel movement, women's participation and roles depend on the group and its political ideology. Contrary to religious or far-right organizations, leftist movements, wishing to challenge gender norms, encourage the participation of women. This conclusion helps to understand why the Kurdish movement in Syria welcomes a large number of females in their armed forces.

To better understand the context in which the engagement of Kurdish women in armed struggle, particularly in Syria, takes place, a historical overview of the origin of the Kurdish question was necessary. It can be concluded that scholars and Kurds themselves are on unsettled grounds regarding the origin of this population. We observe that Kurds form a heterogeneous people in terms of religion and language, resulting from thousands of years of continuous internal evolution and the assimilation of various new groups. However, Kurds all refer to semi-nomadic and warrior populations that were heavily involved in Muslim armies. This lack of unity within the Kurdish population was particularly detrimental when major international treaties were signed by victorious European powers after World War I. The Treaty of Lausanne, which divided the Kurds

into four states - Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran - marked the beginning of many years of frustration and discrimination, which still exists today. It can be concluded that it is in this repressive context that Kurdish nationalist and political movements formed in Syria, to revendicate their self-determination rights. It can be further argued that the Kurdish political movement in Syria is highly complex and fragmented due to internal tensions, which led external actors to intervene as mediators. This situation allowed the PKK to play an important role in the emergence of the now predominant PYD in Northeastern Syria and the formation of its armed forces.

The third chapter argues that civil wars provide fertile ground for the emergence of new actors and political experiments. The disintegration of Syria has given rise to two radically opposing political entities: on one side, the Islamic State organization (Daesh), which pursued a Sunni "caliphal dream." On the other side, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed branches – YPG and YPJ – govern a de facto autonomous region in northern Syria. Referred to as Rojava, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria relies on a "revolutionary" political project – inspired by the PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan – which combines elements of feminism, secularism, communalism, and ecology. The rise of the Islamic State in Syria increased the involvement of Kurdish women in the female army YPJ. However, it was concluded that defining this engagement as a simple desire to defend the Kurdish people would be overly reductionist. The YPJ is primarily a social movement, with its ideological character being essential: to build an egalitarian society and a new military culture in which women hold a central place. An in-depth study of their engagement demonstrates that the YPJ co-led and commanded every battle against Daesh – from the liberation of the Yazidis in Iraq to the fall of Raqqa, including the siege of Kobané – alongside the YPG; at the frontlines of combat. Following a victorious war, the YPG-YPJ (now collectively referred to as the Syrian Democratic Forces) became the most effective allies of the international coalition, serving as their ground forces in the fight against the Islamic State. This chapter concludes that the military effectiveness of the YPG-YPJ and their allies against Daesh has helped establish an anti-Islamic shield, preventing the resurgence and growth of terrorist groups in the country.

The last chapter investigates the consequences of the Turkish military offensive on YPG-YPJ. I have first analyzed how and why Turkey wishes to reduce Kurdish influence in Syria. Turkey felt more threatened by a Kurdish autonomy at its border which

could serve as a rear base for the PKK rather than an Islamic State which is closer to its internal policy. Turkey passively supported the jihadist groups the coalition was fighting by allowing combatants to cross its border with Syria. It is also through this border that a significant portion of weapons, equipment, and supplies destined for ISIS and other radical groups were transported. After joining the international coalition against Daesh, Turkey launched three ground interventions in Northeastern Syria allowing it to control the city of Afrin and a large strip along its border. One of the reasons behind those offensives is to create a "safe zone" for the millions of Syrian refugees the country is welcoming. But more importantly, Erdogan has long been worried that a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria and the Kurdish self-government in Iraq would strengthen the self-determination desire of Kurds living in Turkey. Nevertheless, I concluded that the ongoing drone campaigns and the recent threat of a fourth ground offensive against the Kurds in Syria have detrimental consequences on the stability of the region. A Turkish invasion could increase tensions between the powers present in Syria that see an expansionist Turkish foreign policy in former Ottoman territories. Given the importance of the SDF in the anti-ISIS operation and the monitoring of combatant camps, such invasion added to the incessant drone strikes would have devastating implications for the fight against the resurgence of Daesh. Additionally, I argued that a ground offensive would further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis since many of the civilians in this region are relying on humanitarian aid and would flee in precarious conditions in neighboring countries. Policy recommendations have been provided to mitigate these destabilizing risks:

- Maintain a strong opposition to any new Turkish offensives against the Kurds;
- Urge all parties to the conflict to respect the Geneva Convention;
- Restart peace talks between Turkey and the PYD/SDF;
- Continue to provide financial and military support to the SDF to efficiently counter the resurgence of ISIS;
- Include the Kurds in UN negotiations on the future of Syria.

