War-Making and State-Making in Northeast Syria:

Understanding Quasi-State Activities of the Democratic Union Party

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Abstract

This study focuses on the quasi-state activities of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northeast Syria between 2012 and 2019. The PYD claims to be building a model of 'Democratic Autonomy' and 'Democratic Confederalism' based on the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan. The literature generally portrays this model as a 'stateless' form of governance in contrast to the nation-state model. However, building on the bellicist tradition and Charles Tilly's theory of war-making and state-making, I analyze the relationship between the Syrian civil war and the formation of a state-like entity by the PYD. This qualitative case study reveals a significant gap between the PYD's discourse and practices, drawing on various primary and secondary sources. The PYD is involved in state-making activities through its war-making capabilities, organizational preparations, ideological power, and alliances with domestic and foreign actors. The PYD's state-building mechanisms include administration, territorial control, monopolization of violence, military conscription, protection and security, judicial structure, public services, economic regulation, a taxation system, and diplomatic relations. Moreover, the PYD employs diverse identity-building strategies to legitimize its authority. This empirical study highlights broader implications regarding the rise of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and the emergence of state-like entities in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts. It demonstrates how such actors undertake governance activities and replicate modern state-building mechanisms in the context of state failure. This study also presents how an ethno-nationalist VNSA constructs a distinct territorial identity and geopolitical discourse through a territorialization process akin to state sovereignty, enhancing the understanding of how state-seeking nationalism influences governance, identity-building, and legitimization activities of separatist VNSAs.

Keywords: War-Making, State-Making, Syrian Civil War, Quasi-State Actors, PYD.

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Acknowledgements

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted in any form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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Introduction

Ensuring security and maintaining order within its territory is the primary function of a state. The core of this idea is rooted in the intellectual framework established by Max Weber. According to him, the state is a political entity which has "the monopoly over the use of legitimate violence in a given territory" (Weber, 1958, p. 78). Various institutions oversee administrative functions and security measures to consolidate the state's authority over its people and territory (Jackson, 1993). The hierarchical accumulation of power through these institutions forms the fundamental structure of the modern state. A state's sovereignty depends on its exclusive ability to employ coercive and non-coercive methods to control a specific population and territory, effectively defying internal and external rivals (Tilly, 1985). In this regard, territory is an indispensable element of the sovereignty of a modern state (Brenner, 1999; Cox, 2002). The establishment of defined borders not only signifies sovereign power but also shapes distinct territorial identities (Paasi, 2003). For this reason, states utilize symbolic representations as a means of social control. The legitimacy of a state, or the right to rule, is intrinsically linked to its alignment with its citizens' values, identity, and cultural fabric (Ahram, 2019, p. 6).

On the other hand, the failure or collapse of a state may lead to instability and deterioration of order. It may even trigger social unrest, civil wars, and mass casualties. It also may lead to the erosion of shared communal identity. In these circumstances, the collective sense of belonging formed through the relationship between the ruler and the ruled gets damaged (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Then, generally, violent non-state actors (VNSAs[1] thereafter) emerge to fill the power vacuum by building their own institutions to provide security and public services.

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[1] It could also be referred to as armed non-state actors (ANSAs), non-state armed actors (NSAAs) or non-state armed groups (NSAGs).

Simultaneously, they construct new political identities to legitimize their governance (Yeşiltaş et al., 2022).

There is no agreed definition of VNSAs in the literature because of their distinctive characteristics, strategies, and goals. Yet, there are some common features of distinct VNSAs. According to the Geneva Call's Report (2011, p. 9), they are armed entities with political goals and are not under the direct control of any government. Similarly, Schneckener (2006, p. 25) describes them as groups which employ violence to achieve their aims and are independent of government-controlled forces like regular armies, presidential guards, police, or specialized military units. Accordingly, VNSAs can be conceptually defined as armed organizations which can carry out a systematic act of violence outside of state control for political goals (Vinci, 2008, p. 229; Krause and Miliken, 2009, p. 202; Mishali-Ram, 2009; Aydınlı, 2015, 2016; Berti, 2016; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2018, pp. 6-10).

The end of the Cold War marked a significant increase in the importance of VNSAs in world politics. Possessing tremendous military capabilities and operating outside the direct control of the state, they act autonomously in international politics (Dutka, 2006; Mishali-Ram, 2009; Aydınlı, 2015; Pierman, 2015). Nonetheless, state-centric approaches to conflict and security issues in the field of International Relations (IR) have not adequately addressed the growing importance of VNSAs (Wight, 2006, pp. 293-294; Mulaj, 2014, p. 1; Charountaki, 2018; Ergun, 2018, p. 150).

The scarcity of academic studies in the field does not, however, signify the unimportance of VNSAs. On the contrary, they are central figures in "new wars" (Kaldor, 2012). As Clausewitz emphasizes, war is a violent instrument employed to compel an adversary to submit to one's will. It is a continuation of politics by other means (Sheehan, 2008, p. 400). It can also be seen as organized violence committed among political actors against each other

(Bull 1977, p. 184). Hence, in essence, war is a violent form of politics. "Old wars" involved a state-on-state conflict between regular armies. However, as mentioned above, VNSAs have become important agents in new wars (Kaldor, 2013). In today's world, it is problematic to think of "war" as happening only between states. This situation reveals the significance of VNSAs in international politics. Therefore, both global and regional powers now have to take them into account in their security calculations (Halliday, 2001, p. 28; Bartolomei et al. 2004, p. 1; Aydınlı, 2015, pp. 424-425; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2018, p. 4). Consequently, the rise of VNSAs poses a fundamental challenge to traditional patterns of international relations.

Moreover, VNSAs can produce alternative governance structures to confront the authority of states. They can exert effective control over particular territories and manifest themselves as sovereign rulers by eliminating internal and external rivals (Vinci, 2008; Doboš, 2016; Zelin, 2016). VNSAs also establish administrative institutions to maintain order and provide public services within their controlled territories. Meanwhile, competition over a specific territory requires a certain level of social mobilization and loyalty (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023). Thus, VNSAs endeavour to be acknowledged and supported by the local population. In addition, they seek international support and recognition to consolidate their governance (Maoz and Akca, 2012). As a result, these alternative governance models founded by VNSAs challenge the main tenets of the Westphalian international order; namely, sovereignty, territoriality, and statehood (Jacobsen et al., 2008).

1. Rebel Governance

Research on rebel governance delves into the strategies employed by VNSAs to regulate the social, political, and economic spheres within the territories they control during conflicts (Mampilly, 2011; Arjona et al., 2015; Arjona, 2016; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018). For instance, rebel groups can act as protectors of civilians and shield them from violence. They

also rely on local populations for workforce, financial resources, shelter, and information (Kalyvas, 2006; Weinstein, 2007; Lidow, 2016). Furthermore, rebel groups often undertake sophisticated governance tasks carried out by state institutions, such as education, healthcare, and welfare programs (Huang and Sullivan, 2020). They can even oversee electoral and judicial processes (Cunningham et al., 2021). Besides, in their quest for international recognition, rebel groups can conduct "rebel diplomacy" and/or "foreign policy" (Coggins 2015; Huang, 2016; Darwich, 2021). For them, "rebel marketing" and public diplomacy are viable tools for getting more visible and credible at the domestic and international levels (Bob, 2010; Arves et al. 2019). In this way, they effectively replace dysfunctional states.

Although the actions of armed groups during conflicts are well-documented in the rebel governance literature, the theoretical underpinnings of how these groups evolve into state-like entities and the interplay between this process and warfare remain underdeveloped. In this sense, as will be expanded upon below, a specific subset of VNSAs: ethno-nationalist actors with statehood aspirations are more directly concerned with the issues of sovereignty, territoriality, legitimacy, recognition, and survival, compared to other VNSAs. Instead of overthrowing a regime or transforming the structure of a state, they focus on a particular territory to make their own state. The fate of ethno-nationalist VNSAs depends both on their own actions and on those of external actors. Therefore, to legitimize their existence, they continually strive to secure the backing of external actors. Accordingly, these VNSAs expect that collaborating with global powers and adhering to international rules and norms would eventually grant them international sovereignty and recognition (Ahram, 2019, p. 5; Özçelik, 2020, p. 693).

2. Typologies of Violent Non-State Actors

VNSAs often emerge as complex combinations of various types, each with its own specific strategies and goals (Mulaj, 2014). Yet, the categories used by most scholars are not so much different from each other although their numbers change. For instance, according to Krause and Miliken (2009, pp. 204-205), VNSAs can be categorized as insurgent groups, militant groups, urban gangs and warlords, private militias, police forces and security companies, and transnational groups. Also, Aydınlı (2016) divides them into insurgents, domestic militant groups, warlords/urban gangs, private militias/military companies, terrorists, and criminal organizations. Likewise, Williams (2008, pp. 9-17) mentions: warlords, militias, paramilitary forces, insurgencies, terrorist organizations, criminal organizations, and youth gangs. Additionally, Ezrow (2017) presents eleven diverse types of VNSAs: de facto states, political organizations with militant wings, insurgencies, terror organizations, terror networks, marauding rebels, warlords, organized crime, gangs, private security companies, and paramilitaries. Consequently, scholars cannot agree on whether to recognize particular types of VNSAs or not. For example, the status of private military companies is debatable since states impose the necessary regulations upon them, or maritime pirates are sometimes excluded as they do not challenge the state authority directly in a given territory.

VNSAs can also be divided into two main categories based on their agendas: transactional and transcendental VNSAs. While the former refers to VNSAs that concentrate on economic profit maximization, the latter refers to VNSAs that pursue political, religious, or moral goals (Thomas et al. 2005, p. 122). Transcendental VNSAs, with regard to their values, can be classified as emancipatory, separatist, reformist/revolutionary, and religious/traditional (Ezrow, 2017). These VNSAs can see themselves to be "future armies" of a certain "liberated" group (Schneckener, 2006, p. 25).

On the other hand, in terms of their scope and ideologies, it is possible to categorize VNSAs into two types: *global revolutionary* and *ethno-nationalist* VNSAs. While the former have universalist and/or religious ideologies, the latter are motivated by nationalist ideologies and emphasize the importance of shared ethnicity in creating a unified nation and state (Oktav et al., 2018, p. 4). Jihadist movements like Al-Qaeda and revolutionary Marxist organizations challenge the established international norms and structure through radical extremism (Walt, 2015, p. 42). Conversely, ethno-nationalist VNSAs such as the Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* / PKK) have a narrower scope instead of overthrowing the global order. Their objectives are driven by nationalism, and they aim for either complete independence or increased self-governance in a specific territory (Stepanova, 2008, pp. 39-40). Their definition of a particular territory as "homeland" is the most distinguishing feature (Brown, 1993, p. 5). Besides, ethno-nationalist VNSAs resort to political violence to "liberate" their supposed-to-be countries.

3. Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East

Despite a surge in research on the topic following the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the study of VNSAs and their governance practices in the Middle East remains underdeveloped (Oktav et al., 2018; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2018; Fraihat and Alijla, 2023). VNSAs play a crucial role in the majority of ongoing conflicts in the region and challenge the concept of a state's monopoly to use violence (Durac, 2015). By undermining the traditional concepts of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and statehood, they have become as potent threats to the security of the existing state system in the Middle East (Boyraz, 2020, pp. 1-2).

Moreover, there have emerged many cases where state-like entities in fragile states seek sovereignty over a specific territory in the region. To illustrate, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen have parallel state

structures (Early, 2006; Salloukh and Barakat, 2015; Seliktar and Rezaei, 2020, pp. 155-159; International Crisis Group, 2014; Ahram, 2019, pp. 95-121). In this regard, the course of the Syrian civil war has provided many examples of successfully organized state-like entities that emerged out of the conflict, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or the Democratic Union Party (PYD). These VNSAs established alternative governance systems within their controlled territories, reflecting their distinct political visions. Accordingly, it is essential to comprehend how they create non-state forms of sovereignty, territoriality, and governance. For this reason, the emergence of VNSAs and their governance practices in the contemporary Middle East need to be analysed meticulously. They are in their own process of state formation. As Schlichte (2009) argues, VNSAs often develop organizational structures that parallel those of states, while simultaneously opposing them.

3. 1. Reasons for the Rise of VNSAs in the Contemporary Middle East

Many factors have made VNSAs more relevant in the contemporary Middle Eastern context, such as the decline of traditional state structure, regime insecurity, hyper-localization, and internationalization of macro and micro geopolitical conflicts (Doyle and Dunning, 2018; Polese and Santini, 2018; Dallas-Feeney, 2019). However, in this section, I will focus on three main interrelated factors.

The first one is the state weakness or failure in the Middle East (Mulaj, 2014; Yeşiltaş et al., 2022). Where and when states are weak, rebels or non-state actors emerge and advance (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Newman, 2007; Hendrix, 2011; Aliyev, 2017). State failure can be understood as the state's diminished ability to exclusively control the use of legitimate force in a given territory and to fulfil "the requirements of statehood" (Vinci, 2008, p. 298). From a wider perspective, such requirements can be providing order and stability, delivering welfare

and security, maintaining borders, and representing the population. Providing public goods to citizens becomes difficult or impossible under a failed state (Kraxberger, 2007).

Lack of legitimacy, authoritarianism, failure of governance, and incapability to meet citizens' basic social, political, and economic demands and prevent violence against them are some of the key elements leading to state failure and the proliferation of VNSAs (Williams, 2008, pp. 5-6). In other words, capacity, security, and legitimacy gaps pave the way for the failure of states. Then, VNSAs try to capitalize on the weakening of state authority, fill the power vacuum, and substitute state functions in ungoverned spaces by using force (Hazbun, 2015). In addition to the security provision, they engage in non-violent activities such as administration, electricity-water provision, infrastructure maintenance, construction, social aid distribution, financial redistribution, and law provision (Ünver, 2017, pp. 48-50).

There are many examples of states with weak legitimacy, oppressive regimes, socioeconomic problems, and inability to protect their citizens in the Middle East. The colonial legacy, neo-patrimonialism, and authoritarianism damage the legitimacy, and so the authority, of the states in the region and create favourable conditions for the emergence of non-state groups (Bellin, 2004; Davis, 2009; Hinnebusch, 2018, p. 393). Free from the need to generate revenue through taxation or resource extraction from their citizens, some of these states fail to develop robust institutions and a powerful sense of national identity. Instead, they rely on external sources to maintain control. These states also employ repressive security forces to quell any dissent (Gongora, 1997; Schwarz, 2012).

The Arab Uprisings, rooted in the colonial and post-colonial legacies of the fragility of the Middle East state system, revealed the regimes' authority, legitimacy, and capacity gaps (Berti, 2016, p. 2; Carment et al., 2014). The demands for reform or regime change devolved into civil wars. In fact, the regimes in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt used violent techniques

to suppress the uprisings due to their excessively authoritarian character and created a self-feeding cycle of violence (Droz-Vincent, 2014; Nadin et al., 2014). Put differently, states escalating the level of violence against their own citizens caused counter-violence. This situation eased the establishment of violent opposition groups in the region. At this point, it should be said that violence among civilians happens before or during the collapse of a state, and the state's capacity and legitimacy are further weakened if it persists (Rotberg, 2010). However, the likelihood of VNSAs causing the failure of a state is less than VNSAs emerging from the state failure (Newman, 2007; Aliyev, 2017, p. 1978). Therefore, state failure is one of the most important reasons for the proliferation of VNSAs in the Middle East.

The second factor causing the rise of VNSAs is territorial claims. Territory can provide VNSAs with safe zones and geographical advantages in conflicts. Also, access to natural sources, like water, oil, or diamonds, provides crucial material benefits to them (Elbadawi and Soto, 2015). Meanwhile, territory is one of the most significant tokens of belonging and identity formation (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2018, pp. 12-13). There are two dimensions of how VNSAs perceive the concept of territoriality: the meaning attributed to the territory and the tactical dimension of controlling it (Jabareen, 2015, pp. 52-55). Various political or military measures can be taken by VNSAs to secure the perceived territory. Per their conceptualization of a specific territory, they can engage in demographic and physical engineering projects as well to ensure that their group constitutes a majority (or at least plurality) within the claimed territory (Weidman, 2009). In this way, that territory can be confirmed as part of the envisioned identity (Elden, 2009; Vollaard, 2009). Thereby, territory can become the essential element of an identity (Yeşiltaş, 2015, pp. 64-66). For example, the PYD adopts an ethno-nationalist approach to take control of parts of Syria where Kurds are the majority (Oktav et al., 2018).

The Arab Uprisings significantly challenged the traditional "nation-state model" in the Middle East. Because of the deterioration of state-citizen relations which damages the identity and legitimacy of some Arab states, transnational groups, i.e., ethnic, sectarian, or tribal, put forth sub-identities as a new alternative identity. To illustrate, the weakening of borders and state control in the region emboldened the Kurds to pursue opportunities for greater autonomy and/or independence (Kardaş, 2018, pp. 36-37). The Sykes-Picot Order, which established the modern political boundaries of the Middle East in the post-Ottoman period, is often criticized for creating artificial borders (Sayyid, 2014). However, international norms of sovereignty effectively made these borders unchangeable (Jackson, 1993). Despite this, the idea of redrawing borders gained momentum following the Uprisings among separatist movements to solve the long-standing problems (Ayoob, 2015). With the legacy of "conquered" or "missing" states as a result of the Sykes-Picot Order, ethnopolitical rebellion became more likely in the region when the strength of the central governing authority waned (Ahram, 2019, pp. 11-13).

As Mylonas and Shelef (2014, 2017) discuss, separatism is a distinct form of rebellion. Rather than overturn a regime or change a state structure, separatists want to break a state's hold over certain territories. They mostly draw inspiration from the Wilsonian norms of self-determination and take unilateral steps to separate from an existing state (Manela, 2007; Ahram, 2019, p. 4). Secession is the complete version of separatism. In this regard, separatist or secessionist rebels confront not only a state's de facto sovereignty but also its de jure sovereignty by attaining some form of self-governance over a particular territory and setting up parallel state institutions (Kasfir, 2015, p. 40).

Finally, it is necessary to touch upon the role of international dynamics to understand the spread of VNSAs in the Middle East. The international system in the region harbours competition for regional hegemony. Global powers and regional powers intervene, directly or

indirectly, in the domestic affairs of the region's weak states. They usually support VNSAs, explicitly or implicitly, in line with their own political agendas (Gause, 2014; Kausch, 2017). States prefer to cooperate with domestic non-state actors and use them as a cheap and less risky foreign policy tool in their international competition (Byman, 2005). For instance, the United States (US) and Russia, and regional powers such as Türkiye, Iran, and the Gulf states have utilized various VNSAs as proxies to expand their influence and control in the region following the Uprisings, especially in Syria (Hinnebusch and Saouli, 2020). Consequently, regional geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East increases the interaction between states and VNSAs and offers an environment in which VNSAs gain importance. It would be difficult to comprehend the prevalence of VNSAs in the region without assessing the external interventions in domestic conflicts. The power vacuum in weak or failed states is exacerbated by the support of other states to VNSAs. Then, VNSAs find more opportunities to develop alternative rules and form new identities.

4. Importance of the Research

As mentioned above, the Syrian civil war provided many examples of alternative governance forms in the context of a state failure. Emerging from this context, the PYD, as the Syrian branch of the PKK, has become one of the most influential actors in the civil war. As an illustration of a state-like entity, the PYD rule extends beyond military dominance and encompasses the establishment of institutions and regulations governing several aspects of civilian life such as taxation, judiciary, health services, education, and gender relations. For this reason, its governance structure has been called "parallel hierarchy," "shadow government," "rival government," "rebel governance," "rebelocracy," "rebel statehood," "para-state," "proto-state," "quasi-state," or "statelet" by various scholars (Schmidinger,

2018; Dryaz, 2020; Lee, 2020; Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022, p. 1; Acun and Görücü, 2023; Alijla, 2023; Holmes, 2024).[2]

As will be elaborated in Chapter Four, the PYD took numerous towns under its control right after the withdrawal of the regime forces from northern and northeastern Syria in July 2012. It exploited the weakening state power to attain a monopoly over the use of violence in Kurdish-populated areas and to form the cantonal system. This self-rule grew later in terms of administration, political structure, and military units. Thus, the PYD combatants transitioned into governing roles and became rulers. In late 2014, the "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS," led by the US, was formed to wipe out ISIS. Then, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was founded in October 2015, and the PYD turned out to be its central component. After the decisive Raqqa Operation against ISIS in 2017, the PYD began to dominate beyond the predominantly Kurdish areas in Syria, assumed control over nearly a third of the country and governed approximately four to five million people (Rojava Information Center, 2019, p. 13). Despite Turkish military operations against it, the PYD continues controlling over most of the Syria's oil, gas, and water resources and wheat-producing regions. Therefore, enjoying substantial international support, the PYD is still one of the key players in the Syrian conflict. In light of this information, I will explain why the PYD case is noteworthy to study in this section. It is a textbook example to analyse how an ethno-nationalist VNSA engages in state-like activities in the context of a state failure through its military power and ideological and organizational preparations.

First, as will be shown in Chapter Three, Syrian Kurds had been subject to suppression and marginalization by successive governments for as long as decades. Plus, compared to the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye, they have had a significantly calmer history in terms of

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[2] In this thesis, I will use "state-like" and "quasi-state" concepts interchangeably to refer to the PYD's governance activities to regulate the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres of civilian life in northeast Syria during the civil war in place of the central government.

nationalist mobilization and armed rebellion. Accordingly, neither the academia nor policymakers paid enough attention to the Kurdish question in Syria. Furthermore, prior to the outbreak of the civil war, the idea that Kurds could become autonomous in Syria was unimaginable. In this process, the PYD chose a "third road" position, reasons for which will be examined in Chapter Four, between the Syrian opposition and the regime, and avoided armed conflict with the latter. As the Syrian state got weaker, the PYD utilized its military power to create a self-governing entity. Currently, it acts as the de facto governing authority, implements law and judicial processes, and manages the operation of local institutions in northeast Syria. As a result, although it is not recognized internationally, the PYD's establishment of a quasi-state is the major outcome of the civil war for Syrian Kurds.

Second, Kurds having autonomous governance in Syria is quite important for the PKK as well. For the first time in its history, the PKK managed to control territory via its Syrian wing. This territory served as a platform on which to implement the ideas and theories of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In other words, the Kurdish autonomous region in northeast Syria provided an opportunity for the PKK to realize its long-awaited political aspiration of separatism.[3] As will be discussed in Chapter Two, the PKK was founded with the purpose of establishing an independent Kurdish state, in the so-called "Kurdistan," within the eastern and southeastern regions of Türkiye and extending into certain areas of Iraq, Iran, and Syria. To realize this purpose, it has engaged in violent conflicts against Türkiye since the 1980s. The PYD relies on the PKK for social, financial, ideological, organizational, and military support. Hence, to fully understand the PYD's actions and objectives in northeast Syria, it is essential to recognize its deep-rooted connection to the PKK.

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[3] I use "separatist" to mean those VNSAs taking unilateral steps to attain some form of self-governance over territory and to break away from an existing state. So, I call their actions as "separatism."

Between its establishment in 2003 and the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, the PYD was not a significant actor in Syrian political theatre. Operating as a clandestine organization, it never had any experience in governing. Yet, as will be examined in Chapter Five, the creation of the "Rojava experiment" provided the PYD with an opportunity to put "Democratic Autonomy" and/or "Democratic Confederalism" into practice based on the teachings of Öcalan. Indeed, the PYD did not produce a governing structure instantaneously; the PKK's ideological and organizational preparations were vital to its operations. Thanks to its organic ties with the PKK, the PYD had not only the military power to survive the Syrian civil war's harsh conditions but also the political knowledge and organizational skills to construct governing institutions. In this sense, the PYD governance in northeast Syria represents the realization of the long-term objectives of the PKK following Öcalan's philosophy. This was a historic opportunity for the PKK to advance its goal of self-determination and international recognition.

Third, ever since the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the Sykes-Picot order was established in the Middle East, the Kurdish question has been a transnational and cross-border issue. Due to their status as a nation without a sovereign state, the Kurds have often been subject to the shifting geopolitical dynamics between global and regional powers (McDowall, 2020; Bozarslan et al., 2021). However, a strong aspiration for independent statehood has been a longstanding feature of Kurdish identity. By operating across national borders, pro-Kurdish movements challenge the legitimacy of the official political borders. Accordingly, they are perceived as a fundamental threat to the territorial unity and sovereign rights of the countries in the region. Especially Türkiye views the PYD's quasi-state activities on its border as a national security threat, considering the deep ethnic and cultural ties between Turkish and Syrian Kurds, along with the close relationship between the PKK and PYD. As the rise of the PYD further increased the Kurdish nationalist ambitions, repressing the actions of PKK

sympathizers within its borders would be difficult for Türkiye. In fact, following the collapse of the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government in 2015, the PKK tried to establish "Democratic Autonomy" in Türkiye, similar to Syria (Leezenberg, 2016). So, a comprehensive analysis of the PYD case is fundamental to grasp the spillover effect of the Kurdish issue.

Fourth, the PYD remained largely unnoticed by the international community before the rise of ISIS. As will be revealed in Chapter Six, particularly the Kobane War, fought between late 2014 and early 2015, was a turning point for the PYD. The PYD's successful defence of Kobane against ISIS became a powerful symbol of Kurdish resistance. Moreover, the Kurdish geopolitical discourse would be incomplete without the narrative and meaning derived from the Kobane War. In this regard, ISIS functioned as the *constitutive other* in the PYD's nation-building project.

On the other hand, the war against ISIS provided a significant platform for the PYD to enhance its international reputation and legitimization efforts. As highlighted above, it is common for VNSAs with statehood aspirations to seek international legitimacy and recognition. However, in the current international system, the "separatist" activities are viewed as illegitimate. Therefore, ethno-nationalist VNSAs often ground their claims to legitimacy in moral arguments, such as the right to self-determination, national liberation, and resistance against occupation or colonialism. From the beginning, the PYD has employed military force to secure its territorial control while simultaneously providing public services to consolidate and legitimize its rule. Yet, despite its continuous attempts, the PYD has failed to obtain international legal recognition for the autonomous Kurdish administration in Syria. In this context, the PYD's struggle against ISIS was instrumental in capturing worldwide attention and constructing its image for international audiences. As will be discussed in the literature review section below, the PYD has been presented by international media and

academia as the leading figure of a "revolution" in Syria, and possibly in the Middle East. The so-called "Rojava Revolution" has been seen by many as a "stateless democracy." The extremist ideology of ISIS came off as the very opposite of the PYD's commitment to democracy, secularism, and gender equality. This way, the PYD has been portrayed as a "legitimate" democratic, secular, and capable "counterterrorism" force combating Jihadist militias in Syria and gained international prestige.

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that the PYD has built a global network of relations with major international powers, including the US, Russia, and European countries (Öğür and Baykal, 2018). Even with substantial strategic contradictions among these actors, the PYD has successfully maintained and developed its relations. Accordingly, it emerged as a significant actor that international powers had to take into consideration in the evolution of the Syrian civil war. Its ability to establish international ties reaching up to a global level makes the PYD case unique. In spite of its ties to the PKK, the PYD has managed to get financial, logistical, political, and military support from international actors due to its role as a proxy in the fight against ISIS (Ergun, 2018; Sarı Ertem, 2018; Pusane, 2018). The US continues supporting the PYD after the defeat of ISIS, despite Türkiye's harsh criticism. This is the most compelling evidence of the PYD's elevated status on the international stage. At the moment, the PYD's survival in northeast Syria vastly depends on the US attitude towards the issue. Thanks to its successful "foreign policy," the PYD receives a large amount of international aid. In short, the PYD has built relationships with external actors to solidify its position since it does not have many friends in the region. By means of aligning with international powers, a claim for adherence to international norms and rules, and the establishment of diplomatic channels, the PYD aims to achieve international legitimacy and recognition eventually.

5. The PYD Literature

Several academics, journalists, and activists have focused on distinct facets of the PYD and its rule. So, there are many valuable academic studies, analyses, and reports in the literature dealing with the topic. Even if they are generally descriptive and not comprehensive enough, I highly benefitted from them elaborating on different dimensions of the relationship between the Syrian civil war and the emergence of a Kurdish state-like entity in northeast Syria. Also, they are useful to explain how an ethno-nationalist VNSA with statehood aspirations transforms into a quasi-state actor in the context of a state failure.

First of all, many studies in the literature investigate the reasons for the rise of the PYD. The emphasis in these studies is either on the PYD's pragmatic stance amidst a hostile landscape or on the historical and geopolitical context necessary for grasping Kurdish nationalist aspirations within Syria (Gunter, 2014; Lowe, 2014; Sary, 2016; Plakoudas, 2017; Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019; McDowall, 2020; Wilgenburg, 2020; Kızılkaya et al., 2021; Tejel, 2021). While some of these studies underline the PYD's tacit alliance with the Assad regime (International Crisis Group, 2014; Acun and Keskin, 2017; Baczko et al., 2018), others underscore transnational ethnic and organizational networks of the PYD, which provided crucial advantages in terms of ideological power, organizational discipline, social base, mobilization, military recruitment, and fighting experience (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021; Katman and Muhammad, 2022; Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022).

On the other hand, certain studies examining the PYD's vision regarding the future of Syria mention the ideological, organizational, and inherent connections it shares with the PKK. They demonstrate that these two groups are too interwoven to be considered distinct entities (Kaya and Lowe, 2017; Soner et al., 2017; Şahin and İrdem, 2017). In this sense, Kaya and

Whiting (2017) contend that the PYD aligns with the PKK's vision and sees the "Rojava" experiment as the embodiment of "Democratic Confederalism" in Syria.

Furthermore, the governing methods of the PYD in "no-go zones" in Syria, compared to ISIS, have been the subject of significant studies (Ünver, 2018). While the emergence of ISIS exemplifies the extremist manifestation of the VNSA phenomenon, the PYD represents the evolving nature of the political dynamics in the Middle East (Oktav et al., 2018; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2018). More importantly, Boyraz (2020), analyses the political projects of the "Democratic Confederalism" and the *Caliphate* in the context of their potential to affect the Westphalian understanding of sovereignty, territoriality, and the state in the region.

Another part of the literature concentrates on the PYD's strategies of legitimization. These studies reveal that the PYD benefits from the provision of security and public services, deal-making, identity-building strategies, diplomacy, and image management to consolidate its hegemony and render itself a legitimate actor both locally and internationally (Khalaf, 2016; Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes and van Veen, 2021; İpek, 2022). The rebel governance carried out by the PYD during the civil war has caused the sub-national identities to increase in northeast Syria (Alijla, 2023). Accordingly, in its quest for legitimacy, the PYD has employed inclusive rhetoric and set up diverse administrative and military structures that harboured multiple ethnic, religious, and cultural groups (Cengiz, 2020).

Moreover, particularly following the Kobane War, the PYD constructed a narrative around the themes of resistance and triumph. In contrast to their cognates in other regions, Syrian Kurds did not have powerful national struggle symbols like the *Halabja* Massacre in Iraq or the *Mahabad* Republic in Iran (Federici, 2015, p. 85). For this reason, the Kobane War has become a powerful symbol in the eyes of Kurds, which is referred to by some as the Kurds' *Stalingrad* (Sary, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, it has emerged as a war of identity and functioned as

a meaning-making strategy that is vital for Kurdish geopolitical identity (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş, 2018). It has also brought forward a rich symbolic narration to be used by Kurdish nationalism and *Kurdayetî*, sentiments of pan-Kurdish solidarity (Dalay, 2018; Gourlay, 2018).

In the meantime, the PYD's secularism is one of the major reasons for its favourable perception in Western countries. Hence, some studies discuss the way the PYD and its struggle against ISIS have been "framed" in the Western media and academia (Akin, 2020). Before the Syrian civil war, the "Rojava" concept did not have much popularity in non-Kurdish contexts. However, phrases like "Rojava experiment" and "Rojava Revolution" found a fair amount of space on the international scene after the fight against ISIS (Enzinna, 2015; Dirik et al., 2016; Aretaios, 2015; Lowe, 2016; Schmidinger, 2018). These terms signified progressive ideas such as radical democracy, bottom-up communal governance model, cooperative economy, ecology, and women's liberation (McGee, 2022). Further, the portrayal of Kurdish female fighters, especially when juxtaposed with the hypermasculinity of ISIS within the framework of Orientalism, has become a cornerstone of Western solidarity discourse (Shahvisi, 2018; Şimşek and Jongerden, 2018; Dean, 2019). In this framing, the women of "Rojava" have been broadly depicted as 'heroic,' 'exceptional' or 'badass' in their defiance of the gendered oppression prevalent in the Middle East (Dirik, 2014; Toivanen and Baser, 2016; Tank, 2017).

On the other hand, the contradictions between the PYD's discourse and practices have been addressed in certain studies. While Savelsberg (2014, 2018) asserts that the PYD performs an authoritarian rule similar to the Ba'ath regime, Leezenberg (2016) explores the ideological foundations of "Democratic Autonomy" and emphasizes the inconsistency between grassroots anarchism and Leninist vanguardism within the PKK and the PYD. In addition, Özçelik (2020) explains that the PKK's ideological shift from exclusionary to inclusionary identity

politics was just a pragmatic move, and the PYD is unlikely to abandon its democratic rhetoric because of its legitimacy-seeking. Besides, Dinc (2020) puts forward that the PYD's discourse leans towards Kurdish nationalism and fosters a personality cult around Öcalan. In a similar vein, Moberg (2016) indicates that the PYD carries out the process of nation formation, keeping the Kurdish ethos central to it.

Last but not least, I would like to highlight that there are some *niche* studies in the literature, particularly focusing on the PYD's policies towards gender, education, economy, and ecology. For example, a number of studies touch upon the PYD's promotion of gender equality within its governing bodies and indicate that the emancipation and empowerment of women is a central tenet of its political agenda (Knapp et al., 2016; McKernan, 2016; Dirik, 2018; Grabolle-Çeliker, 2018). While Dirik (2018) claims that the dismantling of statism in northeast Syria has been most part related to the role of women, Kivilcim (2021) discusses the creation of alternative legal and judicial structures by women. Additionally, Gunaydin argues that the PYD managed to open the path towards anti-statist thinking through *jineology,* the science of women (Gunaydin, 2022, pp. 164-175). Furthermore, some studies mention that the education system is an integral part of the PYD's "revolution" and wartime efforts (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). It makes use of education to build a political community and democratic citizenship based on its ideology, too (Dirik, 2022). Besides, several studies underline the PYD's implementation of collective production-collective consumption models and establishment of ecological cooperatives in contrast to capitalist and centralized nation-states (Knapp et al., 2016; Yousef, 2016; Hunt, 2017; Sullivan, 2018; Manzinger and Wagner, 2020).

5. 1. Revolution and Stateless Democracy Argument

The term "stateless democracy" has constantly been used to portray the PYD's political project. Building upon Öcalan's ideas, the PYD asserts that a definitive departure from centralized and representative systems is essential. It advocates for all Middle Eastern peoples to reject the nation-state system and embrace a grassroots, decentralized, communal, and stateless democratic model (Rojava Information Center, 2019). In this regard, the PYD's "Democratic Autonomy" and/or "Democratic Confederalist" project in northeast Syria has prompted numerous researchers to reconsider conventional Westphalian assumptions like statehood, sovereignty, territory, and governance (Graeber, 2014; Hosseini, 2016; Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016; Radpey, 2016; Cemgil, 2019; Gunes, 2019; Jongerden 2019; Sunca, 2021). These researchers assert that the "Rojava Revolution" offers an alternative model to capitalist modernity, imperialism, colonization, centralism, nationalism, nation-state, secular authoritarianism, and Islamism in the Middle East (Knapp and Jongerden, 2014; Saadi, 2014; Charountaki, 2015; Cemgil, 2016; Cemgil and Hoffmann, 2016; Knapp et al., 2016; Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016; Sabio, 2016; Üstündağ, 2016; Colasanti et al., 2018; Dirik, 2018; Yesiltas, 2020; Hoffmann and Matin, 2021). Accordingly, they contend that the PYD, as a *revolutionary* actor, opposes the nation-state system and strives for "politics beyond the state" (Aretaios, 2015; Gunes, 2019; Jongerden, 2019).[4]

Moreover, Cemgil (2016, p. 420) points out that the PYD overcomes the modern states' failure and realizes the Athenian principle of "freedom as non-domination" through the active and direct participation of communities in self-governance. Similarly, its project is reflected as a "democracy in action" project (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013, p. 185), or a "precious experiment in direct democracy" (Ross, 2015). It is even stated that everyone can "be the king

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[4] They interpret "revolution" in a typical way and refer to it as the overthrow of the existing social, political, economic, and institutional power structures and the ruling class by bringing forth a new form of governance (Graeber, 2016: xii; Yesiltas, 2020, p. 133).

in their village" in this project (Colasanti et al., 2018, p. 808). Meanwhile, Baris claims that the PYD draws inspiration from the Mesopotamian and Neolithic heritage to develop an indigenous model of political community and democracy based on council autonomies (Baris, 2022, p. 184).

Furthermore, "Democratic Autonomy" and/or "Democratic Confederalism" projects have been presented as a viable solution for the Syrian conflict due to its foundation in pluralist democracy and the inclusion of all identities, without any group dominating others (Colasanti et al., 2018, pp. 821-822; Yesiltas, 2020, p. 134). According to Dirik (2022, p. 33), by defending all identities, cultures, and languages of the oppressed, the PYD redefines the concept of nationhood and shifts it away from ethnic or culturalist notions towards a shared democratic culture. In this way, it is indicated that the PYD defies nationalistic and discriminative practices by integrating diverse groups into decision-making and coordinating bodies (Akin, 2020, p. 322).

Regarding the militarisation of the so-called "Rojava Revolution," Üstündağ (2016) suggests that the armed forces in northeast Syria 'unmake' the state through *self-defence*. By challenging the state's exclusive control over violence, these forces are fostering the conditions for a communal and democratic defence system. Hence, according to her, the "Rojava" model guarantees that security forces protect the society, not police it (Üstündağ, 2016). Meanwhile, Küçük and Özselçuk (2016) assert that this model does not *destroy* the state but *deconstructs* it. So, coexistence with a state, potentially a Kurdish one, remains a possibility (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016, p. 194). In addition, they interestingly express that "voluntary acts of giving" serve as the primary source of revenue for the PYD rule, as it avoids replicating centralized state structures through taxation (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016, p. 193).

To sum up, the researchers who support the "revolution" and "stateless democracy" argument lean towards viewing the PYD with its uniqueness and exceptional nature. It seems that they deploy a revolutionary romanticism and lack a critical approach to the PYD. Indeed, in this major part of the literature, the PYD discourse is taken for granted. Yet, during times of war and conflict, information production and political rhetoric can be strategically utilized for propagandistic purposes. In this sense, the PYD is no exception. For this reason, when assessing the PYD, we cannot limit our discussion to its claims (of creating a democracy without a state), or the intellectual underpinnings of its governance. Otherwise, we can miss what is being obscured or masked by the PYD.

5. 2. The Shortage of Theoretically Grounded Research

The literature harbours some studies indicating that the PYD reproduces the "stateness" in northeast Syria in a familiar way. In these studies, the PYD rule is described as a Kurdish statelet, state-like, quasi-state, para-state, proto-state, and so on (Moberg, 2016; Plakoudas, 2017; Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 129-152; Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, 2019; Dyraz, 2020; Galvan-Alvarez, 2020; Acun and Görücü, 2023). While these noteworthy studies examine various facets of the PYD rule, they tend to be descriptive in nature and lack a comprehensive analysis. Further, the role of the PYD's war-making capacity in its state-making efforts remains insufficiently addressed.

Pusane (2018) refers to the PYD as a "hybrid non-state actor" because of its complicated identity. By the same token, Zagoritou (forthcoming) views the PYD as a state-like organization, which retains some statehood characteristics without a traditional nation-state's declaratory aspect. Due to a lack of international recognition, Issaev and Zakharov (2021, pp. 104-107) also define the PYD governance as a "state without statehood." In a similar vein,

Galvan-Alvarez (2020) argues that the PYD simultaneously undermines and re-establishes the "stateness" it opposes.

In contrast to these studies highlighting the complex and hybrid nature of the PYD rule, others clearly emphasize its state-like practices. For instance, Ünver (2018, p. 38) thinks that security provision by the PYD fulfils the "functions of a state." Likewise, Dryaz (2020) claims that the PYD engages in a de facto state-like formation process in northeast Syria through its state-like activities, such as administration, security, legitimization, and diplomacy, amid the central state's territorial fragmentation. Meanwhile, Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019, p. 138) write that a resemblance to modern state institutions, characterized by central decision-making and coordination, is evident in the PYD-controlled institutions.

Among other indicators of state-like practices under the PYD rule are the indoctrination in education and military training (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, 2019, pp. 111-112; Dinc, 2020), the enforcement of military conscription (Acun and Keskin, 2017, pp. 37-39), the mapping-bordering strategies (Tejel, 2020), and the legal identity documentation (McGee, 2024). For these reasons, Acun and Görücü (2023) put forward that the PKK's statist objectives in the region are embodied in the PYD's self-administration. They even predict that the PYD, having a bureaucratic apparatus, military units, natural resources, and international relations, is advancing towards autonomy and, eventually, a fully independent statelet (Acun and Görücü, 2023, p. 10, 74).

Lastly, before clarifying the objective of my research and its core contribution to the literature, I would like to discuss two more significant studies. Yeşiltaş and Kardaş (2023) reveal the PYD's pursuit of ruling people and space through the adoption of the modern state's three classical tenets: territory, security, and identity. While the tenet of territory serves to reinforce the PYD's dominance over both people and territory, the tenet of security

provides political order through the implementation of disciplinary violence and the consolidation of the PYD's local and international support network is facilitated by the tenet of identity. Thus, the PYD establishes a de facto sovereign rule in northeast Syria, by replicating the Westphalian conception of sovereign statehood. Another theory-based analysis of the PYD's state-like endeavours is presented by Lee (2020). According to him, what PYD does in the areas it dominates is basically "state-building" even though it advocates for a "stateless" bottom-up democratic self-administration. Lee (2020, pp. 85-88) further develops his argument demonstrating how the PYD utilizes traditional state-building elements such as war, education, and maps. Accordingly, he focuses on military conscription as a statist war-making indicator, map, and flag creation as a sign of state sovereignty, instruction of the Kurdish language as a means of nation-building, and the glorification of Kobane as a nationalist symbol.

6. The Objective of the Research and Its Contribution to the Literature

As underlined above, the PYD rule is an intriguing case of a VNSA exercising governance by monopolizing violence, managing territory, providing public services, taxing people, conducting diplomacy, and pursuing legitimacy, in areas where a state's control has diminished. In this sense, the PYD case provides valuable insights as to *how* a VNSA builds a state-like entity in the context of a state failure. So, by examining the factors driving the formation and growth of the Kurdish autonomous administration in northeast Syria, this research intends to contribute to the broader academic literature on the PYD and the Kurdish issue.

There is a correlation between the Syrian civil war and the emergence of a Kurdish state-like entity under the control of the PYD. For this reason, a detailed examination of how war facilitates the creation of state-like entities is essential. By thoroughly analysing *how* the

Syrian civil war made the PYD's quasi-state, this research seeks to shed light on the complex interplay between the state failure and the quasi-state activities of VNSAs in the contemporary Middle East. However, it should be underscored that there is no automatic relationship between state failure and the rise of VNSAs. Therefore, I will try to provide an in-depth analysis of the PYD's *agency*, i.e., ideology, military power, organizational structure, social base, transnational networks and goals, and its preparation for warfare. I will also consider the historical and geopolitical context in which the PYD emerged as a hegemonic actor. In doing so, I aim to *contextualize* the PYD's quasi-state activities. By outlining the factors and conditions that enabled the establishment of the PYD's order, we can better comprehend the strategies employed to legitimize its existence and claims to power. In this way, I will attempt to offer a more nuanced and comprehensive account of the formation and evolution of the PYD rule.

Meanwhile, the PYD rule presents a fundamental paradox as the PYD positions itself as an anti-statist radical left-wing organization. Accordingly, in the PYD literature, as demonstrated above, its governance model is predominantly claimed to be a "stateless" form of governance. On the contrary, I argue that the PYD is a state-like entity and what it does in northeast Syria is actually an "example of state formation." In the bellicist account of European state formation, as will be elaborated in Chapter One, the warfare and the preparations for warfare have historically caused the development of modern nation-state institutions. In this research, relying on the bellicist tradition and Charles Tilly's theory of war-making and state-making, I aim to move beyond the descriptive analyses and offer a conceptual and theoretical framework for the PYD's creation of a state-like entity. I do so by tracing the emergence and evolution of the PYD rule during the Syrian civil war and analysing its war-making and state-making mechanisms. Since the number of comprehensive and theoretically grounded studies

that cover the PYD's state-making efforts is extremely limited in the literature, this research fills the gap.

The originality of this thesis stems from its conceptual and theoretical framework. Within this framework, I will also illustrate how the PYD imitates the modern notion of sovereign statehood in northeast Syria by ruling territory and people. Rather than dismantling the nation-state model, the PYD mirrors and reproduces it. Hence, I seek to understand how we can make sense of the PYD's concrete state-making activities despite its own rejection of statehood. The discrepancy between the PYD's rhetoric and practices can be understood as a pragmatic survival tactic in a hostile geopolitical environment in which it pursues international legitimacy and recognition as a separatist organization.

Furthermore, this research will offer a tangible example of how an ethno-nationalist VNSA with territorial ambitions can employ territorialization strategies similar to those of modern nation-states in order to consolidate its authority. The PYD not only exerts military control over a specific territory in a failed state context but also constructs a peculiar territorial identity and geopolitical discourse. Although the PYD adopts an inclusive and pluralist rhetoric and seems to embrace ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in its administrative structures, nationalist tendencies prioritizing Kurds and the Kurdish identity are evident in the PYD rule. The PYD's policies to reshape the demographics of northeast Syria can be interpreted as an integral component of its broader identity-building strategies. The *Kurdification* of "northeast Syria" is grounded in the "Rojava" narrative, which is consistent with the Kurdish nationalist ideology and the concept of "Kurdistan." Moreover, the utilization of Kurdish national symbols such as flags, maps, images, words, and slogans proves that the PYD seeks to strengthen solidarity and group cohesion among Syrian Kurds. Additionally, the PYD uses education as a mass indoctrination mechanism for cultivating the Kurdish identity in northeast Syria and building a community aligned with the political

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philosophy of Öcalan. Thus, this research will amplify how *stateless nationalism* can shape identity-building, community-building, and legitimacy-building strategies of ethno-nationalist VNSAs when they engage in governance activities.

There are apparent reasons to be sceptical and to question the inconsistencies between what is 'said' and what is 'done' by the PYD. For this reason, this research will depart from the existing romanticized studies on the PYD in the literature with its *critical* approach. The PYD sets itself a mission to promote democratic values through its "alternative" model. This model is presented as a bottom-up, radical democratic, egalitarian, anti-capitalist, post-national, ecological, and gender-equal model. However, the PYD has been subject to numerous accusations of human rights abuses, war crimes, political oppression, and implementing an authoritarian one-party rule built around Öcalan's personality cult. Therefore, the dichotomies between the PYD's ideological claims and practices require an explanation. Yet, they cannot be fully comprehended without understanding the organic ties between the PYD and the PKK and the ideological and organizational transformation of the latter in the post-Cold War era. Nevertheless, the literature does not pay enough attention to this point. As will be revealed in Chapter Two, much of the disparity between the PYD's ideology and its actions can be attributed to the ambiguous stance on leadership, party, and armed resistance in Öcalan's writings.

Finally, although this case study is confined to the PYD, it may have broader implications for the emergence of state-like entities in the contemporary Middle Eastern context and beyond. While there is theoretical underdevelopment in the rebel governance literature in terms of showing how a VNSA becomes a quasi-state actor during a conflict, the bellicist account of modern state formation mostly concentrates on already-existing states and does not pay enough attention to the armed groups engaging in state-like activities. As a result, this thesis will attempt to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to these fields, and the

conflict and security studies in the field of IR, by studying analytically how a VNSA forms a state-like entity against the backdrop of a state failure through the PYD case.

7. Outline of the Research

In the next chapter, I reveal the methodological approach used in this case study to examine the emergence of a Kurdish state-like entity as a result of the Syrian civil war. Social reality is a subjective phenomenon in which truths are socially constructed. Accordingly, my background is a major factor, which has affected my endeavour and motivation to embark on this study. It has also influenced my interpretation of the qualitative data collected. I draw on various sources, including the writings of Öcalan, the statements of the PYD/PKK leaders, speeches, manifestos, brochures, visual materials, news and documentaries in international media, and statistical information if required. Meanwhile, I am unable to conduct field research in northeast Syria due to security concerns. For this reason, I benefit from interviews conducted by other researchers with the PYD leaders and people living under the PYD rule and reports from international and human rights organizations. With this case study, I aim to offer a detailed analysis of the PYD phenomenon and generate specific context-dependent knowledge. Hence, I endeavour to clarify the emergence and evolution of the PYD rule. In this regard, I attempt to explain holistically the reasons stemming from both the actor itself, other actors, and environmental conditions.

In the first chapter, I analyze Tilly's work on the relationship between war-making and state-making and the theoretical and conceptual framework he developed. I argue that Tilly's arguments can help us analytically understand the emergence of state-like entities as a result of wars today. I focus on how VNSAs, especially those with statehood aspirations, use conflicts for political purposes and take advantage of state failures to monopolize the use of violence in certain territories. For this reason, this chapter will revisit Tilly's framework,

taking into account the contemporary international context, the agency of actors, and ideational factors like legitimacy and nationalism. Within this scope, I will clarify how Tilly's theory of state formation can make conceptual and theoretical contributions to the existing descriptive literature on the PYD.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the ideological and organizational transformation of the PKK from Kurdish Marxist-Leninism to Democratic Confederalism. There is a serious gap in the relevant PYD literature on this point, which is crucial to understanding the intellectual roots of its actions and motivations. Although the PKK has changed its discourse in recent years, it has been seeking to establish an independent state in the so-called 'Kurdistan' since its establishment. To this end, it has adopted novel means, methods and organizational structure according to the changing conditions. Following Öcalan's capture in 1999, the PKK shifted to the advocation of the concepts of Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism allegedly to create a stateless democracy. The PKK first had the chance to realize its goals in this direction through its Syrian branch, the PYD. Therefore, Öcalan's ideological views, which previously remained only at the intellectual level, are being put into practice in northeast Syria by the PYD. This chapter is useful for understanding the ideological and organizational roots, connections, discourses, and goals of the PYD.

The third chapter describes the historical background of the Kurdish Question in Syria and the roots of the PKK's activities in the country. In this chapter, I have mentioned that a *de facto* Kurdish administration in Syria does not seem to be historically possible. Syrian Kurds have been marginalized and suppressed historically under different regimes. Arab nationalism after the independence of Syria paved the way for the contention of Kurdish identity. In the historical process, the Assad regime, on the one hand, denied the existence/identity of the Kurds in the country and deprived them of all human and legal rights through oppression and persecution; on the other hand, it harboured the PKK within its borders and used it against

Türkiye. In return, the PKK has remained silent on Kurdish problems in Syria and established various social and organizational structures within the country. Thus, this chapter is important to contextualize the condition of Syrian Kurds and understand their attitudes towards the 2011 Uprisings, the historical links between the Assad regime and the PKK, the roots of the PYD, and how it quickly organized and armed itself at the very beginning of the civil war.

In the fourth chapter, I will elaborate on the reasons for the rise of the PYD with the Syrian civil war. In this regard, the relationship with the Assad regime was critical. This relationship was based on mutual interests, albeit tacit. In addition, the PYD's organic relations with the PKK played a vital role in its success. From the beginning of the crisis, the PKK reinforced the PYD by providing it with fighting capacity, organizational structure, ideological power, and social and transnational ties. Therefore, the rise of the PYD and its state-making activities cannot be considered independent from the political conjuncture in Syria that developed after the civil war and its relations with the PKK. Finally, the struggle against ISIS and the coalition with the US allowed the PYD to be recognized in the international arena and enlarge its territorial control in northeast Syria. Then, the PYD/PKK has been able to transform into a quasi-state actor that can engage in diplomatic activities at the international level. This chapter helps to explain in what political context, under what circumstances, and how the PYD has built a state-like entity.

The fifth chapter will offer a critical examination of different aspects of the Kurdish state-like entity in northeast Syria under three sub-headings: administration, security, and diplomacy. I examine the PYD's legitimization efforts in the subsequent chapter. In light of the bellicist tradition and Tilly's arguments, I have tried to express that the PYD's state-making activities are directly linked to its war-making capabilities. This process is heading towards a state-building process as the PYD develops administrative institutions, tries to monopolize the use

of violence in a given territory, attempts to ensure security, imposes conscription and taxation, provides public services, conducts diplomatic activities and so on. This chapter will also mention the differences between the PYD's discourse and its practices. Contrary to its claims, the PYD has built a state-like entity, created a one-party regime around the cult of Öcalan in an anti-democratic manner, and its rule exhibits ethno-nationalist characteristics.

In the sixth chapter, the PYD's legitimization efforts as a separatist ethno-nationalist VNSA will be discussed. VNSAs with statehood and territorial aspirations generally aim to build legitimacy in the local and international arena. Similarly, the PYD has been in search of international legitimacy and recognition. It tries to gain the favour of local inhabitants by providing security and public services. The PYD also engages in the identity-building process in the regions under its control. This process has been carried out with Kurdish nationalist motives. The 'Kurdification' of geopolitical discourse around the 'Rojava' narrative and the widespread use of Kurdish nationalist symbols support this argument. The heavy ideological indoctrination in the PYD's educational services as per the teachings of Öcalan can be considered another example of this situation. On the other hand, the PYD employs a discourse promoting gender equality and minority rights and exploits the struggle against the ISIS threat to justify its actions. This chapter reveals how stateless or state-seeking nationalism shapes the construction of distinctive territorial identities in the context of a state failure.

In the concluding chapter, I will summarize this study and its findings and clarify what implications can be drawn. As mentioned above, I attempt to contribute to conflict and security studies in IR concerning VNSAs, quasi-state actors, and rebel governance through an empirical case study in a specific context. In this respect, this study differs from the existing literature on the PYD, which is mostly descriptive and lacks a conceptual and theoretical framework.

Methodology

Introduction

Be informed by methodology, but not a slave to it (Bazeley, 2013, p. 10).

In this chapter, I will explain how I will collect, interpret and analyse data[5] to understand the emergence and evolution of a Kurdish state-like entity in northeast Syria under the control of the PYD as a byproduct of the Syrian civil war.

The bedrock of any analysis lies in our understanding of the nature of reality and the functional dynamics of the world we live (*ontology*). In other words, the perspectives of researchers and their underlying assumptions about the social and political world, and the connections within it, significantly influence research results and interpretations (Hall, 2003). Also, researchers' views on the nature of knowledge acquisition (*epistemology*) shape their perspective on what holds value, legitimacy, and rationality (Greene, 2007). While these underlying principles may not be overtly stated, thinking about what qualifies as knowledge, how it is produced, the proper investigation of a social phenomenon, and the researcher's role in gathering and producing data can enhance the quality of our analytical endeavours. Our perspective on these things influences the way we evaluate the reliability of our findings.

I believe that the social world, unlike the natural world where objective truths exist, lacks absolute or universally applicable truths. In the social world, truths can only be claimed. The social world, characterized by its complexity, defies linear definitions. Our subjective perceptions and interactions in given contexts play a crucial role in how we construct and understand the meaning of social facts. The reality we construct shapes our actions, which, in turn, cyclically, impacts the reality we perceive. Since knowledge is a product of construction

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[5] Data is factual information concerning a specific phenomenon (Neuman and Neuman, 2015, p. 799).

and not discovery, our understanding of objects and the social realm as embodied in our concepts, beliefs, and theories, are continually reshaped and modified in light of new encounters and experiences (Schwandt, 2007). Additionally, people coming from different perspectives might see and highlight different aspects of the same phenomenon.