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Executive Summary

This dissertation argues about the Syrian Kurds, in particular about the following Kurdish Forces: YPG and YPJ. These two armed branches are associated with the predominant political party in Rojava, namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which shares ideological ties with the PKK. In the context of this study, the focus will be on the YPJ, a Syrian Kurdish militia composed entirely of women. This choice is explained, in part, by the uniqueness of this commitment in an Islamist region deeply rooted in traditional values. The YPJ has gained global acclaim as a prominent military unit combating ISIS. The Western perspective on these female Kurdish fighters has prompted inquiries into why the idea of women engaging in warfare is frequently portrayed sensationally.

Despite the departure of international coalition forces from Syria in 2019, YPG-YPJ fighters continue to face both jihadist forces and the Turkish army. In these multiple wars, Kurdish women have access to significant positions, in line with the egalitarian ideology of democratic autonomy, but they are also the primary victims. As Turkey threatens to launch an offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces, the fourth since 2016, such an operation, combined with ongoing drone attacks, could have significant implications for local and international security. By exploring feminist theories on women and war, delving into the Kurdish origins, understanding the ideological and political facets of the Kurdish movement, and analyzing testimonies from the YPJ, this dissertation portrays Kurdish female fighters as challenging the gendered hierarchies of militarization. The objective of this research is to analyze the involvement of the YPJ in the fight against Daesh and the implications of Turkish attacks against the YPG-YPJ. Policy recommendations will be proposed to mitigate these risks.

Theory and literature review

This chapter aims to understand through theory and an extensive literature review, women's role in conflict, war, and inside their organization whether it is a rebel movement or state military. The feminist academic debate on women’s military participation is

divided into two opposing groups: the “right to fight” scholars and the “anti-militarist”. This debate produced a rich, complex, and diverse body of feminist knowledge about war. On the one hand, the “right to fight” scholars argue that, on equality grounds, women should have rights of access to military participation equal to those of men. Therefore, women's presence could and would eventually bring about a transformation of masculinist institutions, such as the military. Indeed, it is argued that denying women access to combat or the military would perpetuate traditional social schemes. The Anti-militarist feminists argue the lack of genuine institutional commitment to progressive gender change will deceive women and they would only become symbolic figures of a violent enterprise. Furthermore, this body of scholar states that women, as the prime victims of war and armed conflicts, should advocate for peace. Therefore, their ultimate objective is the eradication of militarism in society rather than endorsing military institutions and power through female participation.

I then focus on women’s actual participation in regular armies and rebel movements through an analysis of the literature. I argue that while women played traditional but necessary positions in regular armies during the two world wars such as nursing, it is only in the 21st century that their roles have evolved intending to promote equality. More precisely, women were barred from combat roles until very recently. Literature emphasized that military institutions are hyper-masculine environments, therefore if women were to work in the military, it would have been to do “women’s work only”. I argue that men's resentment of women participating in armies and the ongoing feminist debates on whether women should integrate such institutions did not help enhance women's status and the feminization of the armies. Up until now, even with the promotion of equality policy, women count for 16% of the army workforce at best. They are still facing discrimination and sexual harassment among their peers. These issues have been tackled and globally raised through United Nations resolutions, Women, Peace, and Security, which have prompted different member countries to engage with the topic of gender equality in their military institutions. This resolution has also recognized the significant role of women in conflict mediation and peacebuilding. According to the United Nations, “increased women's participation in peacekeeping operations has demonstrated that it enhances mission effectiveness, provides better access to local communities, especially women, and promotes human rights and civilian protection.”

The analysis of women's participation in rebel movements demonstrates that they have different opportunities than women employed in regular armies. While women are active in most of these organizations, their roles and numbers vary depending on the group and their political ideology. Therefore, the reason why the group wants to employ women and the motivation of women to join a certain group correlate. Indeed, groups wanting to challenge social norms and hierarchies such as the leftist movement tend to welcome female fighters. On the contrary, religious, and fundamentalist ideologies whose goal is to reassert traditional gender values are more likely to exclude women from their ranks or women will have only support roles, such as mothers and wives. I argue that women's role in such organizations depends equally on the ideology. A rebel movement that is eager to include women on the same foot as men will usually provide women with greater access to opportunities and positions than a group whose ideology is more traditionalistic. While we tend to think that women engaging in political violence are mere victims and manipulated, they usually volunteer for such enterprises. As Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely (2019) reveal after their study of female fighters is that women's motivations are varied and matter. They are usually linked to their political beliefs but could include also revenge, grief, social networks, or insecurity.