The validity and comprehensibility of all knowledge depends on a particular time, place, context, theoretical framework, and perspective (Bernstein, 1983, p. 3). For this reason, I do not assert that this research is "objective." Assertions of objectivity frequently function as a veil for the researcher's purpose. In this regard, the employment of numerical data to project an image of neutrality can effectively conceal underlying political agendas. To claim an objective point of view in writing implies adopting a perspective devoid of any personal bias, which is unattainable. The identity, personal background, and areas of interest of the researcher are significant factors in both the choice and implementation of research projects. As a result, the pursuit of pure objectivity becomes futile when we consider how the data is produced and interpreted (Berg and Lune, 2012, p. 340).

The ontological and epistemological stances one adopts have direct implications for the methodological choices made in research. The *methodology* can be defined as the 'theory of how inquiry should proceed' (Schwandt, 2007, p. 193). While *methods* are the instruments researchers utilize to examine a problem and uncover its underlying dynamics, *methodologies* are often linked to specific philosophical schools of thought and assumptions. Accordingly, methods are influenced by a specific philosophical or methodological outlook, although not entirely determined or prescribed by it. By encouraging reflection on assumptions about the social world and knowledge, methodology prompts an examination of potential consequences these assumptions may have on the research and its eventual findings (Willig, 2001, p. 10).

1. Qualitative Research

Given the distinction between the social and natural world, social phenomena cannot be investigated in the same manner as material truths. So, when conducting social inquiries, it is important to choose methods that are best suited to the research question and objective. In this sense, employing a qualitative approach can yield deeper insights into the complexities of a social phenomenon or problem across various contexts. Qualitative research focuses on the *qualities* of things more than their *quantity* with an interpretative methodology. Its main concern is comprehending the meanings of actions, decisions, beliefs, and values within their social context, and how individuals mentally map and interpret the world around them (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Therefore, interpretation is an inherent part of all qualitative research. However, it differs in its level of depth and abstraction depending on the specific analytical method employed and the researcher's skills and ambition (Patton, 2015; Silverman, 2013).

As mentioned above, qualitative research typically seeks to understand the *meaning* individuals ascribe to events, situations, experiences, actions, and practices within specific *contexts* and conditions. Moreover, it pursues an understanding of the *processes* underlying them in order to provide explanations (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 30-31). In this regard, qualitative research necessitates a "thick" analysis, rather than a "thin" one, so that comprehensive knowledge of a social phenomenon can be provided and the intricate relationships and interplay among its constituent elements can be identified (Brady and Collier, 2010). Thus, in qualitative research, researchers aim to gain a deeper understanding of a particular problem by observing, describing, interpreting, and analysing it using contextually grounded data.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative research methods have some limitations. First, as previously noted, findings are inherently subjective and influenced by the

researchers' (and sometimes, the participants') individual personalities and interpretations of the subject matter. Also, the choice of data and the data collection procedures are ultimately determined by the researchers themselves. In this case, it becomes challenging to establish a standardized procedure or ensure replicability. At times, the specific procedures involved in analysing the data may not be fully transparent. Besides, since the scale and scope of the research are restricted, it is not quite easy to generalize the findings.

To address these limitations, researchers should seek sincerity and consistency in articulating their 'speaking position' and acknowledging how their *positionality*, which will be elaborated below, might have impacted the research's conduct, findings, and analysis. Hence, the researcher should be conscious of where the research stands theoretically, methodologically, and empirically in relation to the existing scholarly work in the field (Yardley, 2000).

Regarding the matter of generalization, I agree with Flyvbjerg's viewpoint: in the social sciences, concrete knowledge rooted in specific contexts is more valuable than the fruitless search for universal, predictive theories that disregard context (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 6-7). We cannot search for grand laws in social sciences similar to the laws of Newtonian physics (Tilly, 2004, p. 9). Accordingly, when the objective is to highlight the unique and specific, the criticism of generalizability is of little relevance.

2. Sources

This research is grounded in the qualitative analysis of primary and secondary source materials. In my exploration of the connection between war-making and state-making, as well as the historical context of the Kurdish Issue in Syria, I primarily utilized a range of books, journal articles, and other scholarly publications. Furthermore, to evaluate the ideological and organizational changes within the PKK and trace the intellectual origins of "Democratic Autonomy" and/or "Democratic Confederalism," I conducted an in-depth analysis of Öcalan's writings alongside the PKK's manifestos, bylaws, brochures, journals, propaganda websites, and public statements. Moreover, to delve into the relationship between the Syrian civil war and the rise of a Kurdish state-like entity in the northeast, and to verify the PYD's state-building efforts, I drew upon a wide array of sources, including public statements and speeches by the PYD leaders, domestic and international news outlets, blogs, reports, documentaries, and visual materials. I also incorporated relevant statistical data where necessary to support my analysis.

On the other hand, there were methodological limitations in terms of collecting data in my research. Domestic and international organizations have reported numerous war crimes and human rights abuses in Syria since the civil war began. Predictably, conducting fieldwork in conflict zones entails a range of difficulties for the researcher, including the potential for experiencing physical harm and intimidation. In addition, collecting reliable data is quite difficult during and in the aftermath of conflicts. In highly politicized contexts, individuals may become self-protective, demonstrate hesitation or reluctance to engage with a researcher, and conceal their true perspectives. Thus, ethically, given the emotional intensity, significant political risks, and prevailing security concerns, I prioritized the well-being of myself and potential research participants and refrained from conducting fieldwork in Syria.

Moreover, the Kurdish issue is considered a particularly delicate and complex issue in Türkiye. The PKK, along with its Syrian branch the PYD and the PYD's military wing the YPG (People's Self-Defence Units / *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*), are officially listed as terrorist entities by Türkiye. Given the Turkish government's stance on the PKK and PYD, any interaction with these organizations, such as interviewing their members, could have serious consequences for me as a Turkish citizen. It would automatically result in the launch of a criminal inquiry. For these reasons, I had to rely on the published interviews conducted by other researchers and journalists with some of the PYD leaders and fighters and with the people living under the PYD rule.

Finally, I benefitted from the 'official' documents of local and international governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as publicly accessible reports of various research centres pertaining to the Syrian civil war, the PKK, and the PYD. I engaged in a *critical* analysis of these documents to interpret and make sense of the PYD as an actor and its decisions, policies, actions, and justifications in a specific context, with the ultimate goal of understanding the reality 'out there' in northeast Syria.

3. Positionality

As explained above, the self-reflection of the researcher constitutes a vital component of qualitative research because "all knowledge is knowledge from where a person stands" (Ezzy, 2002, p. 20). So, throughout the research process, the researchers must remain mindful of their own *positionality* or situatedness (Neumann and Neumann, 2015). Positionality can be understood as the collection of identity markers and social categories such as race, nationality, religion, class, gender, sexuality, age, occupation, values, perspectives, and experiences, which collectively determine an individual's *relational* position in society. Because of its relativity, positionality is not fixed; it is subject to change and is often debated. Conflicts

arising from positionality can create unease and ethical challenges about disclosing personal details and accurately representing the *other* (Chacko, 2004, p. 52). Accordingly, throughout the research process, the researcher should do self-criticism, remain conscious of their own "pre-understanding" and actively consider how their lens might influence the construction and understanding of meanings (Nielsen, 1990, p. 59; Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p. 228).

The inseparable relationship between research and researcher means that 'what' is studied and 'who' conducts the study are interconnected. The researcher takes the lead in launching and overseeing the research process. Despite the limitations imposed by available resources, the researcher collects, interprets, and analyses the data. This implies that the research is ultimately brought into existence by the researchers' own initiative and effort. Without them, it would not have materialized. In this sense, from the beginning of the research, the researcher acts beyond the role of mere data collector and becomes the *producer* of knowledge (Neuman and Neuman, 2015). Thus, the quality of data and the depth of analysis are enhanced when researchers have a clear understanding of their motivations for studying phenomenon X but not Y, the methods they utilize to generate data, and the way they shape the narrative around their findings (Neuman and Neuman, 2015, p. 799). While assessing 'from where we stand,' we should keep our subjectivity in mind and try to be *fair* (not objective) to reduce any bias and produce reliable knowledge as much as possible.

3. 1. The Turkish Outsider

It is common for research topics to emerge from personal experiences or interests, which can also serve as a potential source of bias. Nevertheless, researchers must maintain sufficient motivation to navigate the often overwhelming, messy, and extensive data produced by qualitative investigations. Through their research, they strive to shed light on the complexities of the phenomenon, to explore its inner workings, and to address gaps in existing knowledge

(Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). However, as elucidated above, since individuals do not possess a static state of being or thought, their changing positionality can cause partiality, relationality, multiplicity, fluidity, and even internal contradictions. For this reason, throughout the research process, researchers can encounter dilemmas related to the nature of the project itself, their own identities, and their engagement with the data. Besides, it would be very difficult to ensure data reliability in highly politicized and sensitive topics, to manage emotional challenges like fear and anger, and to overcome ethical concerns.

Meanwhile, the researcher's position as an insider or outsider in the research presents a delicate and multifaceted challenge. It's not a simple binary. The boundary between insider and outsider is perpetually indistinct. A researcher can occupy both insider and outsider positions concurrently, depending on the specific circumstances. Therefore, the researcher needs to recognize their multi-positionality and resist falling into the trap of assuming that insiders are always more informed or that outsiders are inherently more objective (Baser and Toivanen, 2018).

Since the very establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Kurdish issue has been a major source of anxiety for its citizens. The Turkish Republic has encountered numerous Kurdish uprisings and rebellions. From a historical perspective, it can be said that the Kurdish issue has mainly revolved around ethno-political aspirations and the struggle for self-determination, in addition to its social, cultural, religious, economic, and administrative aspects. The culmination of this process was the rise of the PKK in the 1970s. Tens of thousands of individuals have suffered death or injury in the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state forces and the PKK. The conflict also led to the evacuation of numerous settlements and resulted in the forced displacement of millions.

On the other hand, several cease-fire periods and peace initiatives were undertaken to resolve the issue. The most recent peace initiative, the Kurdish Resolution Process, experienced periods of progress and stagnation between 2009 and 2015, but ultimately proved unsuccessful. As I showed in one of my articles, entitled *Beyond mutually hurting stalemate: why did the peace process in Turkey (2009–2015) fail?*, there was hope before and during the process to end the conflict. However, the process was undermined in large part by the changing regional landscape, notably the PYD's pursuit of statehood in northeast Syria, as I examined in my master thesis entitled *The Impact of Syrian Civil War on the Kurdish Resolution Process*. In the wake of the Syrian civil war and the central government's inability to maintain control, a power vacuum arose in northeast Syria, which was subsequently filled by the PYD. This new status quo revived the PKK's enduring idea of an "independent Kurdish State." A significant number of PKK/PYD members and supporters have suggested that Türkiye could potentially become the next target to experience this "revolution" (Knapp et al., 2016).

Due to the inextricable link between the Kurdish issue in Syria and Türkiye, as illuminated in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, the Turkish state interpreted the PYD's consolidation of power in northeast Syria as a direct challenge to its national security and its longstanding struggle against the PKK. Thus, the broader regional events played a role in the breakdown of the peace process in Türkiye. Afterwards, 2015-2016 turned out to be one of the bloodiest and deadliest periods in the history of the Türkiye-PKK conflict. Prolonged clashes, blockades, and sieges spanning months resulted in the devastation of numerous neighbourhoods, towns, and cities in Southeast Türkiye. And even later, Türkiye initiated major cross-border operations within Syrian territory to counter the PYD. This situation led me to think about what is happening in northeast Syria, what the PYD is doing there, what kind of activities it

engages in, and how it frames and justifies its actions. Accordingly, I decided to analyse and understand the PYD's actual, tangible, and observable practices with this study.

I also feel that my social identity and background are essential in setting me on this particular research journey. I am a Turkish researcher from Erzurum, East Türkiye (seen as part of *Bakur*-North Kurdistan by Kurdish nationalists). The Kurdish issue and the campaign against PKK terrorism have been recurring themes of conversation in my family and neighbourhood since I was a child. Moreover, when I was an undergraduate student in İstanbul, there were serious debates among my Turkish and Kurdish friends about the Kurdish Resolution Process and the Kobane Events of 2014 during our classrooms and casual café gatherings. When I later expressed my interest in studying the PYD, people often regarded me with suspicion and inquired, "Are you Kurdish?" to which I explained that I was Turkish. Then, they would ask me, "If you are Turkish, are you a bloody left-wing communist?" to which I explained that I was not. Their typical response was, "Okay then, you're probably a Turkish fascist." At an international academic conference, I even faced subtle accusations of potentially being a spy or an agent during my presentation. As a result, my attempts to comprehend the Kurdish issue and the Türkiye-PKK conflict have been the curse of my life and a source of internal discord throughout my life. My very existence has taken on a political dimension, and I have transformed into a witness, investigator, and researcher of this contentious subject matter.

Having dedicated nearly a decade to researching the Kurdish issue, I firmly oppose the suppression of any ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual minority groups, and the denial of their fundamental human rights. At the same time, I am firmly against any separatist agenda, recognizing that such movements often lead to increased instability and chaos and add to the complexity of already existing problems in the Middle East. In the meantime, I know that trying to change the borders is a futile effort in today's world due to the international norm of territorial integrity. Additionally, the use of violence instead of democratic methods to realize

political goals mostly harms innocents and paves the way for the vicious cycle of violence by deepening social divisions. Besides, I reckon that my opposition to the PYD makes me an outsider in this research. The PKK's state-building activities in northeast Syria through its Syrian branch are, in my view as a Turkish citizen who has suffered from its terrorism, entirely unacceptable and a source of great distress. I believe that the PKK's ethno-nationalist separatist agenda would only destabilize the region further.

4. Case Study

This section will delve into the case study method where the construction of the case emerges from a dynamic interplay with theoretical frameworks, and the generation of knowledge is achieved through extensions or implications rather than generalizations (Lai and Roccu, 2019). The case refers to a chosen phenomenon that is conceptualized and empirically analysed as a specific example of a more general category of phenomena (Eckstein, 1975, p. 85; Ragin and Becker, 1992, pp. 1-17; King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, pp. 51-53; George and Bennett, 2005, pp. 17-19). In this sense, the case study is characterized by its in-depth empirical analysis of a particular phenomenon, or a limited set of phenomena, which aims to uncover the specific configuration of each case while also illuminating common features within a larger class of similar phenomena (Ragin, 2000, pp. 64-87; Gerring, 2004, p. 342; Yin, 2009, p. 14). It is a valuable tool for comprehending the specific aspects of an individual phenomenon through a holistic approach (Bennett and Elman, 2006). Accordingly, case studies develop a nuanced understanding of reality by generating concrete, practical, and contextually relevant knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Willis, 2014). In this research, I will use the case study method to provide a *thick* understanding of the PYD phenomenon within the Syrian civil war context.

A case is not just a unit to be analysed or an observation to be made; it goes beyond the realm of data and functions as a theoretical construct or category (Ragin and Becker, 1992, p. 1; Hall, 2003, pp. 396-397). So, defining the boundaries of the case is the result of theoretical conceptualization (Rueschemeyer, 2003, p. 320). To explain a phenomenon, researchers merge their theoretical perspectives with a comprehensive understanding of specific cases. In this way, they can ensure that crucial explanatory principles remain prominent and are not lost within their analytic narratives. Otherwise, the research risks becoming purely descriptive, systematically outlining the phenomenon but lacking deeper theoretical insight.

Theory-based explanations of individual cases offer researchers a roadmap for their investigation while simultaneously allowing for the assessment and improvement of the theoretical frameworks themselves (Vennesson, 2008, pp. 227-228). Therefore, depending on the objective, researchers can utilize theories to clarify a case, demonstrate the outcome's predictability, or develop new variables and hypotheses. However, in this endeavour, they should strive to avoid reductive applications of theory by critically engaging with theoretical frameworks, concepts, and tools (Hansson et al., 2015, pp. 6-7).

As for generalization, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is always a trade-off between generalizability and specificity. While detailed generalizations in social sciences are often limited to small, well-defined cases, broader theories tend to sacrifice specificity for wider applicability. Whether to theorize broadly or deeply reflects beliefs about the social world's complexity and how to understand it (Bennett, 2004, p. 43). In this regard, case studies often provide more precise explanations grounded within particular contexts. They provide deep insights into a narrowly focused subject (Beach, 2020, p. 164). On the other hand, case studies, can implicitly present comparisons to broader groups via the 'casing' process (Vennesson, 2008, p. 229). During the research process, researchers keep asking: 'What is this a case of?' and frame their research accordingly. Whether consciously or not, they make

inferences and suggest broader implications about similar phenomena. If the case is representative of others, close analysis can enable researchers to translate specific insights into an analytical framework applicable to similar cases (Stake, 2000, p. 436).

In this scope, a meticulous analysis of the PYD case may enhance our understanding of how VNSAs operate and pursue statehood in the context of state failure through their war-making capacity. As I will illustrate throughout the next chapter, the bellicist tradition and Tilly's theory of war-making and state-making can provide a useful analytical and conceptual framework to understand how state-like entities emerge in the contemporary world. Yet, I will emphasize that the theory is not a predictive model or a blueprint, but rather an analytical tool for investigating an ongoing state-building effort. Ideal types function as conceptual tools for making sense of the social world; they do not set or dictate rules. For this reason, I will attempt to recalibrate Tilly's theory to better understand the interplay between war-making and state-making in the current international context. A comprehensive analysis of state formation in today's world should incorporate not only material factors such as coercion and capitalism but also the complexities of modern international order, the agency of actors, and the critical role of legitimacy and ideational factors.

Rather than adopting a generalized, structuralist lens, I will strive to integrate both the unique historical and contextual factors and the dynamic agency at play in the PYD case. As mentioned above, there exists an inverse relationship between generalization and concretization. As theoretical frameworks become 'thinner' and try to encompass a wider range of cases, they paradoxically lose the ability to fully capture the unique characteristics of those diverse cases. The relationship between warfare and state formation defies simple, linear explanations. Thus, I will try to overcome the 'standard path' and analyse a particular trajectory of the PYD while using Tilly's theory. This initiative necessitates not only analysing how Syria's political landscape evolved during the civil war but also understanding

the PYD's agency, encompassing its ideology, organizational structure, war preparations, strategies, and objectives. Accordingly, I will evaluate how the Syrian civil war contributed to the formation of the state-like entity under the control of the PYD.

5. Limitations

Every research has certain drawbacks. So, I will revisit the limitations of this research in more detail in this section. First of all, I must emphasize that I do not claim objectivity because there cannot be absolute and universally applicable truths in the social sciences. Findings and interpretations of any research are heavily influenced by the subjective viewpoints of the researchers. Also, researchers with various backgrounds and goals would draw attention to different facets of the same phenomenon. Thus, claims of neutrality serve as a front for the researcher's agenda.

Furthermore, the researchers themselves collect, interpret and analyse data. Especially in qualitative studies, they contextualize the data and frame it to obtain deeper knowledge. Accordingly, as can be seen, this research does not offer any standardized method or guarantee replicability.

In the meantime, there were methodological constraints on how I could collect data for my study. Since the start of the civil war, various war crimes and human rights violations have been well documented in Syria by both local and international organizations. Therefore, I could not carry out fieldwork in northeast Syria due to safety concerns. Additionally, I did not intentionally conduct interviews with the PYD members or the people living under the PYD rule because of the delicacy of the Kurdish issue and my research topic.

As the research and the researcher are inextricably related, my positionality and critical attitude towards the PYD and the PKK may have had a profound impact on how meanings are

constructed and understood in this research. However, the claim that the PYD has been building a stateless model in northeast Syria while practising almost all quasi-state activities does not seem meaningful to me. In addition, it cannot be realistic that an authoritarian organization based on the cult of a leader is building a democratic structure. When it comes to the issue of self-determination, it should be remembered that the international norm of territorial integrity makes separatist activities and efforts to change the borders pointless in the modern world. They only destabilize the Middle East further by causing a vicious cycle of violence.

Finally, as clearly stated before, case studies frequently provide specific concrete context-dependent knowledge and, thus, detailed insights into social phenomena. Also, it is important to recognize that there is always a trade-off between generalizability and specificity. I focus on the concretization of the PYD phenomenon based on a particular setting and do not look for universally applicable abstract laws, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings of this research. Nonetheless, I believe that a careful examination of the PYD case could improve our comprehension of how VNSAs operate and seek statehood in the context of state failure by using their war-making capabilities. The researchers can draw implications from this research and convert the findings into analytical frameworks through comparative case studies.

Conclusion

This research prioritizes a case-centric approach over a purely theory-driven one. However, I will employ the mechanisms identified by the bellicist tradition and Tilly regarding state formation and the interplay between war-making and state-making. To reap the methodological advantages of in-depth case studies, we must commit to a thorough theoretical examination. Otherwise, we cannot ensure clarity on what to trace empirically and elucidate

the link between X and Y. Hence, we need to go beyond a mere description of the sequence of events and provide an analytical explanation based on a theoretical framework. In this way, we gain more insights into theoretical mechanisms and how they function in practice.

As a case study researcher, I explore "how" an actor has transformed initial conditions into observable outcomes through a certain mechanism in a comprehensive manner. In this way, I offer an "analytic narrative" considering the agency of the actor because the social phenomena we observe are generated by agents with their capacities and efforts. They link conditions to outcomes. Meanwhile, outcomes can vary depending on changing circumstances. Therefore, I recognize the importance of context and acknowledge that similar factors might produce different results in dissimilar contexts. In light of this information, I aim to provide a more precise explanation of the PYD phenomenon within its political and historical context.

The idea of a Kurdish autonomous administration in northeast Syria, as illuminated in the Third Chapter, would have been unthinkable before the civil war. Thus, there is a clear link between the Syrian civil war and the emergence of a Kurdish state-like entity under the control of the PYD. Although the civil war and the materialization of the Kurdish state-like entity are linked, the war itself did not yield this result. Accordingly, I aim to critically analyse how the Syrian civil war context created the conditions that enabled the PYD to establish and consolidate a state-like entity. In doing so, I will consider the PYD's agency and investigate the reasons behind its success.

Finally, my focus is on explaining the PYD case within its particular environment. I give priority to the accuracy of findings within the case itself over the generalizability of those findings to other cases. Also, as I said before, my methodological approach is grounded in the understanding that the social world is highly complex and context-dependent. This

complexity makes generalization difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, this research may

contribute to a better understanding of how state-like entities arise amidst state failures in the

contemporary world, especially in the Middle East.

Chapter 1: War-Making and State-Making

Introduction

This chapter will examine the "war made the state, and the state made war" aphorism of Charles Tilly (Tilly, 1975, p. 42) and show how it can be used to explain the transformation of an ethno-nationalist VNSA with territorial aspirations (PYD/PKK) into a quasi-state actor. The PYD employs war-making strategies to engage in state-making activities in Syria. So, my objective is to draw a conceptual and theoretical framework by which to analyse how a specific war, i.e., the Syrian civil war contributed to the emergence of a state-like entity under the control of the PYD. In this way, the use of Tilly's theory will help to understand better the trajectory of a particular VNSA. In other words, I will carry forward where Tilly stops in a different context. However, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, I must stress that this attempt requires not only consideration of how the political context in Syria changed throughout the civil war, but also comprehension of the PYD's agency, i.e., its ideology, organizational structure, goals, and war-making capabilities.

An extensive study of the literature suggests that the state formation process in early modern Europe was mostly led by the war-making and state-making mechanisms. Yet, whether it would be sensible to investigate contemporary non-European contexts in the same way is a matter of debate. Tilly never suggested that his arguments were universally applicable; rather, according to him, it was necessary to think of "the possibility that the Western experience was ... an aberration, a dead end, or simply one among many paths" (Tilly, 1975, p. 4). Accordingly, recent studies have expanded this claim beyond the early modern European framework (Kaspersen et al., 2017, p. 2). Several scholars have argued for the similarity that exists in non-European contexts whilst some others found this argument too "Eurocentric" and asserted that different historical, political, economic, sociological, geographical and

international conditions nullify the relationship between war-making and state-making or even invert it (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Herbst, 2000; Sorensen, 2001; Centeno, 2002, 2003; Reno, 1998, 2003; Leander, 2004; Thies, 2004, 2005, 2007; Taylor and Botea, 2008; Atzili, 2012; Delatolla, 2016; Holden, 2017; Hui, 2017; Jung, 2017; Spruyt, 2017; Teschke, 2017). Hence, in spite of the ongoing academic discussions, "the jury is still out" on this debate (Malesevic, 2020, p. 677).

Moreover, the bellicist literature focused on already-existing states fighting wars and did not pay enough attention to the armed groups (or VNSAs) engaging in state-like activities (Jüde, 2022). However, Tilly clearly stated that "War makes states... Banditry, piracy, gangland rivalry, policing, and war-making all belong on the same continuum" (Tilly, 1985, p. 170). The premise that state formation and warfare resemble organized crime means that one can gain better insights into the nature of proto-state structures by non-state actors by making comprehensive use of the bellicist account.

Meanwhile, as explained in Introduction Chapter, the "rebel governance" literature addressed the issues such as the connection between the state failure and rebel governance, the variety of wartime social and political orders in "un-governed spaces," the difference between resource-poor and resource-rich armed groups, insurgent violence, the role of leaders and external patrons in rebel group motivations, the legitimization strategies of rebel groups and so on (Arjona, 2014, 2016; Arjona et al., 2015; Kasfir, 2004; Lidow, 2016; Malejacq, 2017; Mampilly, 2011; Schlichte, 2009; Staniland, 2012; Weinstein, 2007). However, my focus will be more limited. Building on the bellicist tradition, I will try to explain how and under what circumstances an ethno-nationalist VNSA with territorial aspirations transformed into a quasi-state actor and how it employed war-making strategies to engage in state-making activities.

Despite the prevalence of armed conflict in the Middle East politics, few scholars have utilized Tilly's theoretical framework to illuminate the interconnectedness of war-making and state-making within the region. (Barnett, 1992; Krause, 1996; Gongora, 1997; Lustick, 1997; Heydemann, 2000; Delatolla, 2016; Jung, 2017). While they highlight the intellectual gap, these studies do not focus on the emergence of states or state-like entities as a consequence of warfare. Rather, their primary concern is on war preparation and state power within already existing states.

It is doubtful whether the "European models" could apply to the state formation processes in the Middle East. However, the European experience has provided us with certain analytical perspectives. In fact, the concept of nation-state is a European phenomenon (Sharma, 2017, p. 216). Additionally, due to European colonialism, it has spread over the globe. Nation-states are now the main actors of the modern international system. They control and shape social, cultural, and political life. For this reason, examining the underpinnings of this global phenomenon is necessary. Yet, it does not mean that current examples of state formation comply with the standards of previous examples. Even Tilly himself noted that: "Third World of the twentieth century does not greatly resemble Europe of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. In no simple sense can we read the future of Third World countries from the pasts of European countries. Yet a thoughtful exploration of European experience will serve us well" (Tilly, 1985, p. 169). Hence, Tilly's theory must be seen as an analytical and conceptual framework, rather than a blueprint. It is not a means of prediction, but a tool which can be employed to investigate a non-European state formation example and its relationship to warfare. Its contextualized empirical application to unique cases, not its European origin, decides its validity (Jung, 2017, p. 223).

Overall, I find myself in agreement with the historical significance of warfare for the evolution of modern state apparatuses. War and war preparations continue to exert a profound

influence on state-building because it is a process, not an end, as I illustrate throughout this chapter. Therefore, expanding on the depths of the current interplay between war-making and state-making is of utter importance (Spruyt, 2017, pp. 96-97). In this regard, the bellicist theory contains considerable insights for understanding ongoing processes of state formation and transformation.

On the other hand, as will be expanded upon below, even if the mechanisms described by Tilly and others still operate, the world they described is gone. To illustrate, certain states which would have disappeared because of wars in the past are still left intact today. Also, according to some scholars, intra-state conflicts rather un-make states by stretching their capabilities to the breaking point and dividing societies (Cheeseman et al., 2018, p. 34; Schlichte, 2009, p. 30). In this view, the international norm of territorial integrity, as will be discussed below, hinders the war-state relationship. Besides, the financial, political, and logistical support from external actors has reshaped the strategies of potentially violent state builders in today's world. So, the existing international context is decidedly different from early modern Europe (Taylor and Botea, 2008, p. 48). We cannot ignore this fact when trying to use Tilly's theory. For this reason, the theory needs to be amended for different contexts.

Moreover, it is important to consider the multiplicity of options available to agents within any environment. The relationship between war-making and state-making does not come about automatically (Hui, 2017, p. 270). Historically, only a few successful survivors would engage in state-building activities. Thus, the bellicist theory methodologically must delineate the micro-level decisions and actions that underpin state formation (Spruyt, 2017, p. 89). A certain actor might gain advantage over rivals and attain the monopoly of violence in a given territory. The clarification of the agency of actors and micro-level mechanisms reveals that warfare would pave the way for the development of a state or a state-like entity only under

specific conditions. This is to say that the debate around this issue should not be framed in an "either-or" way (Jüde, 2022, p. 226).

Furthermore, I will try to recalibrate Tilly's theory by examining it within Weber's category of legitimacy, which explains when and why people obey (Weber, 1991, p. 78). In the classical bellicist approach, not adequate attention is paid to the legitimacy dimension of ruling. Rather, the emphasis is on the monopolization of violence (Schenoni, 2021). Legitimacy is epiphenomenal in this approach. Similarly, Tilly excludes the legitimacy dimension of state-building processes. According to the protection racket model, it does not matter for the individuals by whom the protection is provided (Tilly, 1985). However, socially recognized legitimization is a must for an authority to be effective. A political community's collective agreement, or any social contract, serves as the foundation for the "right to rule" (Holden, 2017, p. 259). If a political institution is to be sustainable, it should have a certain set of rules and norms managing the relations between those who rule and those who are ruled. When discussing the internal rationale behind systems of domination, Weber made a clear distinction between political authority and mere power dynamics through the concept of legitimacy. He asserted that holding power does not automatically grant the powerholder legitimacy. Again, for Weber, a direct link exists between a state's administrative and security institutions and its rulers through not only tangible benefits but also symbolic patterns of legitimacy. Hence, the state monopoly must be tightly tied to the cultural and symbolic order of society as well (Jung, 2017, pp. 225-226). In brief, contrary to Tilly, Weber brings an ideational factor into the equation, which is essential to comprehend the connection between state-building and community-building.

Finally, the legitimacy afforded by normative justifications for wielding coercive power proved instrumental in the emergence of the modern nation-state. As Malesevic suggests, its philosophical background is heavily imbued with nationalist ideology, which created a

powerful social glue that kept various groups together (Malesevic, 2012, p. 314; 2013, p. 9; 2020). In other words, there is a symbiotic relationship between state-building and nation-building. Nationalist discourse shaped this new form of state and constructed an appropriate identity for the nation. Further, if it had not been for the compelling power of nationalism, it would not have been feasible to manage the recruitment, equipment, and provision of militaries at a never-seen-before magnitude (Finer, 1975, pp. 96-97). Consequently, the inclusion of ideological elements in the bellicist account is vital to understanding how governing systems are stabilized in the contemporary context and the intricate nature of negotiation processes between nation-states and their societies.

To sum up, what I will attempt is not to come up with a general and structuralist approach but to encompass both the historical and contextual nuances and the active agency involved (Teschke, 2017, p. 30). Indeed, as I emphasized in the Methodology Chapter, there exists an inverse relationship between abstraction and concretization. As the conceptual abstraction 'thinner' and strives to include a broader range of diverse cases, it paradoxically diminishes in its capacity to fully grasp the heterogeneous nature of those cases (Kaspersen et al., 2017, pp. 5-6). Nonetheless, as Kaspersen and his colleagues suggested: "For if reality does not comply with Western concepts, then it is perhaps not reality that is at fault, but maybe the classical sociological standards of concept formation, whose idealities tend to demote non-ideal experiences to 'anomalies' requiring normalisation..." (Kaspersen et al., 2017, p. 7). Accordingly, ideal types serve as abstract tools for comprehending social reality; they do not dictate standards regarding how things should be (Weber, 1949, pp. 85-95). By considering this truth, we can overcome 'standard path' and 'stagism' because wars and state formation are not connected through any linear paths (Teschke, 2017, p. 43; Jung, 2017, pp. 239-241).

1. Bellicist Tradition

War was the father of all things (Heraclitus)

Tilly is widely considered to be the pioneer of the thesis that war makes states. His comprehensive articles and books dealing with this topic (Tilly, 1975, 1985, 1990, 1992) have become classics in the field. Yet, certain other scholars have put forward similar arguments before and after Tilly. What differentiates Tilly's works from others is that he revised and built upon an enduring bellicist (or bello-centric) tradition, characterized by a focus on warfare and the imperatives of *Realpolitik* (Kaspersen et al., 2017; Malesevic, 2020).

As per the bellicist tradition, a strong relationship is established between warfare and state formation. For example, Austrian sociologists Ludwig Gumplowicz (1899) and Gustav Ratzenhofer (1881) asserted that states came about through the use of violence and military force in a process in which organized groups brought their disorganized neighbours under control. By the same token, German theorists Franz Oppenheimer (1926) and Alexander Rustow (1980) [1925] asserted that violence has been the starting point of states throughout history as well as the tool by which to maintain it. As Oppenheimer stressed: "states are maintained in accordance with the same principles that called them into being. The primitive state is the creation of warlike robbery; and by warlike robbery it can be preserved" (Oppenheimer, 1926, p. 57). Yet, writings of German historian Otto Hintze, where he suggests there is a connection between the emergence of statehood and the creation of organized military structures, can be seen as one of the most comprehensive examples of early violent state formation models. More specifically, according to Hintze (1975), "all state organisation was originally military organisation, organisation for war." For him, even institutions like parliaments, which are regarded to be the main pillar to maintain the social order in a peaceful way, are rooted in organized violence.

Weber also focused on how war paves the way for the formation of modern states. As is known, according to his definition, the main pillar of modern states is the monopoly over violence. This definition clearly refers to the military aspect of modern states. The emergence of new institutions and organizations occurred at the time of wars to remedy military needs. Even when wars ended, institutions and organizations that were set up during wars continued to operate (Kaspersen et al., 2017, pp. 14-15). It is unlikely that states diminish their size or acquired capabilities in the aftermath of a war by virtue of a "ratchet effect" (Desch, 1996, p. 243). Thus, Weber thinks that state formation is usually enhanced in the post-war phase, especially when "this ad hoc consociation develops into a permanent structure" (Weber, 1978, p. 905). Moreover, he underlines that war outcomes are of utmost importance since a military victory endows its members with social prestige (Weber, 1978, p. 910). Besides, the concept of a state being characterized by delimited territory points to a network of "political" relations between the state in question and other states; that is, *geopolitics* (Mann, 1993, p. 56). Hence, for Weber, there is a strong relationship between politics and geopolitics, which is why one should not be studied without the other.

These original bellicist arguments were advanced by several scholars. For instance, Anthony Giddens (1985) elaborates on how important military power is for structuring traditional and modern states within the sociological tradition. He claims that who controls the means of violence, to what extent it is controlled, and the direction of the violence are directly related to *armed forces* in any society (Giddens, 1985). Giddens also highlights that the internal structure of modern states is pacified in comparison to that of traditional states. In this respect, governments within modern states are distinct from traditional ruling modes (Giddens, 1985, p. 4). Traditional states are typically segmental. To illustrate, they do not have full control over their administrative units, so do not 'govern' as would be understood today (Giddens, 1985, p. 89). Consequently, the emergence of nation-states presupposes the erosion of the

connection between urban centres and rural peripheries, which is quite significant in traditional states, and necessitates the implementation of stringent administrative controls (associated with borders) (Giddens, 1985, pp. 3-4).

Furthermore, according to Giddens (1985), industrialization is the main process accompanying the rise of the nation-state. With the advancement of technology, surveillance, and control mechanisms are developed. The collection and storage of data utilized for controlling the masses are central to the expansion of 'authoritative resources' (Giddens, 1985, p. 2). This is how modern states have been affected by industrialism.

Finally, Giddens (1985) underscores the emergence of the nation-state system as the major factor for the emergence of nation-states. For him, the international system (as the structure) and nation-states (as the political subjects) mutually and simultaneously constituted each other. From the outset, nation-states have depended on actively monitoring the conditions of the international environment to organize their internal administrative structure. For this reason, the modern 'international relations' and nation-states emerged concurrently (Giddens, 1985, p. 4). In this environment, there was fierce geopolitical competition, which required actors to produce efficient and effective military systems and to be able to mobilize violence against others to survive. States that were 'failed' and militarily 'inefficient' were eliminated by stronger ones and incorporated into more competitive political systems (Sharma, 2017, p. 184). So, the apprehension of being conquered pushed states to implement strategies that would expand their state capacities.

Similar to Giddens, Michael Mann (1984, 1986, 1988, 1993, 2012), another international historical sociologist, associates the modern state formation with warfare and geopolitical competition. Mann considers states as autonomous powers that have various functions and mechanisms. Influenced by Weber, he conceptualizes the state in terms of "*differentiated* set

of institutions and personnel embodying *centrality*, in the sense that political relations radiate to and from a center, to cover a *territorially demarcated area* over which it exercises some degree of *authoritative, binding rule making*, backed up by some organized physical force" (Mann, 1984, pp. 187-188). Accordingly, states undertake multiple domestic and international functions such as upholding internal order; taking the required defensive or offensive military actions; ensuring the upkeep of communication infrastructures: roads, rivers, messaging systems, currency, standard measurements, and trade agreements; the allocation, redistribution, and dissemination of economic resources among different regions, age cohorts, and diverse interest groups; the elevation of certain institutions to a sacred status while secularizing others and so on (Mann, 1984, pp. 196-197).

As an attempt to get a comprehensive understanding of how war-making and state-making have historically been related, Mann mentions four interdependent sources of social power: military, economic, political, and ideological (Mann, 1986, 1993). These power sources are only ideal types, that do not exist in an entirely pure form. Since each of them is crucial to one another and to the maintenance of social existence, real power institutions merge all of them. For instance, in all economic organizations, it is mandatory that at least a certain part of the members abide by similar ideological values and norms. Moreover, such organizations require defence capabilities and governmental regulations to function. Therefore, institutions in the realm of ideology, military, and politics contribute to the structuring of economic institutions, and vice versa (Mann, 1993, p. 9).

First, *military power* is physical force in a socially organized form. It originates from the need to be able to defend in an organized way and to benefit from the use of violence. Military power has not only intensive but also extensive dimensions. An intensive coordinated capacity is required to both prevent and inflict death whilst at the same time enabling the mobilization of numerous people across extensive socio-spatial areas (Mann, 1986, p. 11, 25).

According to Mann, throughout history, states were built, developed, and diminished in relation to their military powers. Yet, other power sources such as economics, politics, and ideology were all also influential. Second, *economic power* originates from the need to fulfil the basic needs via social structures (Mann, 1986, p. 24). Economic power is peculiarly effective as it merges daily labour collaboration with networks for the distribution, exchange, and utilization of goods (Mann, 1993, p. 7). Third, *political power* originates from the efficacy of territorial and centralized governance (Mann, 1986, p. 11). It is basically *state* power; commanding and run centrally (Mann, 1993, p. 9). Internally, a state exhibits a centralized and geographically defined political structure whilst externally it operates within a geopolitical framework of the international system (Mann, 1986, p. 11, 27). Last, *ideological power* originates from the innate human quest for profound meaning in existence. Accordingly, social power is attained by having control of an ideology incorporating ultimate meanings, norms, values, aesthetics, rituals, ceremonies, and so on (Mann, 1986, p. 22). So, ideological power strengthens an existing power organization through enhancing its "immanent morale.'' Although historically it has been religions that provided ideological power, classes, and nations have been focal points of the most significant modern ideologies (Mann, 1993, p. 7).

Furthermore, Mann (1984, 1993) draws a distinction between *despotic* and *infrastructural* power, both of which arose due to war and preparations for it. The former signifies a state's capacity for repression; it is power "over" society. Contrarily, the latter signifies the institutional capacity of a state to permeate the society and ensure compliance with its directives; it is collective power "through" society (Mann, 1993, p. 59). As Giddens emphasized, in traditional societies, infrastructural power was not as strong. So, despotic achievements were more difficult to maintain due to the shortage of proper infrastructure needed to penetrate and coordinate social life (Mann, 1984, p. 211). On the other hand, thanks

to the Industrial Revolution, modern states managed to penetrate nearly all aspects of the lives of their citizens and their territories (Mann, 1984, p. 206). Moreover, modern states have a great deal of information about their citizens which they can immediately use as needed; they can implement any decision abruptly all across its boundaries; they can move the economy in a certain direction; they can employ their citizens and enable them to make a living through wages, pensions, family allowances, etc. (Mann, 1984, p. 189). Infrastructurally more powerful states *cage* more social relations using the judiciary system and bureaucratic administration (Mann, 1986, pp. 112-114; 1993, p. 59). This social caging process works in parallel with the increase in the organizational capacity.

Finally, Mann claims that the rivalry-driven dynamics of the geopolitical context had an impact on state formation since wars and war preparations contributed to the advancement of states' despotic and infrastructural capacities. According to him, "a state that wished to survive had to increase its extractive capacity to pay for professional armies and/or navies. Those that did not would be crushed on the battlefield and absorbed into others" (Mann, 1988, p. 109). On the one hand, building capacity was a must for a state's survival. On the other hand, imminent wars presented an opportunity for states to compel resistant social groups to comply (Mann, 1988, p. 4). As warfare intensified its costs escalated, states found themselves in chronic fiscal crises more often, which led them to implement more efficient methods for obtaining resources, recruits, and labour from their populations. For this reason, they needed to enhance infrastructural capacities, which included strengthening centralized state apparatuses, expanding and improving civil services, enlarging tax-collecting agencies and exchequers, professionalizing police and military forces, and establishing state-wide legal and bureaucratic systems (Skocpol, 1993). War preparations were also instrumental in cultivating networks of transportation, communication, and information which were crucial for the effective governance and the conduct of warfare (Mann, 1993). As Finer (1975) suggested,

only centralized and consolidated states with territorial control eventually managed to create a routine 'extraction-coercion cycle' to supply personnel, finances, and logistical resources to the armed forces and to survive (Mann, 1984, p. 208).

In essence, Tilly's thesis regarding the co-dependency of war-making and state-making is rooted in a specific tradition of Historical Sociology, which has enriched its analytical framework by examining the historical development of European states. This tradition, merging Weberian and Marxist approaches, considers the state as an autonomous political entity, and emphasizes the effect of warfare, war finance, and revenue acquisition on the expansion of centralized state authority. In other words, in the bellicist account, the rise of states is not attributed to growing individual freedoms or a dramatic transformation from feudalism to capitalism, where traditional monarchical orders were replaced by unified and secular bourgeois classes (Kaspersen et al., 2017, pp. 14-15). Despite variations in specifics and supporting evidence, scholars advocating the bellicist perspective largely converge on a core narrative regarding the emergence of modern nation-states. For them, warfare has been a driving force throughout history, and it was a great stimulus to state-building (Huntington, 1968, pp. 122-23; Rasler and Thompson, 1989, p. 2; Migdal, 1988, pp. 273-274; Porter, 1994, p. 14; Desch, 1996, p. 242; Gorski, 2001, p. 851; 2003, p. 3; Thies, 2004, pp. 55-56; 2005, p. 451; Sharma, 2017, pp. 183-186).

2. Tilly: War-Making and State-Making

As mentioned above, I will investigate the emergence of the Kurdish state-like entity under the control of the PYD in northeast Syria through the bellicist tradition in this research. However, the core of my theoretical framework, subject to some alterations, will be based on Tilly's arguments as he provided a more nuanced analysis of state formation. This is why first I will review Tilly's ideas on war-making and state-making. Then, I will attempt to revise and

re-contextualize his ideas to make more explicit today's historical and geopolitical context. Moreover, clarifying the agency of actors and the micro-level mechanisms demonstrates that war-making would lead to state-making only under particular circumstances. Lastly, I will bring ideational factors, such as legitimacy and nationalism into the equation to comprehend complex relationships between states and societies and the stabilization of ruling.

2. 1. Tilly's Definition of State

Tilly embraces a classical Weberian understanding of the modern state. According to him, states are "relatively centralized, differentiated organizations the officials of which more or less successfully claim control over the chief concentrated means of violence within a population inhabiting a large, contiguous territory" (Tilly, 1985, p. 170). With this definition, Tilly highlights the exclusive authority over the use of violence in a given territory as a fundamental aspect of modern states.

Furthermore, Tilly thinks, like Mann, that the state is an independent and autonomous actor, which is positioned amidst outside geopolitical forces and domestic social interests (Teschke, 2017, pp. 26-27). For him, the existence of capitalists precedes *capitalism* itself; they operated not only by directly overseeing production but also by working as traders, entrepreneurs, and investors throughout the course of history. Their primary concern is accumulating and consolidating capital. On the other hand, the concern of states has mostly been accumulating and consolidating *coercion* and domination (over territory, population, and fighting force) (Tilly, 1992, pp. 16-20). Therefore, Tilly believes that "where capital defines a realm of exploitation, coercion defines a realm of domination" (Tilly, 1992, p. 19). Besides, as further detailed below, Tilly evaluates state with a historical-materialist perspective, but he diverges from orthodox Marxism and aligns with an approach which prioritizes the logic of material interests (Linden, 2009, p. 242; Gürel and Yörük, 2018).

Even if Tilly draws heavily from the ideas of Weber, legitimacy is epiphenomenal in his state conceptualization. Tilly suggests that there was not one single actor that had monopoly over violence during the early phases of state formation; over a long time, a differentiation such as "legitimate" vs. "illegitimate" forces emerged (Tilly, 1985, pp. 172-173). Ultimately, the personnel of states exerted violence more extensively, in a more efficient and effective way, and gained greater approval from people compared to the personnel of other organizations. To put it differently, Tilly argues that first, the central power of the state was consolidated; and later, the creation of new collective identities as well as the legitimacy-building took place. Only then did "internal" and "external" politics emerge as two separate areas, which allowed for a sensible application of the Weberian *legitimacy* concept on European states (Tilly, 1992, pp. 69-70).

2. 2. Formation and Evolution of Modern Nation States

In the 15th century, the number of state-like entities in Europe was around 200-300 or 500 polities, changeable as per the counting criteria, comprising states, would-be states, statelets and state-like organizations. These polities did not have territorial boundaries or centralized institutions. Also, the use of violence was not monopolistic but oligopolistic. Yet, the number went down to 25-28 states by the end of the 20th century (Tilly, 1990, 1992, pp. 40-43; Porter, 1994, pp. 11-17). Considering this fact, Tilly focused on the historical process of modern state formation and questioned how a specific form of state became dominant first in the West and then around the world (Tilly, 1975, 1985, 1990, 1992). For Tilly, while dynastic politics and the establishment of federations, to some extent, constituted an answer to his questions, the main cause paving the way for state formation had been wars, as these ''provided the chief

occasions on which states expanded, consolidated, and created new forms of political organization'' (Tilly, 1990, 1992, p. 70).[6]

In one of his earlier works on state formation, entitled *Reflections on the History of European State-Making*, Tilly made an 'analytical generalization' of the internal processes in the 'chain of causation' driving state-building:

> The formation of standing armies provided the largest single incentive to extraction and the largest single means of state coercion over the long run of European state-making. Recurrently we find a chain of causation running from (1) change or expansion in land armies to (2) new efforts to extract resources from the subject population to (3) the development of new bureaucracies and administrative innovations to (4) resistance from the subject population to (5) renewed coercion to (6) durable increases in the bulk or extractiveness of the state (Tilly, 1975, p. 73).

This "unilinear" logic can be summarized as: war – extraction – repression – state formation.

However, in *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990, 1992*, Tilly criticized this approach and frankly stated that:

> In fact, we implicitly substituted a new unilinear story - one running from war to extraction and repression to state formation - for the old one. We continued, more or less unthinkingly, to assume that European states followed one main path, the one marked by Britain, France, and Brandenburg-Prussia, and that the experiences of other states constituted attenuated or failed versions of the same processes. That was wrong (Tilly, 1992, p. 12).

Then, Tilly utilized an ideal-typical tri-linear approach, rather than a uni-linearity approach which explains state formation over a single standard path. In this approach, the existence or nonexistence of capital is determinant. Accordingly, these paths could be classified as follows:

1) *coercion-intensive*: the coercion-rich and capital-poor path of e.g. Brandenburg and Russia;

2) *capital-intensive*: the coercion-poor and capital-rich path of e.g. the Dutch Republic; and

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[6] As Tilly observed, it is evident that not all states that partook in wars grew stronger; however, the victorious states did. While winning a war solidifies a self-perpetuating path towards state formation, losing a war undermines the legitimacy of extracting sources from the society and propels the defeated into a trajectory of state weakening. In this regard, there is a strong whiff of ''social Darwinism in the war-centric account of state development'' (Centeno, 2002, p. 17).

3) *capitalized-coercion*: the more or less equal combination of coercion and capital path of e.g. France and England (Tilly, 1990, 1992).

In the first mode, regions were defined through the absence of cities and agricultural predominance. Here, rulers extended tax collection through coercion and constructed extensive bureaucratic systems for extraction. On the contrary, in the second mode, regions were defined through cities and commercial predominance. Here, rulers engaged in alliances with capitalists, and, instead of using force, they bargained. In the third intermediate mode, there was a balanced distribution of cities and densely populated large areas with agriculture becoming more commercialized. Here, rulers co-opted capitalists by granting them representation within governing bodies to set up strong military forces and convenient bureaucratic institutions.

Tilly asserts that rulers, in response to the strategic demands of military rivalry, used various strategies to generate revenues and manpower, contingent upon regionally distinct socioeconomic conditions. Nonetheless, from the 17th century onward, these distinct state formation paths began merging as the path of the 'capitalised coercion' was seen to be quite effective during times of war (Tilly, 1992, p. 31). In the end, it became a global model for the nation-state. As Tilly said:

> The increasing scale of war and the knitting together of the European state system through commercial, military, and diplomatic interaction eventually gave the war-making advantage to those states that could field standing armies; states having access to a combination of large rural populations, capitalists, and relatively commercialized economies won out. They set the terms of war, and their form of state became the predominant one in Europe. Eventually European states converged on that form: the national state (Tilly, 1992, p. 15).

Such states, France and England, achieved the status of 'fully fledged national states' ahead of others (Tilly, 1992, p. 30). They owned considerable resources in terms of both finances and personnel, rendering them the most formidable military forces (Ertman, 2017, p. 59).

2. 3. What States Do: Tilly's Four Different Activities Model

In a chapter published in 1985 titled "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," Tilly proposed that states typically engage in four main activities:

1) *War-Making*: Eliminating or neutralizing their own rivals outside the territories in which they have clear and continuous priority as wielders of force

2) *State-Making*: Eliminating or neutralizing their rivals inside those territories

3) *Protection*: Eliminating or neutralizing the enemies of their clients

4) *Extraction*: Acquiring the means of carrying out the first three activities: war-making, state-making, and protection (Tilly, 1985, p. 181).

It is evident that these four main state activities are interdependent and promote one another, as shown in Figure 1 (Tilly, 1985, pp. 182-183). However, it is critical to note that they all depend on the states' efforts to monopolize the use of violence in a given territory (Tilly, 1985, p. 172).

Figure 1: War-Making and State-Making Pattern
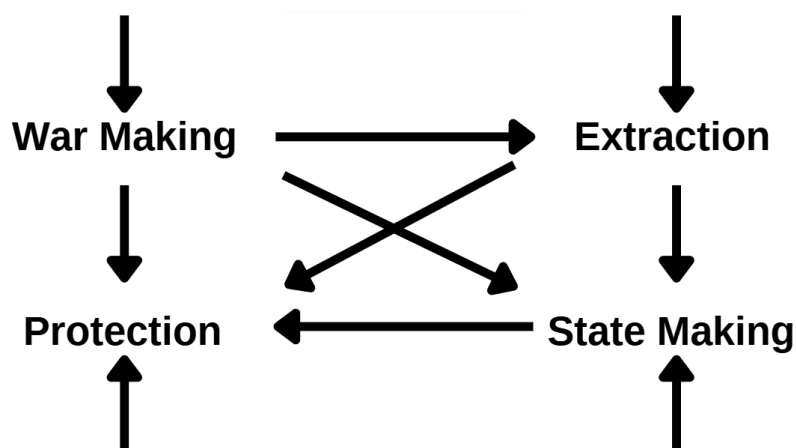
As per the explanation of Tilly (1985, p. 183) regarding how these activities depend on one another, initially, a ruler established dominance over a substantial area through effective warfare. Yet, war-making resulted in a more intense extraction of resources for military purposes, i.e., manpower, combatants, weaponry, provisions, shelter, logistics, materiel, and money, from the populace. Thus, a more robust military apparatus translated into a greater ability to mobilize resources. Successful extraction would mean eliminating, neutralizing, or co-opting local competitors, and disarming the society. This way, war-making brought about state-making. Extracting resources for war also necessitated organized structures like tax collection, law enforcement, courts, and financial management, which in turn strengthened the state's infrastructure, legal system, and fiscal capacity. Similarly, the growth of military organization through conscription, war-related industries, administrative bodies, and, at a later stage, educational institutions fostered the state apparatus. These structures served together to monitor potential rivals. Moreover, in the endeavour of warfare, resource mobilization, and state consolidation; rulers formed alliances with specific segments of society. Members of those social classes lent resources, offered technical expertise, or facilitated compliance among the rest of the populace with the aim of safeguarding themselves from their enemies. Consequently, a peculiar form of state emerged in Europe (Tilly, 1990, 1992).

At this point, it should be highlighted that Tilly argues that warfare and warfare preparations "unintentionally" caused the emergence of modern states. State formation unfolded over centuries as a sophisticated process. Hence, it was not possible for it to come out of rational calculations of rulers or state makers (Tilly, 1990, 1992).

2. 4. Organizational Residues and a Central Paradox in European State Formation

Akin to Hintze and Weber, Tilly draws attention to the post-war phase by referring to the significance of the "organizational residues" of war-making, namely bureaucracies and

standing armies (Ertman, 2017, p. 56). The general rule in Tilly's opinion is: "the more costly the activity, all other things being equal, the greater was the organizational residue" (Tilly 1985, p. 181). Resource extraction for military purposes would not have been possible only with coercion. Therefore, to increase efficacy during war times, rulers needed to persuade substantial segments of the population to endorse war efforts financially, logistically and personally. In this negotiation process, capital-intensive and coercion-intensive states followed different trajectories.

With the scarcity of available resources and an underdeveloped economy, collecting taxes became increasingly difficult; as collecting taxes became more and more difficult, a broader fiscal apparatus was required to do the tax collecting; and as the population decreased and the standing army grew larger, the bureaucracy required to support the army became very difficult to manage (Tilly, 1990, 1992). In the end, Tilly observed an interesting *paradox* in the European state formation: "The pursuit of war and military capacity, after having created national states as a sort of by-product, led to a civilianization of government and domestic politics" (Tilly, 1990, p. 206) because rulers had to grant the subjects, or the future citizens, more and more civil, political, and economic rights. So, the pressure and burdens of warfare enabled the emergence of parliamentarism and constitutionalism in Europe. In other words, "bargaining over the state's extractive claims produced rights, privileges, and protective institutions that had not previously existed" (Tilly, 1992, p. 103).

With the consolidation of extraction systems and the legal institutionalization of state-society relations, state power became centralized. Then, states expanded their authority over the citizens' daily affairs, who started to pay more and more in taxes and yielded to conscription for nationalist and patriotic military endeavours. The number of soldiers in feudal armies seldom exceeded a few thousand; however, it was often hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions in modern national armies. This situation necessitated the development

of a more intricate administrative apparatus and enhanced capabilities for revenue generation for wars, as explained above (Ames and Rapp, 1977). Besides, as the *citizen-armies* became more prevalent, there emerged the need for regular population censuses and supervision; states had to make institutional arrangements to manage the compulsory military service and the mobilization of the population through either force or consent (Tilly, 1990, 1992).

On the other hand, this process resulted in the citizens demanding from states more legal protection and greater welfare policies. So, states started to perform three more major activities, as shown in Figure 2 (Tilly, 1992, p. 97):

Adjudication: authoritative settlement of disputes among members of the subject population

Distribution: intervention in the allocation of goods among members of the subject population

Production: control of the creation and transformation of goods and services by members of the subject population (Tilly, 1992, pp. 96-97).