To conclude, while women in state armed forces can gain skills thanks to the formation and the education provided, it is unfortunately not the case for women in non-state armed forces. Evidence shows that in the post-conflict era, ex-combatants are most of the time left aside and face limited possibilities and opportunities afterward. Women face the additional stigma that comes with transgressing gender norms, particularly women from rural and indigenous communities.

Origin and history of the "Kurdish question"

This chapter aimed to offer an overview of the complexity of the Kurdish movement with particular attention to Syria. I first defined the Kurds geographically, religiously, and linguistically and, in a second step, focused on the history of the Kurdish question and the establishment of Kurdish nationalist movements. Despite their significant size and historical presence, Kurds have often faced political, social, and economic challenges in the countries they inhabit. Their struggle for autonomy,

recognition of their identity, and protection of their rights has been marked by conflicts, uprisings, and territorial disputes.

The origin of the Kurds is a complex and debated subject among historians and researchers. Some state that the Kurds come from a mix of Greek and Iranian populations who evolved in Mesopotamia. Others argued that Kurds are the descendants of the Medes, a population from ancient Iran in 484 BC. In general, scholars agree that they come from an Indo-European population with no definitive starting point in their history and settlement. While their heritage is the result of thousands of years of continuous internal evolution and the assimilation of various new groups, Kurds all refer to semi-nomadic and warrior populations that were heavily involved in Muslim armies.

The Kurds are scattered across a region called Kurdistan, but this territory was and remains without defined borders. While we can find Kurds in the Caucasus and major cities of the Middle East or Europe, they are primarily divided between four countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Most of them live in Turkey, where their region accounts for thirty percent of the Turkish territory. Regarding their religion, Kurds have soon been Islamized with the large majority of them being Sunni. However, Kurdistan demonstrates religious diversity as we can identify Jewish, Christian, or heterodox forms of Islam like the Yezidy minority. Literature tends to highlight that the rugged landscape of Kurdistan, characterized by high mountains and challenging communication systems, along with the historical absence of political unity among the Kurds, resulted in significant variations in local dialects within different groups. Therefore, I distinguished three major dialects: Kurmanji which is the predominant language among Kurds, Sorani, and the Kurdi dialect. The variety of dialects has undermined the establishment of a cohesive political movement or ethnic identity.

The second part of the chapter focused on demonstrating that the Kurds have been the losers of international treaties signed by European powers unbeknownst to them. While the Treaty of Sèvres signed in 1920 provided for the creation of an autonomous or fully independent Kurdish state in most of Ottoman Kurdistan, the nationalist dreams of the Kurds were shattered following the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne three years later. The pledges of independence from Great Britain and France were subsequently forgotten. The imperial interests of these two powers primarily revolved around the region's hydrocarbons, crucial for post-war reconstruction. Responding to the petroleum interests

of the Turkish Petroleum Company, Great Britain was ready to forsake the promises made to the Kurds to negotiate with Mustafa Kemal. While the Treaty of Lausanne guaranteed some rights in the religious and educational domains to non-Muslim communities in Turkey, the application of these clauses was never realized. As for the Kurds in Syria, they were not recognized as a minority with specific rights either by the French mandate power or subsequently by various Syrian regimes. Consequently, Kurdistan was divided as it is known today, between Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Thus began the Kurds' struggle to assert their cultural, linguistic, and political rights within the states where they reside. Despite their aspirations for autonomy, the Kurds have always faced repression and marginalization. In Turkey, the state long denied the very existence of Kurds as a distinct group and suppressed any cultural expression or separate political formation. In Iraq, the Kurdish community achieved a degree of autonomy in the 1990s, eventually leading to the establishment of an autonomous government in 2003.

I have delved particularly into the case of Syria and the formation of Kurdish political movements in the country. Although Kurdish cultural and intellectual associations were favored under French mandate, after Syria's independence, discrimination against the Kurdish minority intensified. It is in this complex and tense context that the Kurdish political movement in Syria started to take place. Despite these movements, the Syrian government persists in denying the Kurds equal rights enjoyed by other inhabitants of the country. The Kurdish political landscape is highly fragmented, and the reasons for this fragmentation are both external and internal. Internal dissensions are tied to diverse desired claims. While some advocate civil and human rights, others turn toward cultural rights, particularly the use of the Kurdish language. Differences also arise regarding the demand for autonomy or independence. As a result, numerous political organizations have emerged since the formation of the first political party in 1957.