Figure 2: Relations Among Major Activities of States
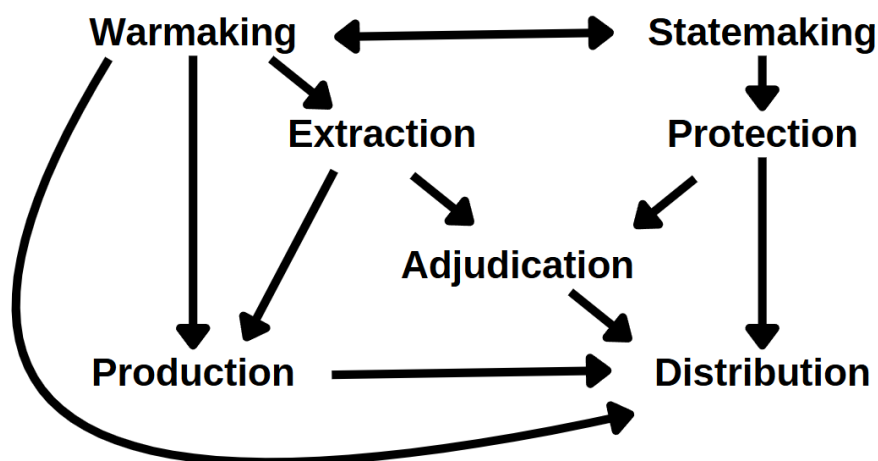
2. 5. Borders

State formation often ran parallel to the establishment of well-defined borders, namely circumscription. *Circumscription* involved states intensifying their authority over their territory: regulative restrictions began to be imposed on the flow of capital, goods, people, and ideas. States developed a comprehensive apparatus for centralized data collection and monitoring (through censuses, statistical agencies, inspectorates, and law enforcement). This extended their reach into various aspects of society, including infrastructure development, labour conditions, educational systems, agricultural practices, and a multitude of other domains (Linden, 2009, pp. 247-248). In addition to this, novel collective identities and cultural homogenization were consolidated inside the borders although no states came out of this process as completely homogenized. Among certain impositions by states are national languages, educational systems, and military service. In the meantime, states made use of tariffs and customs as part of their economic policies. Besides, they spared foreigners from the same rights as granted to their citizens and applied close surveillance to them (Tilly, 1992, pp. 115-116). This is how certain borderlines were drawn, and the differentiation between domestic and international politics became meaningful (Tilly, 1992, p. 70). Consequently, the modern international system was built up by mutually accepted like-units: sovereign national states.

3. Using Tilly's Theory in the Contemporary Context

Thus far, I have explained Tilly's theory on war-making and state-making. Tilly views states as centralized actors that have gained strength through the demands of warfare for resources and centralized power. Yet, this theory has some limitations and needs to be amended to understand the contemporary examples of state formation. Accordingly, I will now explain where Tilly's theory stands in the context of today's political order in which state formation is

subject to quite sophisticated processes. Moreover, we cannot disregard the agency of actors, namely their ideology, organizational structure, goals, and war-making capabilities to comprehend the state-making efforts of VNSAs better. Besides, legitimacy-building and identity-building are crucial aspects of modern nation-state building. Therefore, I will use Tilly's theory to show how the link between war-making and state-making would operate in the modern international order.

3. 1. International Context

Employing the bellicist framework and Tilly's theory in analysing the contemporary world requires considering the temporal realities of the international political landscape. Modern warfare now takes place within a pre-established international order, which presents both restrictions and opportunities in terms of state-making. In this regard, it is important to elaborate on how state-making through war-making can operate in the existing international context. As will be detailed below, the modern international political and economic system bears a stark contrast to the pre-nation-state environment in Europe. For this reason, there are many criticisms in the literature indicating that Tilly's ideas do not apply to the contemporary world (Delatolla, 2016, pp. 283-285). However, I assert that this shift does not undermine Tilly's central thesis, but points to the necessity of revealing the current conditions for the formation of state-like entities.

The modern international order adheres to a set of rules and norms, which prohibits changing or expanding borders through military conquest (Zacher, 2001). While official borders of sovereign states are recognized as legal and legitimate, any forceful attempts to alter these borders are deemed illegitimate. Thus, the principle of territorial integrity functions as a safeguard against probable existential threats (Atzili, 2012; Fazal, 2011). In other words, the current emphasis on territorial integrity protects states from extinction, even if their

sovereignty is more of a juridical nature than practical. This way, the current international system ensures their survival (Sorensen, 2001).

In addition to the international political system, the international economic system differs greatly from the economic system in early-modern Europe. Accordingly, it was Tilly's theory that demonstrated the significant relationship between capital and warfare. In this theory, the cyclical relationship between resource extraction and protective measures contributed to the emergence of modern nation-states. The greater the complexity of tax collection, the more sophisticated the institutional framework became necessary (Bräutigam, 2008, pp. 2-9). Yet, as Centeno emphasized, "for the 'coercion-extraction cycle' to begin, the relevant states must not have alternative sources of financing" (Centeno, 2002, p. 130). Currently, states can make use of external sources to fund their main activities instead of relying on direct taxes (Centeno, 2002, pp. 135-137). In this case, access to international capital could impede state development if it disincentivizes the mobilization of domestic sources (Leander, 2004). The same logic applies to "rents" like oil in the Middle East or diamonds in Africa (Hui, 2017, p. 272). The available rents offer an alternative to complex taxation systems since their extraction does not depend on institutional development (Karl, 1997, pp. 25-26). Besides, access to international capital and natural resources could contribute to a persistent disconnection between rulers and societies (Jung, 2017). So, in this kind of political economy, the delicate link between taxation and representation may become irrelevant (Beblawi, 1990; Luciani, 2005). Nevertheless, this possibility has been mostly ignored in the bellicist account (Jüde, 2022, p. 216).

On the other hand, in the contemporary world, VNSAs may turn into a quasi-state actor by establishing territorial control, developing administrative frameworks, and delivering essential services like security, judiciary, food, electricity, health care, schools, or public transport. To illustrate, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the Eritrean People's Liberation

Front (EPLF) established proto-state structures within conflict zones (Jüde, 2022, p. 211). Further, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) managed not only to maintain an administration and judiciary system but also provided the population under its control with public goods. It also turned to taxation, in addition to certain natural resources like oil, due to the financial burden of the war (Revkin, 2020). Similarly, the *Taliban* produced a comprehensive taxation system, which was imposed on mining and agriculture businesses as well, to fund its war efforts (Bezhan, 2020; Sufizada, 2020). However, as I said above, there is a lack of scholarly analysis of the quasi-state activities of non-state actors in the literature with a bellicist perspective. On the contrary, I claim that war and war preparations are key drivers of their transformation into state-like entities.

Wartime experiences can have formative effects if VNSAs successfully establish sophisticated organizational structures comparable to those of modern nation-states (Bereketeab, 2007, p. 407). Put differently, wars have no formative results if there is no institutionalization. Yet, VNSAs have to take the hegemonic international system into account while engaging in quasi-state activities. The modern international order does not allow the change of borders by force. Consequently, contemporary wars waged by VNSAs can only pave the way for the emergence of state-like entities within the modern international system rather than officially recognized independent sovereign states. Therefore, VNSAs aspiring to statehood usually prioritize changing their status first instead of pursuing a formal declaration of independence.

Finally, VNSAs, as potential violent state builders, must get the means of war and overcome organizational complexities. In this sense, direct resource extraction proves more advantageous for them in the process of creating state-like entities (Jüde, 2022). Since developing institutional capacities is crucial to obtaining the resources needed to wage war, VNSAs can build their own industries, impose certain personal and business taxes, collect

revenue from the diaspora systematically, and form an organized militia. Whereas Tilly's wielders of coercion were limited by resource constraints, today's wielders of coercion have more opportunities in this regard. For instance, access to international capital and rents may decrease the importance of economic self-sufficiency in war-making. Similar to states, VNSAs can receive international support due to several reasons. They can also generate significant revenue from the export of valuable resources. In such circumstances, establishing multifaceted institutions for resource extraction may not be that appealing. Besides, VNSAs relying on international capital and rents are less inclined to penetrate societies by forging closer ties with the domestic population (Hazen, 2013, pp. 70-71; Schlichte, 2009, pp. 139-143). Then, they may prefer to refrain from the complicated effort of state-building, and war may not have any formative effect.

3. 2. Agency

The evolving international landscape offers a broad range of options available to actors across various contexts. There are numerous ways to respond to external pressures, and war-making, thus state-making, is one of them. In other words, there is no automatic connection between warfare and state formation (Hui, 2017, p. 268). In this sense, one criticism towards the bellicist approach and Tilly's theory is that they are historically structuralist, overlooking the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of agency (Kurtz, 2009; Laitin, 2007; Spruyt, 2017). For example, Kurtz (2009) underscores the fact that Peru and Chile embarked on state formation under strikingly similar conditions, but whilst elite bargaining in Chile fostered a state with a robust infrastructure, landowners in Peru obstructed similar advancements, fearing a militarized indigenous population. Hence, in order to refine our comprehension of state formation, we must incorporate a nuanced examination of agency and the micro-level mechanisms at play, which will illuminate why and how specific actors prevail over rivals (Spruyt, 2017, pp. 74-75, 89).

According to Tilly (1985), none of the political actors or organized crime leaders had a particular advantage over the others at the beginning. They competed on equal footing. The ability to exert superior coercive power was the sole criterion for continued existence. Thus, state formation emerged exclusively through a process where the entity with less power became subordinated to a more dominant one. From this point of view, neither divine monarchs nor leaders of national liberation movements possessed distinctive qualities that definitively elevated their position above potential challengers (Spruyt, 2017, pp. 77-78). For this reason, as will be discussed at greater length below, the lack of ideational factors diminishes Tilly's powerful insights. We cannot overlook the ideological advantages a specific actor might enjoy during the war-making and state-making process.

Reno (1998, 2003) points out that the politics of African warlords deviates from the European model of state formation. Warlords focus on accumulating personal wealth through illegal means rather than establishing administrative mechanisms for resource extraction and the provision of public goods. They maintain a patrimonial and nepotist governance. These warlords also eschew building social support. Instead, they cultivate patronage networks utilizing natural sources and international capital. Accordingly, warlords cannot be considered as state builders.

Similarly, Grzymala-Busse (2008) argues for a critical distinction between state resource acquisition, as proposed by Tilly, and the appropriation of resources by state agents. Predatory regimes usually engage in systematic erosion of state institutions to facilitate the extraction of resources for private benefit (Grzymala-Busse, 2008, p. 639). In instances where the pursuit of personal gain supersedes state-building efforts, the resulting political entity deviates significantly from the characteristics of the modern state. Despite exhibiting organizational structures, such an entity functions more akin to a mafia organization (Sorensen, 2001, p. 351).

To sum up, the nature and purpose of violence matters. Of course, as Tilly (1985, 1990, 1992) mentioned, we cannot assume that warfare in pre-modern Europe aimed to establish the modern state. The concept of modern nation-state was not conceivable for Tilly's wielders of coercion prior to its emergence. However, today's wielders of coercion, particularly ethno-nationalist VNSAs with territorial aspirations such as the PKK, seek statehood. Consequently, we cannot neglect their goals when they are fighting. In this regard, as I will demonstrate in this thesis through the PYD case, not only the pre-war conditions but also ideological and organizational preparations for war should be taken into account when analysing the quasi-state activities of VNSAs.

3. 3. Legitimacy

As I touched upon above, Tilly does not pay much attention to the legitimacy aspect of ruling. He asserts that the need to legitimize power emerged only after the monopolization of violence. Accordingly, in the first stage of state-building, monopoly over physical force was formed through the elimination of rivals. Then, in the second stage, this monopoly transitioned into a public responsibility, managed by a network of political institutions accountable to the people. In this stage, rules and norms were established so that the central authority could be rationalized, legalized, and justified (Elias, 1994, pp. 345-355).

The formation of a modern state extends beyond securing monopoly over violence. It necessitates a progressive shift in the underlying societal norms and institutions that legitimize this control as well. However, the monopolization of violence and its legitimization are not necessarily separate or sequential phenomena; rather, they are intertwined and interdependent processes. The legitimacy of a power holder cannot be merely attributed to its possession of power. In order for a state to be consolidated, its governance must be seen as legitimate by the people, mostly through a social contract. Otherwise, reliance on coercion for

extraction of sources would undermine war-making capabilities (Sorensen, 2001, p. 341). Hence, possessing legitimacy, or "right to rule," is key to fostering compliance during the state-building process (Holden, 2017, p. 255, 259).

In light of the tumultuous past of state-building in Europe, Weber defines the state as "the monopoly of the *legitimate* use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber, 1991, p. 78). So, as opposed to Tilly, Weber emphasizes the legitimacy as a vital factor differentiating political authority from simple domination. Accordingly, his emphasis on legitimacy sheds light on the ideational underpinnings of state formation (Jung, 2017, pp. 223-226).

According to Weber, states are formed when a territorial community faces an external threat, prompting its members to collectively take up arms in self-defence. The constant need for defence against external threats gives rise to a political organization perceived as possessing a certain kind of legitimacy (Weber, 1978, p. 905). Weber also thinks that the legitimization of violence at first emerged from the need to punish disobedience and cowardice, which could harm the collective war efforts. Then, military dominance and effective assertion of legitimacy solidified the temporary apparatuses of warfare into permanent state structures (Weber, 1978, p. 906).

In the context of modern statehood, Weber claims that compliance with political institutions is rooted in legal or rational authority. In other words, it depends on the belief "in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rule to issue commands" (Jung, 2017, p. 226). Such a modern form of authority works within the framework of established legal procedures, which dictate the allocation and application of political power by rulers in standardized mechanisms. These formal mechanisms separate modern authority from its historical antecedents. Unlike modern authority that relies on impersonal rules and procedures, traditional legitimacy is rooted in personal connections and the "established belief

in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (Weber, 1968, p. 215). In short, holding the monopoly over legitimate violence in a particular territory and the population inhabiting that territory requires a structured administration in the contemporary world. However, it does not have to be a 'rational-legal' bureaucracy. A 'modern state administration' can encompass diverse governance structures, adapting its principles and traditions to specific contexts (Sharma, 2017, pp. 216-217).

The ties between rulers and the administrative and security branches are forged through both material benefits and symbolic legitimacy patterns. For this reason, Weber clearly emphasized the importance of legitimacy during the state-building processes and distinguished between its rational and symbolic dimensions. To get a better grasp on the former, Mann's concept of "infrastructural power" would be useful as well. As I explained above, he highlighted that modern states, empowered by their robust infrastructure, extend their reach throughout society, implement public policies, and maintain the monopoly over the use of legitimate violence in a given territory (Mann, 1984, 2008, 2014). The organizational capacity of a state correlates with its effectiveness in delivering public services, which in return strengthens its legitimacy.

On the other hand, a political authority's legitimacy is also embedded in the cultural and symbolic order of the society. Therefore, I think Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic capital" would help us to comprehend the latter one better. He refers to symbolic capital as: "the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291). So, it provides credibility, recognition, and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1986). The essence of symbolic capital lies in the esteem and recognition accorded by others (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 389). In this way, it shapes how agents construct their understanding of the environment they inhabit, thereby influencing their self-conceptions and identities. Hence, the symbolic power contest revolves around defining and

classifying the categories that affect our comprehension of what is socially acceptable and legitimate. Accordingly, Bourdieu sees the state as the "central bank of symbolic capital" (Dodge, SEPAD Interventions, 2022). However, this does not indicate that raw power simply masks itself with symbolic forms. Instead, symbolic power represents the culmination of a meticulous transfiguration of power (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 208). In this manner, symbolic sources of domination are as significant as the material sources.

3. 3. 1. Ideational Factors in Legitimacy-Building Processes

As I elaborated on above, Tilly prioritizes material factors like coercion and capital in explaining state formation and disregards ideational factors. Therefore, he provides a materialist explanation for the conduct of war and states' relations with territory and population. However, the development of the modern state is not only about monopolizing violence and building institutions; it is also a conceptual development. Such a constructivist approach offers a useful lens for understanding how different forms of rule gain legitimacy, how power is maintained, and the intricate bargaining processes between states and their citizens. With the conceptual transformation of sovereignty and the imagination of nations, modern states and national identities were constructed. Hence, we should take both material dynamics and abstract dynamics of state-building into account together.

Tilly suggests that states function basically as organized protection rackets. Accordingly, the strongest actor will be the best provider of protection so that people willingly offer their allegiance and rely on this actor for safety. In other words, Tilly's view implies that any actor with sufficient means of coercion could form a state, legitimize its rule, and extract resources from the population. Yet, state makers are not mere leaders of organized bandits; they wield unique ideological instruments unavailable to others (Spruyt, 2017, pp. 85, 91-93).

3. 3. 2. Territorialisation of Sovereignty

In the Weberian tradition, the territorial definition of sovereignty is one of the principal characteristics of the modern state. Territorial sovereignty depends on a state's control over a defined area, making all residents subject to the laws of its rule. A sovereign's power is limited to its territory, and it acknowledges no competing authority within its territory (Spruyt, 2017, pp. 83-84). Defining sovereignty by fixed territories marks a critical juncture in modern politics, altering the nature and significance of the territory itself substantively.

Territory is generally viewed as a static concept, with the same meaning across history. Similarly, Tilly considers territory in terms of material benefits such as control, competition, population, and taxation. For him, "states always grow out of competition for control over territory and population" (Tilly, 1992, p. 4). Thus, Tilly explains state formation as a process where rulers build coercive forces, pacify the people, solidify borders, and create a distinct separation between internal and external politics (Tilly, 1992, p. 70). Through territorial reorganization, states advanced their defensive mechanism, optimized resource extraction, and expanded their authority. In this process, a state's authority gradually transitioned from certain locations like towns and forts, which used to be the main places of the royal authority, to encompassing the entire territory, with the capital city acting as the central point of power.

On the other hand, the core of a modern and sovereign territorial state is based on a fundamental change in the concept of territory (or *space*) (Strandsbjerg, 2017, pp. 127-128). Nevertheless, Tilly and the bellicist tradition mostly overlooked this point. As an Italian jurist underscored, regarding the development of the modern state, "the state does not have a territory, it is a territory" (Poggi, 1990, p. 22). To put it differently, the state-territory relationship has historically evolved from a state (a person) owning land to the territory defining the very concept of the state (Strandsbjerg, 2017, p. 129). In this case, defining the

state through its territory necessitates examining how territory is socially constructed and politicized in a particular historical context (Bartelson, 1995, p. 40).

To understand why territory matters politically, we need to grasp the meaning attributed to it. The shift from medieval to modern rule involved a transformation in how territory was conceptualized. This included the homogenization of territorial authority and the crystallization of political boundaries (Branch, 2011). This epistemic change influenced how polities, sovereignty and territory were understood. As Kagan and Schmidt suggested, maps played a key role in defining borders, managing land use, designing and rationalizing tax systems, and planning military strategies (Kagan and Schmidt, 2007, p. 662). So, they empowered rulers with unprecedented control (Strandsbjerg, 2017, pp. 152-153). Cartography[7] thrived alongside state formation, serving both wartime needs and preparations for future conflicts. In the meantime, mapping is not only about drawing boundaries for material benefits, but it also shapes our perception of political space (Elden, 2005, p. 11). The assumption of a uniform space within a defined territory leads to its perception as homogenous (Strandsbjerg, 2017, p. 142). Accordingly, maps and borders are not just lines; they shape collective mentalities, foster territorial identities, and enable novel socio-political constructions. As state makers were struggling to monopolize the power, they became more concerned with mapping projects. In this way, they produced a specific knowledge of territory, established a new reality, and reconfigured the territory's relationship with the society. Consequently, the territorialization of sovereignty and the formation of modern states have been discursive processes as well.

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[7] Strandsbjerg (2017) shows that *cartography* reshaped the landscape, redefined space, and ultimately played an essential role in the rise of territorial sovereignty.

3. 3. 3. Making Nations

As mentioned above, there is a symbiotic connection between state-building and nation-building (Malesevic, 2012, p. 314). Nationalist discourse fuelled the rise of modern states, fostering a sense of national identity and constructing the "citizen" suitable for the nation. Thus, nationalist ideology formed the philosophical basis for the modern state (Malesevic, 2020). Throughout nation-building processes, various symbols such as language, flags, maps, images, songs, cultural ceremonies, sporting events and so on have been utilized to concretize nationalist imaginations. Without the normative justification of coercive power through nationalism, modern states would resemble traditional or patrimonial states. Although the bellicist perspective argues persuasively that warfare has played a decisive role in the development of modern states, it does not elaborate much on the role of nationalism in state-building mechanisms and the bond between war and nationalist ideology. Therefore, I stress the significance of warfare in terms of contributing to the strength of national identities in the contemporary world, which in turn increases the strength of states.

Tilly mentions "national states," implying the concept of nation and national identity but does not directly explore how identities form in *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (1990, 1992). He maintains that nationalism came late in the process of European state formation. States instrumentalized it to homogenize the society and mobilize public support when they consolidated their rule in a certain territory and implemented conscription and direct taxation in the 19th century (Tilly, 1992, pp. 114-117). Hence, nationalism is a by-product of state-building for Tilly (1996). Nations were not formed autonomously; state-building mechanisms made them. Meanwhile, according to Tilly, variations in state formation led to two different forms of nationalism: the *state enforcing* and the *state seeking* nationalism. The former was a top-down process through which a central leadership intended to assimilate the population and consolidate control; the latter was a bottom-up process driven by the elites who advocated

for ethnic minority rights. These elites constructed a shared narrative of historical hardships and resistance against external dominance and sought autonomy or a separate state (Tilly, 1993, pp. 46-49).

While the history of warfare goes back thousands of years, nationalism is clearly a modern phenomenon. Rulers of pre-modern times went to war over land acquisition, economic gain, dynastic disputes, broken marriage pacts, personal insults, and a multitude of other reasons. To fund wars against internal and external rivals, they mobilized resources, both manpower and finances, from the population. Yet, the modern warfare is heavily influenced by nationalism. Put differently, modern states increased their war-making capabilities as they promoted nationalism and recruited nearly entire nations during modern wars. In this process, the military itself became a ''school for the nation'' (Howard, 1976, pp. 94-115; Weber, 1976, pp. 292-302; Posen, 1993; Porter, 1994, pp. 19-20, 121-145; Krebs, 2004). Additionally, schools and mass media became critical tools to build a common national identity and to create a more homogenous society (Rokkan, 1975, pp. 570-571; Calhoun, 2012, pp. 19, 97-99). Therefore, the concept of sovereignty gained a "national" meaning as well in the modern world, and states organized intense nationalist campaigns to justify their use of violence.

The concept of nation is built on the idea of an imaginary close-knit community, overlooking any existing social and economic disparities. This feeling of fraternity led millions to voluntarily fight and die in modern wars. Memorials like *Unknown Soldiers* around the globe powerfully embody these nationalist imaginings (Anderson, 2006, pp. 7-9). However, the bellicist account, which focuses mainly on macro-level material factors, does not pay adequate attention to the role of nationalism in the contemporary world. Meanwhile, nationalism is part of the micro-social dynamics, too. Nationhood is constantly reproduced through everyday practices, conversations, stories, and social events (Billig, 1995; Fox and

Miller-Idriss, 2008; Skey, 2011). This way, nationalism permeates all social classes, acting as a powerful force that connects micro-level solidarities to broader national narratives.

Last but not least, war can help create a more homogenous society by promoting a sense of national identity and building a community through a shared struggle (Shapiro, 1997, pp. 52-54; Neumann, 1996, pp. 156-157; Tilly, 1992, p. 116). It can stimulate national identity sentiments by constructing the sense of 'we-ness' (Barnett, 1995, p. 497). At this stage, it is a must that the "other" be defined as the enemy (Simmel, 1964). In this regard, war can heighten ethnic and national consciousness, solidify internal cohesion, and contribute to state formation. Taylor and Botea (2008, p. 34) see war as a driver of national identity and consider nation-making as an important state-building mechanism. Comparing the cases of Afghanistan and Vietnam, they claim that Tilly's ideas about war-making and state-making remain relevant today in the presence of two conditions, p. 1) the existence of a core ethnic group; and 2) the amalgamation of war and revolution with a unifying nationalist ideology (Taylor and Botea, 2008). In other words, political and national coherence is crucial for the consequence of war-making in terms of state-making (Taylor and Botea, 2008, p. 28). Besides, revolutionary movements might be better able to gather resources from people and integrate previously excluded segments of the population into wartime efforts (Skocpol, 1988; Walt, 1996, pp. 22-30). Their ideological commitment can help them to control and wield state coercion in the long term (Gurr, 1988; O'Kane, 2000). As a result, ethno-nationalist and revolutionary VNSAs, like the PYD, may have certain advantages over other actors in the current state-making endeavour.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complicated dynamics of state-building and the relationship between war-making and state-making. In the context of this particular topic, Tilly's theory is a notable source by which to explain how states are formed through warfare. This theory regards war to be the main factor shaping state formation. Accordingly, there emerges the need for centralized power and military advancement during the times of war, which ultimately helps states come into being.

However, it is evident that Tilly's theory needs adjustment in order to comprehend the state formation in the modern world. The current international order does not allow for the changing of the borders through conquest, and keeping the borderlines intact is a significant principle. Moreover, factors such as the availability of rents and external funding change the calculations of today's wielders of coercion. VNSAs, as potential violent state builders in the contemporary world, can develop state-like entities inside the existing borders. Yet, the intricate dynamics of the modern international politics render these entities complicated.

Furthermore, Tilly's emphasis on material factors overlooks the significance of legitimacy and ideational factors in state formation. At this point, referring to Weber is crucial. According to him, legitimacy is not the same thing as mere domination and is a key element that distinguishes states from a random forceful power structure. Through public acceptance, a state strengthens its ability to function effectively; this cannot be achieved only through military dominance or providing material benefits, but symbolic capital is required as well for a state to be credible and respected. Additionally, in the context of modern state formation, the concept of territory also gains a new, deeper meaning. Whilst, according to Tilly, territory is just a tool for control and resource extraction, it is a defining characteristic of national identity in the modern state formation that is enhanced by maps and borders. Accordingly,

nationalist ideologies can justify state power while war strengthens the national identity in a self-reinforcing cycle.

All in all, it is of no doubt that Tilly's theory is a valuable contribution to the field to understand how war-making has historically caused state-making. Yet, the complexities of the modern international order demand a more nuanced approach where the new international political dynamics, various motivations of actors, legitimacy, ideology, and the evolving concept of territory all should be taken into account. By acknowledging and dealing with these parameters, we can gain more profound insights into the ever-changing nature of the relationship between war-making and state-making and the quasi-state activities of VNSAs.

Chapter 2: Ideological and Organizational Trajectory of the PKK: From Kurdish Marxist-Leninism to Democratic Confederalism

Introduction

This chapter examines the ideological trajectory of the PKK, particularly in terms of its approach towards the concept of nation-state. Since its establishment in 1978, the PKK has been a VNSA aiming to establish an independent Kurdish state. However, following the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the PKK altered its discourse and strongly denounced the nation-state model. Allegedly abandoning the claim for independence, the PKK adopted a new narrative that emphasized radical democracy, egalitarianism, anti-capitalism, minority rights, and gender and environmental issues based on the teachings of Öcalan. Its project for "Democratic Autonomy" and/or "Democratic Confederalism" envisages a stateless form of governance or a democracy instead of the modern nation-state system. Thus, the PKK's politics is claimed to be beyond the state and is an interesting example of post-nationalist, post-territorial, and post-sovereign politics in a world of nation-states.

On the contrary, I argue that the PKK only inverted the former self-determination thesis. The Kurdish identity and nationalism are still the cornerstones of its ideology and struggle. Its changing stance on the concept of the nation-state is more of a continuity rather than a rupture. The PKK still pursues its original goal with different organizational structures and methods. Hence, its shift regarding the notion of nation-state is a strategic and pragmatic act aiming to legitimize the PKK within the current international system, which identifies it as a terrorist organization and considers its separatist activities illegitimate.

To support my argument, I analysed the writings of Öcalan and the PKK's manifestos, brochures, journals, propaganda websites, and public statements. Even though Öcalan is imprisoned in the İmralı Prison, he is still the leader of the PKK and continues to shape the theoretical framework of the PKK's cause and its organizational structure. Texts and books he wrote on social and political topics in prison and the letters and messages he sends the PKK meetings are the backbone of the PKK's ideology.

With this chapter, I aim to elaborate on the roots and main parameters of Öcalan's philosophy, which are crucial to understanding the PYD's ideological background and its quasi-state activities in northeast Syria because of its organic ties with the PKK through the KCK (*Koma Cevakên Kurdistan* / Union of Communities in Kurdistan). The PYD claims that it implements "Democratic Confederalism" based on Öcalan's views, as I will illustrate throughout this thesis. Previously, Öcalan's ideas were abstract theoretical ideas only affecting PKK and its sister parties, but now they are appearing in northeast Syria. This situation makes the PYD rule a special case for the PKK, as I mentioned in the Introduction. The PKK, as a VNSA which had been trying to establish a Kurdish political entity for many decades, turned into a quasi-state actor in a different context through its Syrian branch, the PYD. In this sense, this chapter is useful to grasp why and how an anarcho-socialist organization engages in quasi-state activities. Put differently, it will help us comprehend why there exists a profound dissonance between the PYD/PKK's discourse and actions.

The first section will focus on the emergence of the PKK considering its original ideology, methods, and structure. In this section, I will show how the PKK nationalized Marxist-Leninist ideology to reach its goals. The second section will discuss the reasons for the ideological change of the PKK from Kurdish Marxist-Leninism to Democratic Confederalism. The third section will explain the transfiguration of the PKK with a different ideology and organizational structure after the imprisonment of Öcalan. The last section will demonstrate

that the KCK is a pan-Kurdish political project and a quasi-state structure. Besides, it will reveal the relations between the PKK and its sister parties, including the PYD.

1. The Emergence of the PKK: Its Ideology, Method and Structure

> *Marxist movements and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance, i.e., nationalist. There is nothing to suggest that this trend will not continue*
> *(Eric Hobsbawm, 1977, p. 13).*

The emergence of the PKK coincided with the anti-colonial national liberation movements during the Cold War. These movements aspired to use protracted guerrilla war and gain state power, and then, make thorough socio-political and economic changes (Arrighi et al., 1986; Derlugian, 1998). Similarly, the PKK identified itself as a socialist party to abolish social classes employing a two-step strategy: form a new state and create a society without any classes (PKK, 1978). In other words, the PKK wished to establish an independent revolutionary socialist "Kurdistan," as per the founding manifesto of the PKK, *Kürdistan Devrimi'nin Yolu* (The Path of Kurdistan Revolution) (Öcalan, 1978).

When it was founded in 1978, the PKK embraced a Marxist-Leninist ideology (Manafy, 2005, p. 108). It was Marxist as it used the class revolution as a base, and Leninist as a leader group was taking on the vanguardist role of steering the revolution. This ideology matched up with the Cold War conditions and the support from the Soviet Union. However, it should be emphasized that the PKK mainly tried to "nationalize" or "Kurdicize" the ideology of socialism to receive the Kurdish people's support. As Özcan (2006, p. 20) suggested, the PKK was:

> a *Kurdicized* copy of those customary communist parties that undertake a nation's 'national' liberation as an 'initial stage' of the ultimate socialist revolution. The ideology by which the PKK formulates this initiative's aims and objectives is a Middle Eastern translation of traditional Marxist socialism.

The PKK regarded Marxist-Leninist ideology as the most effective way of reaching its goals.

Öcalan summarized the group's ideology as follows during this time:

> We tried to apply Marxism-Leninism into the conditions of our country…
> And to render the liberation of our country under the leadership of a Marxist
> movement had come into the view at that time… We recognized the reality
> of our country as a colony and left the rest to Marxism-Leninism... We kept
> our independence and reached the stage for a written formulation of our
> theory. These are our own products, not copied (Akkaya, 2016, p. 169).

The PKK's Kurdish identity always constituted the base for its cause. As Öcalan said:

> Kurdistan is like a corpse, which lost its all vitality and energy… [and the
> only way to save Kurdistan], is to implement Marxist-Leninist ideology in a
> proper and creative way… without the adaptation of Marxism-Leninism into
> the reality of our country [Kurdistan] from top to bottom, it is impossible to
> take a step further (Öcalan, 1984, p. 57, 77).

Therefore, socialist and Marxist expressions among the PKK members do not necessarily

point out that "Marxism, not Kurdish nationalism, has always defined the PKK" (Radu, 2002,

p. 48).

The PKK aimed to challenge the authority of those states that ruled over Kurdish-majority

areas and found an independent Kurdish state employing guerrilla warfare. As stated in its

foundation document, the PKK:

> ...aims to establish a Democratic People's Dictatorship in an Independent
> and Unified Kurdistan and eventually to create a classless society. The
> Kurdistan National Liberation Struggle, which is conducted by the PKK, is
> an inseparable segment of the world socialist revolution strengthened by the
> socialist countries, national liberation movements and working-class
> movements (PKK, 1978).

To realize this goal,

> The PKK movement will follow, before anything else, its own ideological-
> political line, namely the line based on Marxist-Leninist ideology... By
> injecting Marxist-Leninist ideology into veins of the state [Kurdish state], it
> will reach its targets. The PKK trusts such an ideology (Serxwebûn, 1983, p.
> 18).

The PKK's founding members believed the "Kurdistan is a colony" thesis so that they would follow the national liberation model (Öcalan, 2013, pp. 222-248). For instance, in one of the seminars, Öcalan stated:

> Kurdistan is a classic colony in its kind and its existence even had been denied and policies of annihilation and assimilation have been in practice. The only way of its liberation would be through a prolonged popular armed struggle.

According to Can Yüce, one of the PKK's chief ideologues, this thesis was "the first cement of Kurdistan's revival" (Yüce, 1999a, p. 120).

Moreover, as Yeğen underlined, "the PKK burst into Kurdish and Turkish politics as an organization perceiving and using armed struggle as the main instrument of its political fight" (Yeğen, 2016, p. 370). From the very first moment, it believed that "everything might be only possible with weapons" (Öcalan, 1998, pp. 96-97). Hüseyin Topgider, who was a member of the *Apocular* (Apoists)[8] group, explained this situation as follows:

> The PKK understood well the psychology of the Kurdish people… They understood that the people are weak, so they need guns. The other groups kept seeing these things as something in the future, and their approach was that first you think, argue, and develop a consciousness and then organize. But in that period in Turkey, you needed to be armed to accomplish anything (Marcus, 2007, p. 40).

The Kurdish issue was also a "class" issue for the PKK, along with being a "colonial" issue. It put forward that only "progressive powers" could save the so-called "Kurdistan" from this double oppression. Hence, the PKK would get organized as a working-class movement and carry out a revolution to form a new social structure (Bila, 2016, pp. 21-22). The proletariat was "the most revolutionary class" for the PKK, and it was the vanguard of the revolution. On the other hand, villagers were the ally of the proletariat. The PKK's role was to make sure that the Kurdish proletariat, villagers, and students were unified as a class and they could get mobilized in the face of "Turkish colonialism" and oppressive Kurdish feudal landlords

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[8] They were referred to as *Apocular* by other Kurdish and Turkish groups, meaning the supporters of Apo, referring to their leader *Apo* 'Abdullah Öcalan' (Marcus, 2007).

(Serxwebûn, 1981, p. 9). With this discourse, the PKK refashioned the political language of the socialist national liberation movements for the context of the Kurdish region and people.

Following its foundation, the PKK tried to reinforce its power in the Kurdish national struggle and gain a hegemonic role. As Öcalan once said, "People think that our first bullet has been shot on the head of our enemy, the Turkish state soldiers. But I say, we have shot our first bullet on the head of the Kurds" (Saeed, 2014, p. 118). The PKK was trying to annihilate the opposing groups. Selim Çürükkaya, a PKK militant, explained why they chose to fight against other Kurds:

> We believed in socialism, and it was a Stalin type of socialism we believed in… The 1920s were our model, how the Russian Communist Party forbade all other parties and got rid of the cliques. We saw this as all positive and we wanted to do the same (Marcus, 2007, pp. 41-42).

Accordingly, the PKK questioned the legitimacy of other Kurdish leaders and political movements. The aim was to portray the PKK as the only genuine organization that would voice the Kurdish issue. According to Öcalan, "the road from nothingness to freedom" would only be advanced by the PKK's efforts (Öcalan, 1995, p. 124). He thought the imperialist countries and their local allies, including traditional Kurdish tribal leaders, were targeting the PKK's socialist revolution. So, adopting the dictatorial methods against these "internal threats" in a Stalinist manner was a must if the revolution was to be preserved (Öcalan, 1988, pp. 131-132).

As mentioned above, Öcalan argued that the only way to break the colonization and assimilation methods was to "use power" and fight against colonizers and those who worked for colonizers (Öcalan, 1983, pp. 142-144). He was inspired by Engels' works titled "*Anti-Duhring*" and "*The Role of Force in History*". According to Engels, the use of force has both progressive/revolutionary and counterrevolutionary/reactionary qualities. The use of force by colonized societies to get freed of the colonizers' oppression is a progressive, revolutionary,

legitimate and historical necessity. As per such Marxist doctrine, Öcalan asserted that colonization in class societies was maintained using force, so it should be annihilated by the same method. With this framing, Öcalan tried to show the PKK's violence as a progressive, revolutionary, legitimate, and historical necessity (Bila, 2016, p. 24; Türk, 2020, pp. 466-471). For example, in his book titled *Kürdistan'da Zorun Rolü* (The Role of Force in Kurdistan), Öcalan openly stated that "the armed struggle" and the "revolutionary violence" were the most important means of reaching the target of an independent Kurdish state:

> The main method of struggle in the national liberation revolution of Kurdistan is the armed struggle. Of course, there are many other important methods of struggle which will be used in our revolution. But all of them will be used in connection with the armed struggle, and they will be kept subservient to it... In Kurdistan, not depending upon the armed struggle, the proletarian party cannot exist. Without waging the armed struggle, the proletariat of Kurdistan cannot be a class for itself (Öcalan, 1983, pp. 286-287).

In line with armed struggle and propaganda, the strategy chosen by the PKK was the "Protracted War" (Öcalan, 1993, p. 124). This strategy consists of three stages foreseen by Mao (PKK, 1983, pp. 302-305). According to the three-stage formula, the first stage is the strategic defence which aims to break the bonds between the legitimate state and the people. In this stage, guerrilla-style activities should be developed. Fear and terror are to be spread among people to weaken their bonds with the state. In the second stage, guerrilla war is to improve, and armed balance is to be redressed. After the strategic balance is established, the third stage, namely the strategic offence, follows.

To reach these targets, the PKK suggested an organizational structure as follows:

> We need a political organization under guidance of the scientific socialism, a national liberation front under the leadership of that political organization, and a powerful, fighting people's army affiliated with this front. This organization of the party-front-army should be based on the mass organizations of the workers, peasants, craftsman/tradesmen, youth and women (Öcalan, 1978, p. 185).

Regarding how armed struggle and political struggle affect each other, the PKK stated that:

> The armed struggles which do not develop under the leadership of a party are always condemned to deviation from their aims and finally to degeneration. In this respect, this is our principle: "*The Party commands arms and it is never allowed that the arms command the Party*" (PKK, 1983, p. 293).

Therefore, the PKK went for a trilateral structure: "party-front-army". This structure embodied all ideological, political, and armed activities. There was no higher body than the party that could make decisions, manage the strategy of this structure and determine the army's actions. It was to play a leading role in the revolution. The PKK took on this role since it was "vital" to "the existence of the Kurdish people" and "for a revolution" that would save the Kurds from "oppression" (Öcalan, 1993, p. 345).

Inspired by Lenin, the PKK claimed that anyone who weakened the party's discipline would be serving the bourgeoisie against the proletariat (Özcan, 1999, p. 69). The second article of the PKK's founding code (1978) goes:

> The duty of a member is to work to the best of their ability according to the discipline, agenda, tactic, and strategy of the party to realize its goals and targets, not to expose the party's secrets, to try to research the party's political consciousness, theory and revolutionism, to work on the essentials of criticism and self-criticism, to keep nothing secret from the party, to avoid pride and adventurousness…

Just as other Kurdish leaders and political movements that could function as an alternative to the PKK were suppressed based on the doctrines of Stalin, intraparty critics were silenced. Many PKK members were executed since they were alleged to be collaborators to the Turkish state or US imperialism (Marcus, 2007).

The front was defined as people moulded with the party's ideology. According to Öcalan, any guerrilla movement could not win the war without winning the people's hearts (Öcalan, 1993, pp. 189-190). The front was to direct the politics on the ground and to teach the organization's

doctrine. Its name was ERNK (Kurdistan National Liberation Front / *Eniye Rizgariye Navata Kurdistan*).

Army, on the other hand, was the unit consisting of militants that handled the armed struggle. It was the actor who had the responsibility to protect the people from oppression. First, the HRK (*Heza Rizgarîya Kurdistan /* Kurdistan Liberation Forces), was founded in 1984 and then ARGK (*Artesa Rizgarîya Gelê Kurdistan /* Kurdistan Peoples' Liberation Army) in 1986 to build a state (Özcan, 1999, p. 65).

Finally, it should be emphasized that Öcalan has been ruling the PKK as the single unquestionable leader. An internal promotion system has been implemented by the PKK based on loyalty to the leader and his values. In the PKK's Third Congress in 1986, it was stressed that Öcalan is "above everyone else in the position of just, infallible, and unassailable judge" (Marcus, 2007, p. 109). So, Öcalan enjoys a position in which he cannot be questioned or criticized by anyone within the party (Kasaba, 2008, p. 351). The PKK members and sympathizers refer to him as the "*Leadership"*. Put differently, Öcalan is referred to as an institution, not a person. He is frequently likened to the "*Sun*". In this analogy, the PKK's organizational structure resembles the planetary system. While the sun is Öcalan, parties, institutions and militants are planets moving around this sun (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013, pp. 165-167). As a result, the ideological and organizational structure of the PKK and its affiliated organizations are based on a leadership cult, suppression of dissenting voices and use of violence.

2. Reasons for Change and Continuity through breaks

As the Cold War came to an end, the PKK's ideology began to change. While some studies dealt with the external factors for the ideological change of the PKK, others pointed to the importance of the internal factors. The fall of the Soviet Union was among the most significant causes since it shifted international and regional political contexts (Manafy, 2005; Özcan, 2006; Gunes, 2012). Secondly, the positive approach of the major Turkish political parties in the 1990s towards the "Kurdish reality", particularly then-Prime Minister Turgut Özal's efforts to solve the Kurdish issue, contributed to this change (White, 2000; Pope and Pope, 1997). Thirdly, the PKK faced a deadlock in its struggle and mobilization due to the Turkish Armed Forces' successful counterinsurgency operations and measures (Gunes, 2012; Aydın and Emrence, 2015; Akkaya, 2020). In other words, the PKK could not progress beyond the second stage of the Protracted People's War strategy. Lastly, the fact that Öcalan was captured in 1999 led to a more remarkable change in the PKK's ideology (Özcan, 2006; Gunes, 2012).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did have serious repercussions for the PKK, as an organization desiring to make a revolution in the Soviet-style in the so-called "Kurdistan." It was dubious whether the PKK would be able to realize its aspirations via the Marxist-Leninist approach, within a US-led liberal international order founded after the Cold War. This crisis left a "void of meaning" and a structural vacuum which the PKK needed to fill (Nabers, 2009, p. 193; Balcı, 2017, p. 135). Thus, the PKK had to construct a novel discourse that would serve as a source of *meaning* and identity in the post-Cold War context.

Also, its struggle needed to be redefined because the PKK was getting militarily more powerful in this period (Balcı, 2017, p. 142). The PKK carried out its most effective and deadliest terror attacks at the beginning of the 1990s (Çelik, 2019, p. 118). However, its

military activities remained limited due to the lack of resources and human force (Akkaya, 2020, p. 738). Under these circumstances, Öcalan pragmatically declared that they did not wish to establish a separate state, but they wished to negotiate how the Kurds would have more democratic rights (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011).

The PKK's Fifth Congress in January 1995 reinforced its ideological change. In this congress, Öcalan said: "We were neither drunk of [existing] socialism, nor our morale was down when it collapsed" (Öcalan, 1995, p. 81). He also criticized the ''fetishization of the state'' in the following way: "By becoming a state, socialism cannot reach its aim. It would be more accurate if becoming a state would be understood as a simple aim of Socialism" (Öcalan, 1995, p. 62). At the end of this congress, the symbol with the hammer and sickle referring to the unity of workers and peasants was removed, and instead the flag with a torch emblem was accepted.

Following the Fifth Congress, the PKK started to utilize the discourse of "scientific socialism" and differentiated its own socialism from Soviet socialism (Balcı, 2017, p. 138). Yet, the quest for a new ideological approach could not produce a novel "master frame" for the PKK (Akkaya, 2020, pp. 738-739). On the contrary, the PKK adopted the "*APOist socialism*" to replace the Soviet model and the "colony thesis'' (Yüce, 1999b, p. 13, 22, 26). This was a shift "from a classical national liberation movement based on Marxist-Leninist principles to a *sui generis* organization, embodied in the figure of a 'Divine King' (the supreme leader), Abdullah Öcalan" (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011, p. 151).

To sum up, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *truth*, which Kurdish nationalism fed on, was no longer tied to Marxist-Leninist socialism. A new *truth* came from Öcalan (Grojean, 2008, p. 9). A personality cult replaced a set of Marxist-Leninist principles as a guide in PKK's attempts to establish an independent Kurdish nation-state.

The breaking point for the ideological change of the PKK, as I mentioned above, was the capture of Öcalan (Romano, 2006, p. 179). Türkiye strictly warned Syria in 1998 to cut its support to the PKK and to deport Öcalan, and openly stated that it would take the necessary precautions in this regard, including the use of force (Altunışık, 2002, p. 277). As a result of this pressure, Öcalan had to leave Syria in October 1998. Then, he was captured in Kenya and brought to Türkiye on 16 February 1999. Therefore, towards the end of the 1990s, the PKK was an organization that emerged under the Cold War conditions with a Marxist-Leninist ideology, could not achieve its objectives, and ultimately had its leader captured. This failure forced the PKK to make changes in its doctrine and strategy (Öcalan, 2013, p. 307).

Besides, the perception of terrorism and the anti-terrorism policies in the international arena following the 9/11 attacks became influential in the PKK's ideological evolution (Çelik, 2019, p. 120). For instance, the EU, which did not include the PKK in its list of terrorist organizations previously, recognized it as a terrorist organization in 2002.[9] Then, the PKK's quest for an independent Kurdish state became more problematic when it was defined internationally as a terrorist organization. Hence, in the upcoming period, the PKK aimed to evade international pressure due to being viewed as a separatist terrorist organization.

Under these circumstances, the PKK looked to the mechanism called "master frame transformation" (Akkaya, 2020). This meant that the master frame of the PKK's activities and struggle would transform and extend in terms of its scope and content. It strived for a new meaning and ideological framework to overcome the deadlock situation, elaborated above. Consequently, the PKK "made a pronounced turn towards a project of radical democracy, rejecting not only what he called the 'classical Kurdish nationalist line', but also a leftist interpretation of a similar tendency" (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2014, p. 186).

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[9] The PKK was recognized as a terrorist organization by the US in 1997, by the European Union (EU) in 2002, by Canada in 2002, by Japan in 2002, by Iran in 2002, by Iraq in 2004, by Australia in 2005, and by Syria in 2008 (Çelik, 2019, p. 123).

3. Transfiguration of the PKK

After Öcalan's imprisonment, the PKK underwent significant ideological and organizational changes. The PKK's failure to establish an independent Kurdish nation-state was a significant driving force behind this emerging change. Also, the PKK faced an insurmountable challenge in achieving its goals within the international world order, which identified it as a terrorist organization. Being recognized as a separatist terrorist designation undermined the legitimacy of its actions. As a result, the PKK found itself in a *cul-de-sac* situation, so it had to change. Yet, this change was driven by practical considerations, including self-preservation, global normative changes, and a rational understanding of opportunities, which will be clarified below (Özçelik, 2020, p. 694).

The PKK's new action plan included topics such as turning to legal means of politics, extending diaspora and lobbying activities, use of media extensively and focusing more on women's rights and environmental issues. Then, it started using a human rights and democracy discourse more frequently in the post-Cold War context (Kaya, 2020, pp. 130-158). Additionally, the PKK went for a new organizational structure to obliterate its tracks through affiliated organizations. However, it is still an ethno-nationalist VNSA leaning on the leadership cult of Öcalan and seeking a state. Only the instruments and discourse the PKK uses, in the direction of its strategic goals, have changed. For this reason, as Soner et al. suggest "if PKK went through anything, it is transfiguration than metamorphosis" (Soner et al., 2017, p. 6). Instead of a complete transformation, the changes the PKK made were more of a transfiguration, allowing the organization to pursue its original purpose with different ways.

3. 1. Democratic Confederalism: An Alternative Governance Model?

Starting from the 2000s, the PKK altered its discourse on the nation-state concept and strongly denounced the nation-state model in its rhetoric. It was no longer bringing forward the issues such as self-determination or the foundation of an independent Kurdish state. Instead, the PKK adopted a new narrative that emphasized radical democracy, minority rights, gender, and environmental issues. Öcalan advocated for a self-governing, community-based approach that would promote democracy and freedom, rather than the nation-state approaches (Öcalan, 2017, p. 25). According to Jongerden and Akkaya, the goal was to move "politics beyond the state, political organization beyond the party, and political subjectivity beyond the class" (2012, p. 2). In this regard, Öcalan presented the state as "the 'original sin' of humanity" (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2015, p. 171) and criticized both socialism and national liberation movements, expressing that they were confined by the concepts of the state and state-building. He underlined that state-building is not the way to attain liberation, it instead can be achieved by strengthening democracy.

Moreover, Öcalan introduced the concept of *democratic nation*, which is "the common society formed by the free will of free individuals and communities. The unifying factor in a democratic nation is the free will of the people and groups who decide to be of the same nation" (Öcalan, 2012, p. 432). Such a nation does not rely on a specific ethnicity, religion, language, class, or state. It rather relies on a society that is democratic and multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural.[10] Therefore, Öcalan claimed that a nation should be characterized not by ethnicity or language, but rather by citizenship in a democratic republic (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012, p. 5). This republic would serve as an umbrella for all citizens

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[10] Öcalan's ideas were also affected by Leslie Lipson's book entitled *The Democratic Civilization* (1964). Lipson's ideas on how multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies can live together peacefully in democracy were inspiring for Öcalan. Lipson gives the example of Swiss cantons and explains how different linguistic groups have equal democratic rights in the same country (1964, pp. 143-144). Yet, this model could not be applied to the Kurds since they are scattered around mainly four countries.

and communities in a shared homeland. Besides, he suggested that a social contract should be established to create a democratic constitution that safeguards autonomous individuals and communities from a centralized political power (Öcalan, 2012, pp. 28-30).

On the other hand, Öcalan declared that the idea that every nation should have its own state was problematic, and in the context of the so-called "Kurdistan," striving for an independent state was a blind alley (Öcalan, 1999, pp. 10-11). The cost of the conflict and the potential violence would be too high for both the Kurds and their neighbouring communities. He also highlighted that the overemphasis on the concept of nationhood led to a range of problems and hindered the development of a democratic and classless society in the Middle East (Öcalan, 2017, p. 10). As a solution to these problems, Öcalan brought a new framework, that advocated for radical democracy, to the table. For him, the "Democratic Confederalism" project was a viable alternative to the state-centric models because it was "a non-state political administration" or "a democracy without a state" (Öcalan, 2017).

Öcalan's project was shaped by diverse political perspectives, including critical Marxism, leftist Foucauldianism, radical democracy, feminist political theory, and libertarian eco-anarchism. Its underlying principles draw on ideas from various concepts, such as "radical democracy" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe and Holdengraber, 1989), "multitude" (Hardt and Negri, 2004), and "libertarian municipalism" (Bookchin, 1994, 2015). Especially Bookchin's ideas have notably influenced Öcalan's worldview and political stance. Öcalan considers himself a "good student" of Bookchin (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 676). He has adapted concepts such as "ecological society" and "confederalism" from Bookchin's works and integrated them as the core themes of the PKK's new initiatives (Öcalan, 2017). However, Öcalan's subscription to Bookchin was merely an attempt to mask the PKK's lasting Stalinist practices.

3. 1. 1. Capitalist Modernity vs Democratic Modernity

To begin with, Öcalan thought that the major reason for the failure of socialist movements was their inability to come up with an alternative perspective to capitalist modernity (Öcalan, 2009, pp. 151-152). Öcalan described the concept of "democratic modernity" as the economic form of Democratic Confederalism, and brought forward it as an alternative to the "capitalist industrialist modernity." He argued that the core drive of the democratic modernity model should not be profit, as capitalist industrialization's development objectives have resulted in environmental destruction (Öcalan, 2009). So, the main objectives were to be to eliminate widespread unemployment and to abandon the pursuit of maximum profit. Accordingly, Öcalan claimed that the establishment of ecological communes and social entities that prioritize meeting the needs of society rather than making profits was a must (Öcalan, 2011). He thought that it would be possible to establish an ecologic-economic society via communes not dependent on any outside element or actor for food. In this way, both state and capitalism would be done away with. Regarding this issue, Öcalan asserted that:

> We cannot acknowledge capitalism as an economic system. Maybe we cannot totally abolish it; but we can change and erode it; we can construct our own economic system (Öcalan, 2010).

3. 1. 2. Nation-state and Bureaucracy

On the other hand, Öcalan argues that in capitalist modernity, the growth of the nation-state and bureaucracy is interdependent with the subjugation of society. He says:

> During the European modernity the state had all means at its disposal to expand its bureaucracy into all strata of the society. There it grew like *cancer* infecting all lifelines of the society. Bureaucracy and nation-state cannot exist without each other. If the nation-state is the backbone of the capitalist modernity, it certainly is the cage of the natural society. Its bureaucracy secures the smooth functioning of the system, secures the basis of the production of goods, and secures profits for the relevant economic actors in both the real socialist and business-friendly nation-state (Öcalan, 2017, p. 14).

Hence, Öcalan argues that Democratic Confederalism opposes the centralized and bureaucratic administrative nature of the nation-state. As an alternative, "a type of political formation where society governs itself and where all societal groups and cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils" (Öcalan, 2017, p. 24).

3. 1. 3. Radical Democracy or Direct Democracy

According to Hardt and Negri, "When power is transferred to a group of rulers, then we all no longer rule, we are separated from power and government" (2004, p. 244). In other words, representative democracies are not sufficiently democratic in that citizens are steered away from politics. Further, they claim that such systems maintain social inequalities while falsely promising equality since politics primarily functions as the domain of the privileged elite (Hardt and Negri, 2004). The ordinary citizen does not have the required sophistication to participate meaningfully in electoral politics, which brings up the issue of disillusionment with elections as the embodiment of the popular will. Political parties and electoral politics have been unable to tackle the representation crisis (Hardt and Negri, 2004, pp. 240-270). Therefore, for Hardt and Negri, resolving this crisis requires "new practices, new forms of organization, and new concepts" (2005, p. 220). Similarly, Öcalan (2011, 2017) contends that national parliaments, representative political institutions, and electoral processes do not operate in such a way as to enable citizens to actively participate. For him, what would be a sensible alternative to these democracies is a system where political power is not centralized and flows from the top down, but instead flows from smaller local units such as communes, councils, and assemblies, towards larger confederal unions utilizing delegation.

Inspired by Bookchin, Öcalan explains his alternative project as follows:

> *Democratic Confederalism* is based on grassroots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For one year they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic decision-making power rests with the local grassroots institutions (Öcalan, 2017, p. 30).

In this project, "autonomy from below" takes the place of "autonomy from above" (Jongerden, 2015, p. 5). The pyramid-like framework relies on the voluntary engagement of people and civil society organizations at various levels of participation. As opposed to centralization and consolidation of power in one single place, people organize themselves and make the decisions that form the uppermost part of the pyramid. Accordingly, political groups would have the opportunity to discuss their issues with one another in public gatherings and implement resolutions, which means that political power is directly used, and direct democracy is appreciated by the people.