These internal tensions thus open the door to external mediation, notably from Iraqi or Turkish organizations like the PKK. The PKK, founded by Öcalan, has exerted significant influence in Syria and is responsible for the emergence of the major party, PYD. The PYD's role is to disseminate the ideas of democratic confederalism theorized by Öcalan. It is only within the context of the Syrian crisis that the PYD sets itself apart from other political parties by organizing the party at the local level and placing itself in a third way. In 2012, as Syrian troops partially withdrew from the Northeast, enabling

Kurds to gain control of three enclaves, the PYD emerged as the sole hegemonic force capable of managing this region.

It unfolds as if the grand moment of “history's revenge” has arrived for the Kurds, protagonists of a history marked by successive betrayals since at least the 1920s. These aspirations for autonomy appear within reach, but the situation is far more complex than it may seem. Despite the apparent opportunities that have arisen, tensions within the Kurdish space and the emergence of new actors like ISIS continue to threaten their autonomy.

The involvement of Kurdish female fighters in the struggle against ISIS: the case of the YPJ

This chapter aims to analyze the role of Kurdish women in the struggle against ISIS in Syria and how they gained central participation in the ongoing “democratic” revolution that is taking place in Rojava. Media and the Western fascination for these women usually fail to understand and report the broader context in which the involvement of Kurdish women in warfare is occurring. This can be attributed, in part, to the prohibition of women's direct involvement in ground combat in most countries worldwide. I, therefore, developed, in my first part, the global background of this involvement. I have found that the Syrian civil war allowed two actors to become prominent on the regional and international scene: the Islamic State and the PYD accompanied by its military branches. Indeed, the chaos that surrounded Syria in 2011, after years of dictatorship from the Baathist regime, pushed the opposition to militarize. Both the PYD and the Islamic State benefited from the unrest to develop their activities and gain power.

It is contended that ISIS found its origins in the Iraqi civil conflict triggered during the period of American occupation from 2003 to 2011. While the group was engaged in low-intensity guerilla actions, the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 coupled with the almost simultaneous eruption of the civil war in neighboring Syria, breathed new life and unforeseen opportunities for growth into the “Islamic State in Iraq.” The group was successful in creating a Syrian branch named the “Al-Nusra Front.” However, while both groups had a longstanding association, their nationalist perspective led to their separation

in a violent war and the establishment of the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria." Territorial expansion strategy holds significant importance for ISIS, as it seeks recognition as a legitimate state entity. In 2014, the creation of a caliphate with Raqqa as its capital marked a significant shift in ISIS legitimacy.

On the other hand, PYD equally benefited from the Syrian civil war. It positions itself in a third way compared to other Kurdish parties: the party did not want to support the regime or the rebels. On the opposite, they started to organize, at the local level, civil councils to disseminate their ideals of "democratic autonomy." As the unrest was increasing, the PYD gathered combatants to prepare the defense in the summer of 2011 named under the YXG. It was only a year after, in July 2012, when the regime troops left the Kurdish regions to consolidate the defense in Aleppo, that the YPG was officially founded. Kurdish women took part in all the stages of the evolution, from leadership positions to training the YPG combatants. Thus, on April 4, 2013, an autonomous battalion entirely composed of women was formed, named the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). While Western media interest in Kurdish women's involvement in combat is relatively new, it is rather a historical one. Organizations following the same ideology as the PKK, like the PYD, welcomed a substantial number of women. Their internal policy places the liberation of women as one of its main pillars. While acknowledging the history, it is evident that Kurdish women have played an active role in advocating for their rights within Kurdish nationalist movements over an extended period. Simplifying their armed engagement against ISIS by romanticizing it fails to capture the multifaceted nature of their struggle. A comparison with women's rights in nations such as Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia underscores how Kurdish communities set themselves apart through their relatively greater acceptance of gender equality.