By replacing representative political institutions and decision-making mechanisms with local ones that rely on direct participation by citizens, Öcalan proposes methods of achieving "radical democracy" (2017, p. 21). Mouffe and Holdengraber (1989) call *radical democracy* (or, radicalising democracy): taking the scope of politics beyond formal institutions; establishing grassroots forums, councils, and assemblies; enabling various sections and sectors to build coalitions; and enjoying democracy by means of a culture of solidarity where there is no need for state authorization. Likewise, according to Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism is "beyond the state" and has nothing to do with the recognition by states (Öcalan, 2011, 2017).

However, at this point, Öcalan's political attitude can be described as "semi-anarchist." On the one hand, the state is "the fundamental source of oppression in society" and an "obstacle for any social development" for him (Newman, 2005, p. 34). He is in pursuit of a "stateless

democracy" or "post-state liberation" through Democratic Confederalism (Öcalan, 2017). On the other hand, Öcalan does not call for the immediate destruction of the state. He argues that "the overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process... The state will be overcome when democratic confederalism has proved its problem-solving capacities with a view to social issues" (Öcalan, 2017, pp. 28-29). For this reason, he thinks that Democratic Confederalism can come to a "peaceful coexistence" with the nation-state "as long as the nation-state does not interfere with central matters of self-administration" (Öcalan, 2011, p. 32).

3. 1. 4. Confederation

Bookchin stresses the significance of institutions asserting that "lack of structure and institutions leads to chaos" (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 675). He rather advocates that municipal or local communities should come together and get organized in a loose confederation known as a "commune of communes" (Bookchin, 1994). This confederation is necessary to tackle problems and challenges that go beyond the limits of a single municipality (Bookchin, 2015, pp. 36-37). However, it "is a way of democratizing that interdependence without surrendering to the principle local control" (Bookchin, 1996, p. 298). Similarly, Öcalan recommends establishing a confederal super-structure, i.e., *World Democratic Confederal Union* to settle matters extending beyond the limits of local communities. In this platform, national civil societies and communities work together, as opposed to sovereign nation-states in the United Nations (UN), intending to create a new global system that has security, peace, ecologic balance, justice, and productivity (Öcalan, 2017, p. 28). The primary function of this overarching organization is to act as a body of coordination and work on areas such as defence, education, healthcare, and the free flow of commodities among the confederation's members.

The main objective of Öcalan's confederation proposal is to confront the political boundaries to such an extent that the discriminatory citizenship policies rooted in national or cultural identities enforced by nation-states are no longer valid. In other words, the primary aim is to establish transnational and trans-border connections among the four regions of the so-called "Kurdistan" and link them through a confederal superstructure (Öcalan, 2017, p. 31).

3. 1. 5. Democratic, Women-liberationist and Ecological Society

While constructing his new ideology, Öcalan referred to Bookchin's ideas on domination and hierarchy and emphasized that the source of the social problem could not be explained solely in terms of economics. Therefore, class analysis was not sufficient. He argued that the problem stemmed from the domination of mankind over nature, of men over women, of the old over the young, of parent over child, and in other hierarchical structures, of the superior over the inferior, or of the majority over minorities that are different. He also stated that the capitalist system created a hierarchical society based on domination and coercion by the state. Addressing the issue of women and sexism in particular, Öcalan argued that modern capitalist systems exploit women as cheap labour and value them only as long as they give birth and reproduce. He underlined that power relations in society and state ideologies are full of sexist concepts and behaviour (Öcalan, 2017, pp. 17-18). Hence, for Öcalan, "without the repression of women, the repression of an entire society is inconceivable" (2017, p. 18). Meanwhile, Öcalan pointed out that the effort to dominate nature destroys nature and alienates humans from nature. For all these reasons, feminist and ecological movements should be supported, and social awareness should be increased to do away with subordination and hierarchy (Öcalan, 2015, pp. 41-44).

In summary, Democratic Confederalism places feminism and ecology at the core of its ideology. Paralleling the thoughts of Öcalan, the PKK allegedly embraces a "democratic, women liberationist and ecological society." It calls for the establishment of councils for the women, youth, sects, religions, ethnicities, ecology and so on. These councils would deal with matters relevant to their areas of concern. Besides, each specific council has the power to veto laws that affect their respective interests. For example, the women's council can veto a law that is proposed regarding marriage or gender issues, while the minority council can veto laws related to their interests. However, the emphasis on democracy, women's rights and environmental issues did not replace the PKK's decades-long quest for statehood, nationalist stance and violent methods, which will be elucidated below in a more detailed manner.

3. 2. Self-Defence

The most complex aspect of Democratic Confederalism is its formulation of *self-defence*. Öcalan believes that self-defence is inherent to all forms of life existing within the universe, and every living organism and entity has its own system of defence.[11] According to Öcalan:

> There are no society or groups of people, not even living beings without considering some sort of self-defence. Democratic societies are the most advanced existences of nature, and they could not show up and endure their existence without self-defence (Öcalan, 2012, p. 34).

Öcalan believes that self-defence is a fundamental right, especially if an "occupation" is taking place. He identifies three circumstances that could warrant the use of the term *occupation*: "if there is an occupying force, if there is a colonialist force or if there is a more different form of a repressive system" (Öcalan, 2004, p. 129). However, Öcalan did not clarify what is the "different form of a repressive system." By purposefully leaving certain concepts undefined, Öcalan created room for legitimizing violence depending on changing

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[11] In a similar way, Murat Karayılan, one of the leaders of the PKK, asserted that "there is no life without self-defence" (Karayılan, 2014, p. 490). Duran Kalkan, another senior member of the PKK, too claimed that "there won't be any democratic organization and political action without self-defence" (Kalkan, 2006, p. 113).

circumstances. Put differently, by introducing the concept of self-defence, he developed a new rhetoric regarding the use of violence and established a new theoretical ground for the PKK to justify its violent struggle.

On the other hand, the term "legitimate self-defence" is not clearly defined within Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism. This term, which does not exist in Bookchinian terminology, made it possible for the whole project to be militarized and revolutionary violence to be adopted again (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 686). In Öcalan's writings, the self-defence encompasses more than just military capability. It also involves the promotion of democratization, political consciousness, and the preservation of one's identity. However, there is no guarantee that the self-defence mechanism will not overstep its "legitimate" boundaries and become indiscriminately violent. Therefore, Öcalan's uncertain stance on armed resistance has had severe repercussions, as exemplified in this thesis with the PYD case. Referring to Weberian formulation, I would argue that the claim of the PYD to have a monopoly over the use of "legitimate" violence in northeast Syria is a bid to establish a state-like structure.

The mechanism of self-defence consists of three phases: "passive defence" which emphasizes the struggle in politics, "active defence" which is about guerrilla tactics aiming to stop the attacks of the enemy, and "total defence" which is related to mass uprisings (Karayılan, 2014, pp. 517-521). So, the self-defence model's three phases resemble the Protracted War's three phases. However, Öcalan views the self-defence notion as rooted in a critical analysis of revolutionary violence. For him, the use of revolutionary violence emerged because of the state-centric strategies that were intended to establish new nation-states. Similarly, Karayılan highlighted that the main actor in the Protracted War was a "guerrilla," but in the context of self-defence, each actor, including the guerrilla, takes an equal part. Through their self-defensive capabilities, they would be able to defend "the right to live and social values" and "the reorganization of the entire society" (Karayılan, 2014, pp. 510-512).

There is no meaningful difference between the self-defence and guerrilla warfare model in practice since the former follows the principles of the Protracted War as well. Also, there is no significant differentiation between passive defence and strategic defence, or between total defence and strategic counter-offensive (Türk, 2020, p. 476). Hence, it is safe to say that Öcalan's stance on "violence" has mostly remained unchanged (Türk, 2020). He consistently views violence as a political tool and uses the discourse of "just war" to portray the PKK's use of violence as a means of "resistance" and "legitimate" rebellion.

3. 2. 1. Self-Defence and the Nation-State

As formulated by Weber, the defining characteristic of modern states is their monopoly over the use of legitimate violence. The concept of absolute and indivisible sovereignty is employed by the nation-state in order to monopolize and centralize power. Öcalan focuses on this dimension of the nation-state and claims that: "the nation-state is a centralised state with quasi-divine attributes that has completely disarmed society and monopolises the use of force" (Öcalan, 2017, p. 14). Moreover, according to him, being "the most advanced unity of monopolies such as trade, industry, finance and power," the nation-state attempts to monopolize every social process. As per the concept of sovereignty, the people and the nation are united as a single entity and are regarded as a "unitary political subject" (Öcalan, 2017, p. 12). On the other hand, Öcalan asserts that this kind of sovereignty cannot exist within Democratic Confederalism (Öcalan, 2017). As in *multitude*, it rejects all established types of sovereignty.

According to Hardt and Negri, the concept of multitude describes a collection of singularities/unique entities and "a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different" (2004, p. 99). This concept challenges the conventional notion of sovereignty rooted in the principle of "rule by the one" - regardless of

who the ruler is: the monarch, party, state, nation, or people (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 328). These political entities tend to homogenize and govern by means of uniformity under the banner of state, nation or people. Yet, the multitude is presented as 'the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone' (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 100). It does not embrace either vanguardism or anarchism, but instead seeks to create an organization "through the collaboration of singular social subjects" (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 222). In this model, identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, and class "do not determine hierarchies of power" (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 101). In this context, Öcalan tries to legitimize self-defence by referring to, what Hardt and Negri called, "the democratic use of violence" (2005, pp. 342-345).

Interestingly similar to the bellicist tradition and the ideas of Tilly, Öcalan clarifies his perspective on the nation-state further by saying that:

> Essentially, the nation-state is a militarily structured entity. Nation-states are eventually the products of all kinds of internal and external warfare. None of the existing nation-states has come into existence all by itself. Invariably, they have a record of wars. This process is not limited to their founding phase but, rather, it builds on the militarisation of an entire society…

He continues that:

> This militarisation can only be pushed back with the help of *self-defence*. Societies without any mechanism for self-defence lose their identities, their capability of democratic decision-making, and their political nature. Therefore, the self-defence of a society is not limited to the military dimension alone. It also presupposes the preservation of its identity, its own political awareness, and a process of democratisation. Only then can we talk about self-defence. Against this background, democratic confederalism can be called a system of self-defence of society (Öcalan, 2017, p. 26).

In the meantime, Öcalan justified the necessity of self-defence considering the historical experiences of the Kurdish people. According to him, beginning from the *Neolithic era* and continuing until the present day, the Kurdish people have consistently faced aggression from

external forces.[12] So, if the course of the Kurds' history is to change, the PKK's role is crucial. In this way, Öcalan established a new identity for the PKK by portraying itself as the ultimate manifestation of self-defence for the Kurdish people. In the final analysis, he concluded that "Kurdistan and the Kurds cannot exist without self-defence" (Öcalan, 2015, pp. 500-503).

In his writings, Öcalan frequently says that people should take the necessary steps relying on their agency and power against the state and exercise Democratic Autonomy. But also, he refers to the need for a social actor to safeguard the right to self-defence on behalf of the people. The HPG (*Hêzên Parastina Gel* / People's Defence Forces) is the social actor mentioned here. Öcalan argues that the HPG is "different than the national liberation guerrilla or national liberation army" (Öcalan, 2004, p. 130), whose purpose is to establish a state or a new power form. Its duties are: "to defend the people when their constitutional rights are violated, to be *guarantor* of democratization attempts, to *lead* the resistance of people against attacks and to protect cultural and environmental entities" (Öcalan, 2004, p. 130). He warns that the HPG should always be on alert in case of war.

As a result, Öcalan's position concerning pluralism and the revolutionary vanguard party's role is ambiguous (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 678). The anarchist theory and Leninist/Stalinist organizational structure have remained divergent. The lack of a theoretical examination of vanguardism and the leadership cult within the PKK has resulted in its hegemonic structure being legitimized. How a non-democratic organization with a strict hierarchy and leadership cult can come together with the ideals of radical democracy is still a mystery.

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[12] Öcalan underscores the presence of a transhistorical Kurdish identity, which has existed in the "Kurdish lands" (Dinc, 2020, p. 8). Gerber and Brincat mention 'the importance of Öcalan's alternative historicism' by which Kurds are viewed as a people that "has preserved its instinctive understanding of freedom, equality and fraternity" (2018, p. 10). Öcalan seems to view communities as pre-existing entities beyond the scope of history, and he claims that the nation-state 'alienates the community from its natural foundations' (Öcalan, 2012, p. 12). In this sense, ideas of Öcalan contain elements of underlying nativism and ethno-symbolist nationalism where pre-existing ethnic components are emphasized.

Besides, Öcalan's continuous emphasis on *Kurdishness* and the fight for a *free* "Kurdistan" leads one to believe that there is no distinct vision for moving beyond nationalism. Since he is still in favour of the establishment of a Kurdish entity, Öcalan suggests that Kurds in the four regions of the so-called "Kurdistan" could create their own autonomous entities using the principles of Democratic Confederalism. As will be shown in the next section, the KCK functions in practice as a separatist pan-Kurdish quasi-state political project, which disregards the recognized international borders of the region where Kurds reside (Soner et al., 2017, p. 12).

4. KCK as a Pan-Kurdish Political Project

With the change of its discourse towards the concept of the nation-state, the PKK claims that self-determination could not be achieved through the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Instead, forming a "democratic self-government" at each level would be the way to realize this goal (Öcalan, 2008, p. 32). This shift was reflected in the proposal for the creation of local people's councils and assemblies. Self-governments or communes, modelled on Bookchin's Communalism, are planned to be constructed in the so-called "Kurdistan" and all areas in which Kurdish people live, not being bound by any political boundaries. The PKK asserted that the primary means of unifying the Kurdish people and the so-called "Kurdistan" would be the implementation of Democratic Confederalism (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; Leezenberg, 2016; Ziriğ, 2014). For this reason, I put forward that the PKK is trying to draw a new agenda for self-determination, while simultaneously arguing that its project goes beyond the nation-state and does not pose a risk to the current national borders.

The PKK changed its name in the Eighth Congress held on 20-24 April 2002 and named itself KADEK (*Kongreya Azadi u Demokrasiya Kurdistan /* Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress). In addition, the armed wing of the PKK started to be called the HPG. Also, in this congress, instructions were given to accelerate the new structuring in Iraq, Iran, and Syria (Ünal, 2012, p. 8). Then, the PKK founded the PYD in 2003 in Syria. The YPG was founded as the PYD's military wing. So, the PYD and the PKK are of the same origin in terms of their leaders, ideology, goals and covenants (Şahin and İrdem, 2017). Öcalan is the founder and leader of both organizations. Their goal is to establish Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism in various parts of the so-called "Kurdistan" (Leezenberg, 2016; Bila, 2016). Many PKK leaders and fighters serve in the PYD/YPG at the same time (Çelik, 2019, p. 121).

In 2005, the PKK was reorganized in its Ninth Congress, and its aims were redefined. The PKK made public the KCK Contract.[13] In its new manifesto, the PKK denounced its former objective of seizing state power. It was highlighted that Democratic Confederalism does not welcome the state system and draws its strength from "communal values." Accordingly, the PKK focused on creating communes in different surroundings:

> Democratic Confederalism is the democratic order of the Kurdish people who accomplished a democratic revolution. It is an order that allows people to elicit their strength in all levels. It is an order that recreates the communal democratic values of our people existing in our people's history in a modern form. In order to establish such a social order, starting from today, our people have to establish a free-democratic life through creating their communes in villages, neighbourhoods and factories (PKK, 2005).

The purpose was to unite the Kurds in the Middle East via the KCK structure within the same social, political, judicial, and cultural governmental framework. Article 6 of the preface of the

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[13] The KCK is a relatively more complex model compared to the KKK (Union of Kurdistan Organizations / *Koma Komalen Kurdistan*) (Serxwebun, June 2005).

KCK Contract states:

> For the self-determination of Kurdistan, this movement aims not to establish a nationalist state but to establish its own democracy that will be grounded on no political borders. All Kurds will come together for establishing their own federation and unite for confederation in case of the emergence of a Kurdish structure in Turkey, Iran, and Syria and even in Iraq.

On the one hand, there is a proposal for democracy aiming to empower people in such a way as to keep the current borders of the regional states as they are. On the other hand, there is a call to establish an umbrella political entity in different geographic areas where Kurds reside, as illustrated in Map 1. Since the borderlines of the nation-states where the Kurds have resided were to be overlooked, I would say that the KCK was supposed to function as a pan-Kurdish political project.

Map 1: KCK's Alleged Map of "Kurdistan" (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 8)

With the establishment of the KCK, the PKK formed a broad network of various organizations tied to it and became more and more complex over time (Bayraklı et al., 2019). As demonstrated in Figure 3, its organizational structure has evolved into a complicated body with parties and institutions. Then, the KCK has "become an institutionalized umbrella structure overseeing its member organizations: the PKK in Türkiye, the PYD in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq" (Khalaf, 2016, p. 9). Besides, one other assembly exists towards Kurds in diasporas. It is called the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK). Having its headquarters in Brussels, the KNK convenes members from various parts of the world periodically to conduct elections and hold an annual general congress in Europe. The KNK has taken the place of the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile. Its purpose is to serve as a legal representation of the Kurdish struggle beyond the so-called "Kurdistan" (Saeed, 2014, pp. 156-157).

The PKK's replacement with the KCK only means a "formal" abolishment because "the PKK" concept continues to be used commonly to refer to this complex party organization (Yarkın, 2015, p. 35). Hence, the KCK is merely a transfiguration of the PKK with a new structure. In other words, the PKK has one face despite it has many names, as shown in Figure 4 (Levant 24, 2022). It currently continues its activities in the region under the roof of the KCK, and also under the name of the PYD in Syria.

Figure 3: Member Organizations of KCK (Kekevi, 2015, p. 121)
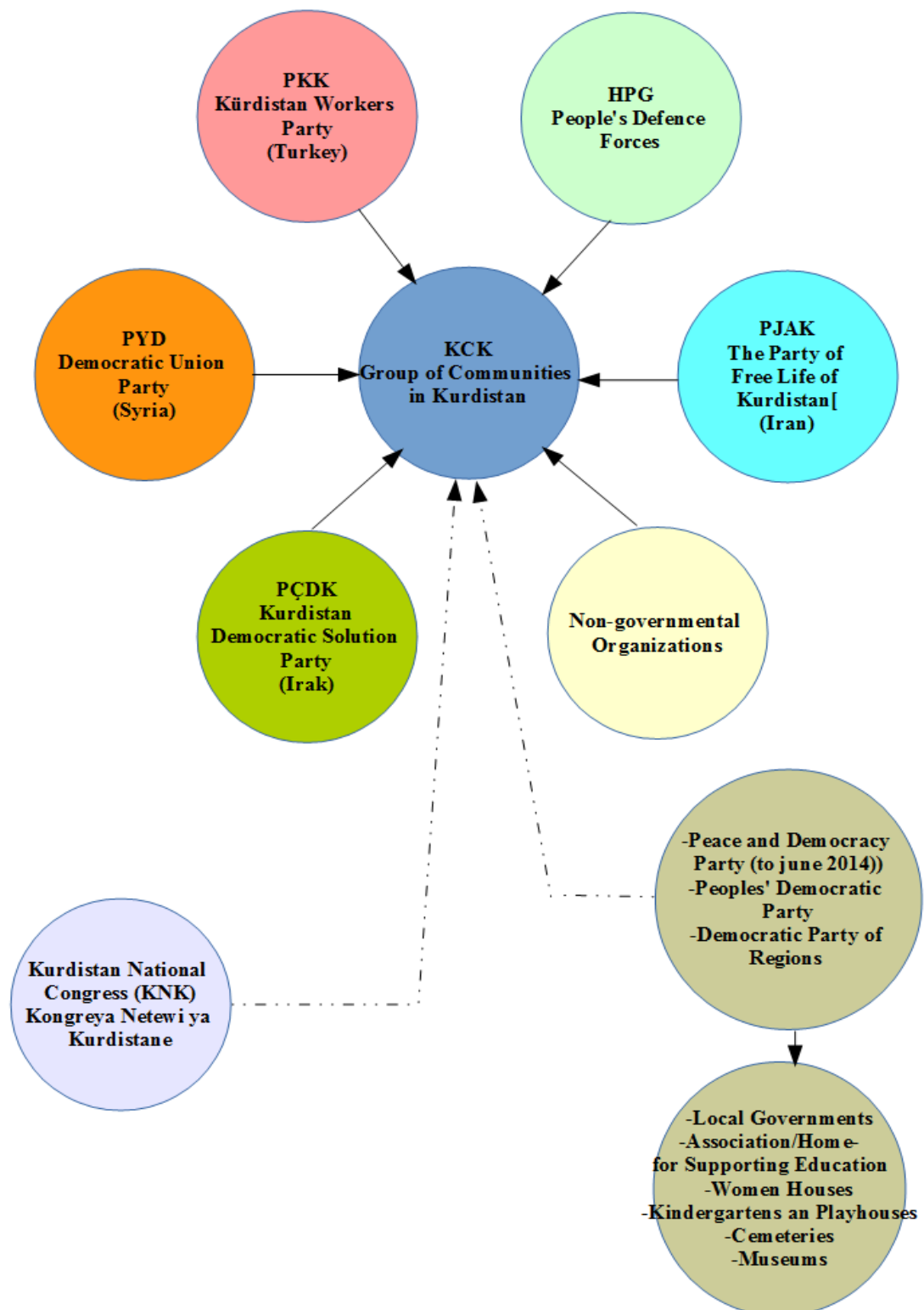
Figure 4: Main PKK Affiliates and Fronts (Levant24, 26 October 2022)

Main PKK Affiliates & Fronts

TURKEY
SYRIA
IRAQ
IRAN

Name	Acronym	Active	Area of Operations	Base of Operation	Role
Kurdistan Workers' Party	PKK	1978 – Present	Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran	Qandil Mountains, Iraq	Military Leadership
Kurdistan Freedom Brigades	HRK	1984 – 1986	Turkey	Inactive	Military
National Liberation Front of Kurdistan	ERNK	1985 – 1999	Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran	Inactive	Political Leadership
Kurdistan Popular Liberation Army	ARGK	1986 – 1998	Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran	Inactive	Military
People's Defense Forces	HPG	1999 – Present	Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran	Qandil Mountains, Iraq, Syria	Military
Democratic Union Party	PYD	2003 – Present	Syria	Syria	Political
Free Women's Unit	YJA-STAR	2004 – Present	Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran	Qandil Mountains, Iraq	Military
Kurdistan Free Life Party	PJAK	2004 – Present	Iran	Iran	Military Leadership
Eastern Kurdistan Units	YRK	2004 – Present	Iran	Iran	Military
Women's Defense Forces	HPJ	2004 – Present	Iran	Iran	Military
Kurdistan Communities Union	KCK	2005 – Present	Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran		Political
Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement	YDG-H	2006 – 2015	Turkey	Inactive	Military
People's Protection Units	YPG	2011 – Present	Syria	Syria	Military
Women's Protection Units	YPJ	2013 – Present	Syria	Syria	Military
Yazidi Women's Units	YJE	2015 – Present	Syria, Iraq	Sinjar, Iraq	Military
Civil Protection Units	YPS	2015 – Present	Turkey		Military
International People's Protection Units	YPG-E	2016 – Present	Syria	Syria	Military
Civil Protection Women's Units	YPS-JIN	2016 – Present	Turkey	Turkey	Military

4. 1. KCK as a Quasi-state Structure

As mentioned above, the PKK suggested that the right to self-determination should be reinterpreted at the level of autonomy via the KCK structure, but not a nation-state. For this reason, it claimed to offer a new governance model, aiming to decentralize power, which was distinct from federalism or ethno-territorial autonomy (Ziriǧ, 2014). On the contrary, I assert that the PKK only inverted the original self-determination thesis, and the KCK resembles modern nation-state structures.

Within the KCK structure, as seen in Figure 5, there exists a position at the highest level referred to as the Leadership. Hypothetically, the Leadership position holds the most significant authority and decision-making power within the KCK. However, this institution is not a committee or council. It is "Öcalan" (Saeed, 2014, pp. 140-141). In other words, Öcalan's supporters view him not only as an individual but as an abstract institution. He represents a symbolic character within the KCK, and it is expected that all members show complete loyalty to him. According to Article 11 of the KCK Contract, Öcalan is considered the ultimate decision-maker and representative of all Kurds. The presence of Leadership at the top of the pyramid contradicts the bottom-up structure of Democratic Confederalism and its democratic ideals mentioned earlier.

There is a parliament-like assembly under the KCK Leadership. Functioning as a legislative entity within the KCK, it is called the "Kurdistan People's Assembly" (*KONGRA-GEL*). This assembly manages main policies and makes major decisions. So, KONGRA-GEL is the highest legislative body. It has also the power to make determinations on behalf of the KCK regarding the ratification of agreements with other states and international organizations. KONGRA-GEL is composed of 300 members in accordance with the KCK Contract. The KCK "citizens" elect these members for a term of two years.

In the organizational structure of the KCK, there is another council called the "Executive Council." Thirty out of all members of KONGRA-GEL are elected to the Executive Council. This council bears the responsibility of performing executive tasks. Among the thirty members, there is a subgroup comprising six members who serve as managers. This subgroup includes two co-presidents and four assistants.

Apart from the legislative and executive councils, there exists a "Judiciary Council" of the same level as the other two. The Judiciary Council is composed of three distinct courts that are accountable to a higher court referred to as the Court of Administrative Justice. These three distinct courts are namely the Administrative Court, Military Court, and Court of the People's Freedom. The Legislative Council elects the members of the Judiciary Council as well. Therefore, not only the executive but also judicial members are elected by the KONGRA-GEL. In short, the KCK's legislative, executive, and judicial powers are structured in a manner akin to those of modern states, as I argued above.

Figure 5: Organizational Structure of KCK (Kekevi, 2015, p. 122)

On the other hand, examining the KCK Contract closely gives us more clues about why the

KCK is a quasi-state structure, including various elements of the modern state mechanism

such as law, citizenship, compulsory military service, taxation and so on.

Article 7 of the KCK Contract states that:

> From now on, three types of law will be valid in Kurdistan: EU law, unitary state law and democratic confederal law. Kurdistan will recognize the law of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq so long as these unitary states recognize that of Kurdish people and Kurdish people will enter into settlements on this basis.

The legal foundation of the KCK is composed of three components: EU law, unitary states' law, and democratic confederal law. It is important to note that the recognition of unitary states' law is not absolute, but rather contingent upon democratic confederal law being recognized. Establishing a specific legal system with accompanying judicial institutions within a defined territory serves to underscore the legal sovereignty aspect of states.

Further, the KCK Contract contains regulations on how to become a citizen, what the rights, freedoms, duties, and responsibilities of citizens are, and under what circumstances one would lose their citizenship rights (KCK Contract Article 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). For example, Article 5 of the KCK Contract expresses that:

> Any person that was born and lives in Kurdistan or that is dependent on the KCK system is a citizen. ... S/he possesses the predetermined rights and freedoms and performs the obligations determined by this contract.

Furthermore, on 'Fundamental Duties', in Article 10c of the KCK Contract, military service is an obligatory duty in cases of war while clause (i) in the same article states that every KCK citizen is a "taxpayer". As is known, citizenship, taxation and mandatory military service are the main pillars of the modern state system.

Besides, in Article 14 on 'Foreign Affairs', a mechanism for the development of diplomatic relations is mentioned. This means that the KCK possesses the authority needed to utilize external sovereignty. As is known, ratifying international agreements, representing the public diplomatically and forming diplomatic relations are reserved within the authority of states since they possess international legal personality.