Because the military is embedded in Kurdish culture, their effectiveness on the battlefield distinguished them from other forces in the fight against ISIS. YPG/J and later on, the Syrian Democratic Forces became the most reliable local allies for the US-led coalition against Islamic terrorism. From the Sinjar crisis to the Raqqa liberation passing by the Kobane battle, they have shown resilience, autonomy, and fluidity in front of the attacks sponsored by ISIS. Women composed slightly less than half of the armed forces and took an active participation in all the battles and strategic decisions. The over-mediatization and the Western fascination they faced after the Kobane battle, failed to encompass the motivation behind this involvement. The YPJ is primarily a social

movement, with its ideological character being essential: to build an egalitarian society and a new military culture in which women hold a central place. YPJ's ideology is based on Jineology, a unique expression of Kurdish feminism that considers the emancipation of individuals, both men and women, from conventional gender roles and patriarchal systems. Many of the YPJ fighters engaged in the militias for the “cause”, the implementation of democratic autonomy in Rojava. There is, of course, the idea of the emancipation through arms. Therefore, when ISIS, representing the climax of the traditional gender structure and society, attacked Kobane, the cradle of the Kurdish revolution, in 2014, many women enrolled in the YPJ. The experiences of Kurdish female fighters challenge certain feminist theories that argue against women's participation in war because war is primarily a masculine endeavor, while women are assumed to be naturally peaceful.

The struggle of the YPG/J against ISIS was, first for protecting their interest, but their engagement alongside the coalition has helped secure the region and Western countries. While none of the countries of the coalition wanted to engage, at first, troops were on the ground, and tens of thousands of Kurds died in this war. As I argued in this chapter, none can defeat an enemy solely with airstrikes. They were and still are our ground forces in the fight against ISIS.

In 2015, under the impulsion of the USA, the YPG and YPJ joined the Syrian Democratic Forces composed of multiethnic and multiconfessional factions. The areas liberated by the SDF are integrated into an administrative structure called the Autonomous Administration of Northern and East Syria. The AANES follow the ideology of democratic autonomy based on direct democracy, the liberation of women, and social ecology. In practice, this model is built upon grassroots participation based on the power of popular communes, where every citizen has an equal right to vote and speak. In Rojava, all institutions are gender-balanced, multiconfessional, and multi-ethnic. Women hold at least forty percent of seats in political bodies and every leadership position is co-led by a man and a woman. While in theory, this project seems democratic, in practice the power is heavily centered on PYD hands. The administration has been accused of media censorship and authoritarianism, despite improvements.

In summary, the Syrian Kurds have effectively established themselves as a significant regional actor, operating independently from neighboring states. They have

garnered international respect through their successful fight against ISIS, attained self-governance in Kurdish-majority regions, and sparked a cultural renaissance that revitalized their Kurdish identity. While this political experiment represents one of the most democratic systems in Syria today, it faces significant challenges and threats, foremost among them being Turkish military incursions.

Turkish attacks against the Kurds in Syria: challenging the stability of the region

This last chapter aimed at exploring the implications of the several attacks led by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces against the Kurds in Syria. Erdogan has not always been aggressive toward the PKK and the PYD. While talks between Ocalan and Turkey were initiated in 2012, the AKP's and the Kurdish movement's visions remain divergent. As the Syrian crisis started, and Kurds gained a growing influence in the north of the country, Turkey's hostility towards the PYD increased, dealing a fatal blow to the negotiations. Therefore, I first analyzed how and why Turkey wishes to reduce Kurdish influence in Syria.

Turkey regards the SDF/YPG as the primary threat to its war-afflicted neighbor, with the Syrian regime coming in a secondary position. The Islamic State ranked lowest on the list of perceived threats. Thus, the Turkish government has implemented several initiatives to eliminate Kurds from its border. Turkey passively supported the jihadist groups the coalition was fighting. By allowing foreign combatants to cross its border with Syria, Turkey became the favorite passage to join ISIS. It is also through this border that a significant portion of weapons, equipment, and supplies destined for ISIS and other radical groups were transported in trucks belonging to Turkish intelligence services (MIT). However, it is noteworthy to clarify that Turkey was not allied to terrorist groups but shared the same interest: dismiss Bachar al-Assad from the Syrian government and target Syrian Kurds in the North to create an Islamic State. Indeed, Turkey felt more threatened by a Kurdish autonomy at its border which could serve as a rear base for the PKK rather than an Islamic State which is closer to its internal policy. While Turkey joined the coalition against Daesh in 2015, its willingness to expel Kurdish forces from its border did not fade.

Since 2016, Turkey launched three ground interventions in Northeastern Syria: the “Euphrates Shield” operations (August 24, 2016 – March 29, 2017); the “Olive Branch” during the Afrin battle (January 20 – March 18, 2018); and the “Peace Spring” operation, which took place between October 9 and 22, 2019. Ostensibly, those offensives aim to create a “safe zone” for the millions of Syrian refugees welcomed in Turkey. But incidentally, Erdogan has long worried that what happens to Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Syria would strengthen Turkish Kurdish separatists or legitimize international calls for Turkey to grant Kurds national rights. It will appear unconvincing for Turkey to justify its refusal to grant autonomy to its Kurdish minority if Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have autonomy. Through its second ground incursion, Turkey gained territory along the Turkish-Syrian border, more precisely the town of Afrin in 2018. The Western military presence seemed to be able to prevent any new Turkish operation against Rojava. But following a telephone discussion with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump announced in October 2019, to everyone's surprise, the imminent withdrawal of the American contingent from Syria. If these offensives are criticized on the international scene, the last incursion was therefore made possible by the US troop withdrawal from the region, equivalent to a green light from the Trump administration. Since then, Turkish airstrikes never stopped despite the Turkey-Russia deal that marked the end of the “Peace Spring” operation in 2019. This agreement allowed the Russians and the Syrian regime to fully take over, both militarily and diplomatically, from the Americans in northeastern Syria.

Alleged war crimes, systematic discrimination based on ethnic criteria (mainly targeting the Kurds), and ethnic cleansing have been witnessed in towns now controlled by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces. The United Nations for Human Rights has observed a disturbing pattern of serious violations in these regions, particularly in Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tel Abyad, where increased incidents of killings, abductions, illegal transfers of individuals, confiscations of land and property, and forced expulsions have been documented. Kurdish women are the first victims of those discriminations, instilling a climate of fear among the population. This “tactic” is not new for Turkey that have already been condemned for the use of sexual violence against Kurdish women. YPJ fighters are one of the main targets of Turkish airstrikes. Recently, Erdogan announced that a fourth ground offensive will soon be launched on Kobane and Qamishli to control the entire border from Afrin up to the Iraqi border. However, such an offensive would have detrimental consequences on the regional and international levels.

The Kurds currently hold a significant strategic position in the Middle East, at the crossroads of various but highly sensitive issues: from anti-ISIS operations to Iranian and Russian interests in the country, as well as oil-related concerns. On a regional level, both Iran and Turkey are present in Syria and wish to renew their neo-imperial aspirations. Turkish operations have heightened rivalries and tensions with regional powers that see an expansionist Turkish foreign policy in former Ottoman territories. Meanwhile, Russia aims to replace the US in Syria, seeking warm-water access in the eastern Mediterranean. All three nations want US departure but have different territorial goals, allowing Kurdish autonomies to act as a buffer. Additionally, the Kurds hold sway over strategically vital oil fields in the region, and they exercise control over the entire northern border with Iraq, extending down to the Euphrates River.

More importantly, Turkish military operations and drone strikes could lead to lasting consequences regarding the ongoing operations to contain ISIS resurgence. The United States still has a little contingent to support the SDF in anti-ISIS operations due to increasing sleeper cells. However, the SDF would have to pause its counter-terrorism partnership in case of an offensive to relocate its forces on the border. But the most immediate risks come from the thousand ISIS prisoners and their families massed in twenty-six makeshift detention facilities monitored by the SDF. In the Al-Hol camp, where fifty thousand prisoners (mostly wives and children of fighters) are coexisting in disastrous humanitarian conditions, the Islamic State system is still being implemented, posing one of the biggest threats.

Furthermore, I posited that a Turkish invasion would worsen the humanitarian crisis as many civilians in the region rely on humanitarian aid and would be forced to flee in precarious conditions. The initial three ground offensives and the recent Turkish aerial assault have already intensified the profound humanitarian crisis in the country. Since the Battle of Afrin in 2018, roughly half a million people have fled conflict zones, and out of the three million inhabitants of northern Syria, 1.8 million are dependent on humanitarian aid. If a Turkish ground offensive were to target cities like Qamishli and Kobane, it would likely trigger a large-scale displacement of thousands of people, necessitating additional humanitarian assistance that might not be readily available.

For those reasons, some avenues have been identified to avoid this ticking bomb to have short and long-term consequences on the regional and international level:

- Maintain a strong opposition to any new Turkish offensives against the Kurds;
- Urge all parties to the conflict to respect the Geneva Convention;
- Restart peace talks between Turkey and the PYD/SDF;
- Continue to provide financial and military support to the SDF to efficiently counter the resurgence of ISIS;
- Include the Kurds in UN negotiations on the future of Syria.