To sum up, the KCK has the goal of operating as a state, as evidenced by the presence of various elements such as legislative, executive and judicial bodies in its organizational structure. Also, the KCK Contract, which functions like a constitution, has a legal system, a citizenship model, a taxation system, and external sovereignty references. Additionally, having military units and services points towards the objective of the monopolization of violence in a given territory to establish a state under the cover of Democratic Confederalism. Hence, once thoroughly examined, it can be easily seen that the ideological changes in the PKK do not match its practices on the ground, and the KCK structure embraces the modern nation-state system.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to explain the PKK's transfiguration following Öcalan's ideas and the rationale behind it taking internal and external dynamics into account. Although the PKK initially embraced a Marxist-Leninist ideology to establish an independent Kurdish state utilizing protracted guerrilla warfare, it had to go through ideological and organizational rearrangements after the end of the Cold War and Öcalan's capture. Starting from the 2000s, the Democratic Confederalism project became prominent within the PKK discourse, instead of collective rights and the self-determination issue. In this way, the PKK reframed its existence and struggle. Adopting a new narrative, which emphasizes radical democracy, human rights, minority rights, gender and environmental issues and so on, the PKK tried to justify its actions within the post-Cold War context. Yet, this shift was just a pragmatic move to get more transnational and international support to advance the Kurdish nationalist cause.

On the other hand, when the PKK was internationally recognized as a separatist terrorist organization, especially after the 9/11 attacks, it became much more difficult to create an independent Kurdish state. Then, the PKK started emphasizing that its politics is beyond the

state and has nothing to do with changing national borders. However, its changing position on the nation-state and the self-determination issue was just a discursive shift. The PKK continues its struggle by different means, on different platforms, and with a new rhetoric. For this reason, in this chapter, I highlighted that the PKK/KCK is old wine in a new bottle.

Democratic Confederalism is a useful project to mask, repack and legitimize the PKK's long-standing goals, albeit within a new international context. The KCK is a nationalist state-building project, operating under a unified system of governance. With this new labelling and complex organization, the PKK aimed to hide its authoritarian vanguardist party structure and lose its traces under the guise of multitude and egalitarianism. Moreover, the transnational dimension of the KCK structure makes more sense bearing in mind the Kurdish nationalist discourse, which claims that the so-called "Kurdistan" was divided into four by colonial and regional powers. So, the PKK is endeavouring to bring the "Kurdification of geopolitics" to the forefront, ignoring the official borders in the Middle East.

This chapter is essential to understand the PYD's quasi-state activities better. It shows not only the ideological roots of the PYD but also its organizational and transnational ties with the PKK through the KCK structure. The PYD replicates the KCK model in northeast Syria and puts Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism project into practice, as will be shown in Chapter Five. In other words, the PKK realizes its decades-long nationalist aspirations for the first time in a different context via its Syrian wing. As I will clarify in this thesis, the PYD rule is a state-like entity, despite its emphasis on non-state governance and democracy. There is a huge gap between its discourse and actions. This contradiction does not only stem from severe war conditions in Syria but also Öcalan's ambivalence towards the leader, party, violence, armed resistance, nationalism, and nation-state. In addition, the PYD/PKK's pragmatic attitude can be explained via its quest for legitimacy to survive in a hostile geopolitical environment.

Chapter 3: Historical Background of the Kurdish Issue in Syria

Introduction

Stateless people may believe that they must have their own nation-state to protect themselves in the world of the nation-state system. This belief may bring about "a fierce, violent group consciousness", which would promote national identities (Arendt, 1951, p. 292). As the largest stateless nation in the Middle East, the modern history of Kurds, abound with oppression, insurgency and terrorism, would verify this argument. However, Syrian Kurds had to wait until the emergence of the Syrian civil war. Many observers saw the current *de facto* Kurdish autonomy in northeast Syria as a natural consequence of the nationalism among Syrian Kurds, which developed during the last century. However, this chapter argues that this teleological reading does not shed light on the complexity of the matter.

In this chapter, I will focus on the historical background of the Kurdish issue in Syria with a longitudinal approach. Although they faced similar challenges and assimilationist policies, studies on the Kurdish issue paid less attention to Syrian Kurds before the 2011 Syrian Uprisings compared to their brethren in neighbouring countries. Thus, I will offer an insight into how the Kurdish identity denial took place during the nation-state-building project in Syria and how Kurds reacted to this alienation process. In this way, the logic behind the rise of Kurdish nationalism in Syria and the geopolitical context in which it emerged would be understood better.

Considering the history of state formation in Syria and the regional politics of the Middle East which have a crucial impact on the evolution of the Kurdish issue in Syria, I have three main arguments. First, the Kurdish identity has been a challenge to the nation-building trajectory in Syria, as Arab nationalists assumed it was an Arab republic. They saw the Kurds as

allochthone and perceived the Kurdish identity as a threat to the country's national security. The perception of the Kurdish population and identity in Syria has been an important aspect of the formation of Kurdish nationalism and its position towards the Syrian regimes and opposition. Second, the Kurdish issue has been a transnational issue since the establishment of nation-states in the Middle East. So, it cannot be grasped properly without considering regional developments and transnational ties of Kurdish actors. Third, although the Kurdish quest for autonomy was a historical phenomenon, the PYD's state-making activities in northeast Syria had been unrealistic or "unimaginable" before the civil war. The Kurdish issue in Syria evolved in an unexpected direction with the eruption of protests against the Assad regime after decades of political marginalization and persecution.

This chapter begins with the independence of Syria and the triumph of Arab Nationalism. This section shows how the Kurdish identity became one of the most contentious issues of Syrian politics after its independence. Kurds started to be gradually perceived as a vital threat to Syria's national state-building projection. With the rise of Arab nationalism, anti-Kurdish policies gained momentum during the United Arab Republic (UAR). They were often associated with foreign powers, treason and separatism. Then, I reveal how the Ba'ath regime systematized the anti-Kurdish campaign to create a homogenous Arab nation/identity in Syria. Arab nationalism denied the Kurdish existence in the country. Various assimilationist projects were implemented within the *Arabization* framework. In the absence of a charismatic leader, the Syrian Kurds became more fragmented under state oppression and looked at their ethnic kin in the neighbouring countries for support. Yet, their sufferings were neglected, and they were used just as a backyard by the Kurdish leaders in their own fight. Although Hafez al-Assad cooperated with the Kurds and pragmatically exploited the Kurdish issue to confront regional and domestic challenges, he usually followed the Ba'athist approach. Finally, I will display how Kurdish nationalism revived in Syria in light of regional developments at the

start of the twenty-first century. Bashar al-Assad had to face the Kurdish issue in a different political context. We witnessed the Kurdish reawakening in Syria following the Qamishli Riots of 2004. On the other hand, even if it proposed a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, the 2005 Damascus Declaration could not build a strong bridge between the opposition and the Kurds before the uprisings to contend with the regime's long-standing oppression.

1. Independent Syria: Triumph of Arab Nationalism

With the independence of Syria from the French Mandate regime in 1946, the Kurdish identity became one of the most contentious issues of Syrian politics. The separation of Lebanon from greater Syria caused the association of any notion of autonomy with separatism and treason in the eyes of the Arab majority (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 48). The establishment of Israel next to Syria and the Arab defeat in the 1948 War, which boosted the Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism discourse together, worsened this situation (Patton, 2019, pp. 187-188). Arab nationalists considered Kurdish identity as a vital threat to Syria's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity. Then, Kurdish political, cultural, and social rights had been heavily suppressed till 2011.

However, it must be emphasized that the central governments in Damascus did not autonomically carry out an anti-Kurdish policy following independence (Tejel, 2019, p. 370). The main reason was the instability in the county. Syria witnessed successive military coups starting in 1948, political division among the elite and serious economic problems. This instability prevented the emergence of an official state ideology that would construct the Kurdish identity as a threat in those years. Further, the electoral system inherited from the Mandate period provided Kurdish candidates with an opportunity to be elected to the Syrian parliament. Additionally, many Kurdish officials coming from the working class, or petite

bourgeoisie, stayed in the army to develop their socio-economic status. Therefore, Kurds in Syria enjoyed limited social-cultural freedom till the mid-1950s despite various problems. Yet, their political demands were not open to any discussion (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 239).

1. 1. Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) was an attractive party to Kurds since it defended the equality of people and the freedom of oppressed masses (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 48). Many Kurds joined the SCP to confront Arab nationalism. Its leader was Khalid Bakdash, a Kurdish political figure from Damascus. Thus, the SCP was called the "Kurdish Party" (Tejel, 2009, pp. 42-45). Yet, Kurdish movements in Syria were fragmented. Therefore, erstwhile members of the SCP founded the *Partîya Demokrat a Kurdistan-Sûriye* (Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria/KDPS) under the leadership of Dr. Nouraddine Zaza in 1957 to converge all Kurdish political trends into a single organization (McDowall, 2020, p. 922).

The KDPS followed a similar party program to the KDP in Iraq, established by Mullah Mustafa Barzani in 1946 (Tejel, 2021, p. 440). It aimed at the preservation of Kurdish culture and identity as an ethnic minority in Syria (Gunter, 2014, p. 16). It also demanded education and publication in mother tongue and underlined poor socio-economic conditions in the Kurdish-majority regions of Syria (Yildiz, 2005, p. 32). While defending democratization in Syria and the liberation and unification of the so-called "Kurdistan," the KDPS did not strive for the independence of so-called "Syrian Kurdistan" (McDowall, 2020, p. 895). The party expanded its base by including smaller parties and different Kurdish figures from all social classes in its ranks. Most of the current Kurdish political parties in Syria originate from the KDPS (Gunes, 2019, p. 3). However, since its inception, the KDPS has suffered from

factionalism. Its fragility stemmed from both internal and external dynamics (Tejel, 2021, p. 442).

The first point of contention was to adopt a pan-Kurdish policy or a "Syrian-oriented agenda". In this sense, the use of the sensitive concept of "Kurdistan" caused internal tension, i.e., whether it was the "*Kurdistan*" Democratic Party or the "*Kurdish*" Democratic Party. Using the word "Kurdistan" would incite the fear of separatism as it suggested that the so-called greater "Kurdistan" included northeast Syria as well (Gunter, 2014, p. 25). While some of the Kurdish leaders such as Zaza and Hamid Darwish defended a softer approach for Kurdish rights; others, like Osman Sabri, were prone to a stronger struggle. Zaza's faction argued that the party was ethnically centred, and the concept of "Kurdistan" should not be used since it did not exist in reality. On the contrary, Sabri's faction put forward that Syrian Kurds were located within "Kurdistan" and the party was not a platform to discuss its existence (Allsopp, 2015, pp. 78-79). This disagreement at the leadership level was exacerbated by generational and ideological differences (Allsopp, 2015, p. 77). While Sabri's leftist faction generally resonated with the communists, labourers and students; Darwish's rightist faction contained urban merchants, professionals, religious leaders and landowners (Gunter, 2014, p. 26).

The KDPS was influenced by transnational and regional developments too. The conflict between Barzani and Jalal Talabani and their relations with Damascus deepened its fragmentation. Then, over the years, numerous Kurdish political parties emerged in Syria. Even if Barzani and Talabani attempted to reunify the KDPS factions many times in the 1970s, they failed due to disputes between their supporters in Syria (Tejel, 2021, pp. 442-443).

As will be elaborated below, the authoritarian rule in Syria historically forced Kurdish parties to operate illegally and clandestinely (Gunes, 2019, p. 65). The state coercion increased the

cost of political mobilization. On the other hand, Kurdish political movements in Syria were weak, fragile and fragmented. This is why Syrian Kurds were marginalized and oppressed until the Syrian civil war (Gunter, 2014, pp. 25-27). In addition, the selective engagement of the Syrian governments with some Kurdish actors caused alienation among Kurdish movements (Tejel, 2009, p. 89). Besides, Kurds in Syria were geographically dispersed, and northeast Syria was bereft of mountains, which could hide Kurdish militants. Hence, geographical unsuitability was one of the main causes for the lack of violent struggle in Syria, in contrast to Iraq and Türkiye (Gunes, 2019, p. 65). For these reasons, Kurdish political movements could not resist authoritarianism in Syria and discrimination against Kurds and mostly looked to their cognates in neighbouring states for inspiration and help (Tejel, 2021, p. 442).

1. 2. Nasser's United Arab Republic

In 1952, Gamal Abd al-Nasser came to power in Egypt with the Free Officers' military coup. The mid-1950s were the heyday of Arab nationalism, and Nasser was its leading figure, especially after the Suez Crisis in 1956. He could succeed in the unification of Egypt and Syria under the UAR in 1958. Then, he implemented his one-man rule by abolishing all political parties and crushing all opposition (Patton, 2019, p. 190). Also, he put the Syrian army under his command. Even if anti-Kurdish policies like banning Kurdish organizations, dress and signs started earlier in Syria, they gained momentum during the UAR period between 1958-61. However, it was only a prelude to the official systematic anti-Kurdish campaign in Syria under the Ba'ath regime.

During this period, officials surveilled the activities of all ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, which would threaten the pan-Arab nationalist project. Among them, Kurds posed a danger in two manners: first, they were a non-Arab ethnic group, and second, they were

associated with feudalism (Tejel, 2019, p. 370). As an ethnic minority, Kurds were viewed as an anomaly to the Arab unity. It was difficult to assimilate them. Also, feudal ties should have been eliminated via land reforms. Per this purpose, the policy of land redistribution was introduced to weaken the feudal chiefs and strengthen peasants by granting them land ownership.

Within the framework of Arab nationalism, the Nasser regime correlated Kurdish nationalism with Zionism and Western Imperialism. Kurds were frequently regarded as "Trojan horses" hired by foreign enemies (Dağ, 2018, p. 4). Including the concept of "Kurdistan" in the KDPS' name fuelled concerns over Kurdish intentions. Its leaders and 5,000 members were imprisoned in 1960 (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 54). They were tried for being members of an illegal organization and for separatism. After trials, the party's name was changed to the "Kurdish" Democratic Party of Syria to avoid allegations of separatism, and it strived only for the social, cultural and economic rights of the Kurdish people (Hasan, 2020, p. 11; Allsopp, 2015, p. 78). Lastly, the anti-Kurdish campaign included the purge of "disloyal" Kurdish officers in the army. Later, the doors of military academies and police forces were closed to Kurds (Ahram, 2019, p. 135).

The Nasser regime extended its repression of Kurdish identity to the socio-cultural sphere. Using the Kurdish language in public was officially prohibited. Publishing in Kurdish and the possession of Kurdish books were banned. Kurdish music was forbidden. Also, the government sent Egyptian teachers into predominantly Kurdish areas of northeast Syria to teach Arabic. The celebration of *Newroz*, the Kurdish New Year, and other cultural practices were disallowed as well (Gambill, 2004).

The suppression of Syrian Kurds increased with the 1961 Kurdish Revolt in Iraq. Barzani attempted to establish an autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. The Syrian

regime was afraid that this rebellion and calling for autonomy would inspire Syrian Kurds due to the political connections between the KDP in Iraq and Syrian Kurds. Thus, transnational relations between different Kurdish groups were perceived as a threat to Syria's national security (Tejel, 2021, p. 440).

Last but not least, the economic dimension of the anti-Kurdish campaign is of crucial importance. Jazira was agriculturally the most fertile region and known as the "breadbasket" of Syria (Yildiz, 2005, p. 25). Also, the cotton industry in Jazira leapt forward during the 1950s with the increase in global demand and prices (McDowall, 2020, pp. 898-899). Moreover, major oil fields were discovered in the far northeast of Syria in the mid-1950s (Ahram, 2019, p. 135). Thanks to economic growth in the region, the population of al-Hasakah Governorate reached 305,000 in 1961 from 240,000 in 1954 (McDowall, 2020, pp. 897-898). Poor and unemployed people from surrounding areas, mostly Kurds from Türkiye and Iraq, migrated to "attractive" Jazira. Yet, the Syrian government, politicians and mass media were adamant about stopping the Kurdish "infiltration" from neighbouring countries (Tejel, 2021, p. 441).

The authoritarian rule of Nasser and the domination of Egyptians in the state institutions disturbed different segments of Syrian society. Then, on 28 September 1961, Lieutenant-Colonel Abd al-Karim Nahalawi staged a military coup with the support of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian business community and ended the UAR (Yildiz, 2005, p. 32). After a short period of power struggle and instability, the Ba'ath Party (the Arab Renaissance/Reawakening Party) took control of Syria with another coup on 8 March 1963. With the rise of the Ba'ath regime, more severe measures were taken to stifle Kurdish nationalism, and brutal legal and political actions were put into practice. Yet, before discussing it, I will discuss the Al-Hasakah Census of 1962 and the Muhammad Talab Hilal Report to reflect the Ba'ath mentality towards the Kurdish people and their identity.

1. 3. Al-Hasakah Census of 1962: Living Corpse

In her canonical work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt uses the metaphor of "a living corpse" to define those who are "deprived, not of the right to freedom, but the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of right to opinion" (1951, p. 294). I use this striking metaphor to show what it means to be "alive" as a Kurd in Syria after 1962. The Al-Hasakah Census of 1962 classified a significant proportion of the Kurdish population in Syria as either foreigners or stateless overnight. Syrian Kurds, stripped of their citizenship, had been technically alive, but incapable of participating in civil and political life by the Syrian Uprisings.

On 23 August 1962, a special legislative decree (No. 92) was issued by the Syrian government. According to this decree, an exceptional population census was to be performed in the Al-Hasakah Governorate in one day to differentiate its "real inhabitants" and the "foreigners" or "alien infiltrators" (Human Rights Watch, 1996). All non-Arabs, but in practice only Kurds, had to present a document such as a Syrian identity card, a 'family card' or land deeds to prove that they had been Syrian residents at least since 1945. Otherwise, they would lose their citizenship. A few weeks later, on 5 October 1962, this census was carried out. However, the Syrian authorities did not inform Hasakah residents of the census, i.e., its procedures, objectives and consequences. They did not give the residents sufficient time to prove their status. The officials went from door to door and requested the people to present a document showing their residency. At the time of the census, most of the Kurds were peasants and illiterate (McDowall, 2020, p. 900). The land ownership system in the region was traditionally based, in such a way that the majority of the land inhabited and cultivated by the peasants/farmers belonged to a landowner (Yildiz, 2005, p. 33). Although they were assumed to have rights to the land they cultivated, most of the peasants/farmers did not have land

deeds. Besides, many Kurds deliberately did not participate in the census for fear of corvee, taxation and compulsory military service (McDowall, 2020, p. 923).

As a result of this census, the Syrian Kurds were divided into three categories (Yildiz, 2005, p. 34):

1) The Kurds who could prove their Syrian citizenship.

2) *Ajanib* (foreigners): those Kurds who were registered as migrants or illegal migrants by the Syrian authorities. Their citizenship was removed. They became stateless overnight as they did not have citizenship in another country. They were issued a special red identity card by the Ministry of Interior, blacklisting them as "the foreigners of al-Hasakah" (Human Rights Watch, 1996).

3) *Maktoumeen* (unregistered people): those Kurds who did not participate in the census even if they held Syrian citizenship.

Following the census, over 120,000 Kurdish people, nearly one-fifth of the Syrian Kurdish population, were stripped of Syrian citizenship (Human Rights Watch, 1996). The number of stateless Kurds had reached 350,000 by 2011, in addition to the approximately 75,000 unregistered Kurds (Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2019).

While both *ajanib* and *maktoumeen* were deprived of basic human and citizenship rights such as the right to education, employment, free health care, real property ownership, passport, travelling, marriage, registration of childbirth and the right to vote and to run in an election, the latter group faced more severe discrimination and repression mechanisms in all spheres of social life (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Yildiz, 2005, pp. 96-105). Their status is passed down over generations. Their children were not given diplomas from secondary schools. So, they could not enrol in a university. *Maktoumeen* people had to use someone else's name,

who held Syrian nationality based on good faith, to receive wages, sign a contract, or register a car or business. They could not even stay in a hotel together with wives or children since they were officially unmarried. This situation paved the way for the development of the black economy to benefit from basic human and citizenship rights. To sum up, the stateless Syrian Kurds were like "being buried alive" (Gunter, 2014, pp. 19-20). They were socially, economically and politically marginalized for many decades because of the lack of nationality and identity documents.

The successive Syrian governments never took concrete steps to solve these problems (Lowe, 2006, p. 3). They pursued a systematic policy to deal with the existence of Kurdish people and their identity in the country (Hasan, 2020, p. 10). The beginning of the Syrian Uprisings in 2011 forced the Assad regime to change this policy and grant citizenship to some Kurds after nearly five decades, which will be addressed later in this study (BBC, 2011).

1. 4. Muhammad Talab Hilal Report

In November 1963, Lieutenant Muhammad Talab Hilal, the head of internal security in the province of Hasakah (Jazira), prepared a confidential report entitled the "Study of the National, Social and Political Aspects of the Province of the Jazira." In this report, he likened Kurds to a "cancer" in the body and argued that the authorities should deal with the "Kurdish danger" since "they posed a threat to the security of the state" (Hasan, 2020, p. 3). With his own words:

> The bells of the Jazira sound the alarm and call on the Arab conscience to save this region, to purify it of all this scum, the dregs of history until, as befits its geographical situation, it can offer up its revenues and riches, along with those of the other provinces of this Arab territory…The Kurdish question, now that the Kurds are organizing themselves, is simply a malignant tumour which has developed and been developed in a part of the body of the Arab nation. The only remedy which we can properly apply thereto is excision (Vanly, 1992, pp. 153-154).

To excise "a malignant tumour in the body of the Arab nation", Hilal prepared a twelve-point plan and recommended that:

1) Kurds should be removed from their lands and moved to more internal parts.

2) Kurds should no longer be given the right to education.

3) Any job opportunities should be taken from Kurds.

4) The "wanted" Kurds should be delivered to Türkiye.

5) A "divide-and-rule" policy within the Kurdish community should be adopted.

6) Arab clerics should take the place of local Kurdish religious 'ulama' (clerics).

7) Kurdish territories should be settled by Arabs.

8) The "Arab cordon sanitaire" along the border of Türkiye should be established. This Arab Belt should be emptied of the Kurds and host the military agencies instead.

9) The "collective farms" should be established for Arab settlers.

10) Among those who want to live in the area, only Arabs should be given citizenship.

11) An anti-Kurdish campaign should be conducted among Arabs.

12) Anyone who does not speak Arabic should be denied from voting and working as a government officer (Vanly, 1992, p. 156; McDowall, 2020, pp. 901-902).

When Hilal's report was disclosed in 1968, the Syrian authorities expressed it was not official government policy, but the personal ideas of Hilal (Tejel, 2009, p. 61). However, it can be said that the Ba'ath regime's policy towards Kurds in Syria was compatible with Hilal's proposals to a large extent (Yildiz, 2005, pp. 34-35). While the denial of citizenship had already started with the 1962 Hasakah Census, the "Arab Belt Project" was put into practice in 1973 within the Arabization framework. The regime implemented other exceptional orders, decrees and laws against the Kurdish people and identity, which will be shown in the following section (Hasan, 2020, pp. 5-9).

2. The Ba'ath Regime

Ba'athism was more like a state-building project, which directed its attention to issues of culture, identity, political boundaries, and the socio-economic structure in the Arab World (Saouli, 2018). Its main principles were to actualize the unification of the Arab nation, to overthrow the colonial governments across the Middle East, and to realize a progressive socio-economic reform/revolution (George, 2003, p. 6). They were summarized by the slogan "unity, freedom, socialism" (Devlin, 1976, pp. 23-45). It was assumed that Arab unity and socialism would be realized under the leadership of the party (Saouli, 2018, p. 19). Although this anti-imperialist national liberation movement attracted various Arab political activists across the region, the Ba'ath Party came to power only in Syria and Iraq.

When it seized power with the 1963 coup, the Ba'ath Party had begun its state-building project. Secular Arab national identity was the fundamental identity of Syria in this project (Gunter, 2014, p. 22). All other ethnic and religious identities were marked as "internal enemies" and exposed to state persecution. To implement its repressive policies, the Ba'ath regime introduced the "Emergency Laws." These laws created a climate of fear in which basic human rights and freedoms were restricted arbitrarily on the pretext of protection of public order and national security (Human Rights Watch, 2007). In this environment, the regime developed an exclusionary discourse against the Kurdish identity and systematized its anti-Kurdish policies, in parallel with the al-Hasakah census and Hilal's project (Yildiz, 2005, p. 35; Hasan, 2020, p. 4).

Kurds were seen as a menace to the Arab nation, and they would be tolerated only if they embraced the Ba'athist concept of Arab nationalism (Gunter, 2014, p. 22) In 1967, school textbooks started omitting anything regarding the Kurdish existence in the country. The authorities restrained Kurdish parents from registering their children in the birth record with a

Kurdish name. House raids and arbitrary arrests by police forces against Kurds were common during the 1960s (Tejel, 2009, p. 62). Also, under the Ba'ath rule, recruitment in the key public or security sectors and appointment to a senior position became difficult for a Kurdish citizen, except for those loyalists of the regime (Hasan, 2020, p. 8).

The agrarian reform project was another discriminatory project adopted by the Ba'ath regime against Kurds (Winckler, 1999, p. 124). After the separation from the UAR, the Ba'ath Party upheld its land redistribution policy. Before the Ba'athist land reforms, landowners made up only 1% of the agrarian population and owned 50% of the land, whereas landless peasants formed 60% of the population (Hinnebusch, 2001, pp. 16-18). The fertile lands of Jazira passed into state ownership. Then, the state authorities distributed these agricultural lands to Arabs in the region to decrease the Kurdish landowners' influence (Gunes, 2019, p. 64).

Last but not least, the Ba'ath regime intended to create an "Arab Belt" (*al-Hizam al-Arabi*) during the 1960s-70s. According to this plan, the cordon would be about 6-10 miles deep and 200 miles wide along the Syrian-Turkish border, as seen on Map 2 (McDowall, 2020, p. 880). The regime wanted to force the Kurdish inhabitants out of the border region and move them into interior areas. Dispossessed Kurds would be replaced by Arab settlers from the Euphrates tribes. The primary purposes were to hamper transnational relations of Kurds, to prevent the spread of Kurdish unrest in Iraq and Türkiye into Syria, to provide the security of economic resources such as oil, cotton, and wheat in Jazira, and to "Arabize" the region (Gambill, 2004; Yildiz, 2005, pp. 36-38). However, the Ba'ath Party had to wait until the completion of Tabqa Dam and Lake Assad in 1973 to execute this plan. Technical problems related to these two construction projects were the main reason for this delay as they would cause Arabs to leave the areas affected by the flood (Tejel, 2009, p. 61).

Map 2: Kurdish Population Areas in Syria (McDowall, 2020, p. 617)

3. Hafez al-Assad

Hafez al-Assad came to power with another military coup in 1970 and then quickly eliminated his opponents within the army and public institutions. In 1971, he became the first non-Sunni president of Syria. Throughout his one-man rule for thirty years, Assad relied on the army and security forces because he was aware that monopolizing violence was a prerequisite to reaching political power (Tilly, 2003, p. 36). Yet, his reliance on the Alawi community revived identity contention in Syria. Even if Assad included various social forces in his regime pragmatically, this was far from inclusive democratic governance and accountability. He and his narrow circle had control over all major political decisions. Assad ran the country in a Machiavellian sense to persevere in a fragmented society and geopolitically hostile environment. However, his consolidation of power dramatically deepened the dilemmas of Syrian politics in the long run (Saouli, 2015).

With respect to the Kurdish issue, Assad followed the Ba'athist approach to create a homogenous Arab nation/identity. On the other hand, he took some pragmatic steps from time to time, as will be shown below. Discriminatory policies towards the Kurdish people continued and were legalized by his regime. Article I of the Syrian Constitution of 1973 proclaimed that "The Syrian Arab Republic is a democratic, popular, socialist, and sovereign state. No part of its territory can be ceded. Syria is a member of the Union of the Arab Republics." It provided a legal basis for ignoring minority rights. In this regard, Kurdish people and their identity were marginalized and suppressed (Gunter, 2014, p. 22). The anti-separatist emphasis of the constitution was used against Kurds (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Within this legal framework, the names of Kurdish towns and villages were changed and "Arabized" from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, i.e., Kobane became Ain al-Arab, Serekaniye became Ras al-Ayn, and Derek became Al-Malikiyah. Using Kurdish language in the workplace was banned in 1986. Kurdish songs were banned at weddings and festivals in 1989. Giving children a Kurdish name was officially banned in 1992. Businesses that had Kurdish names were forced to be renamed in Arabic in 1994. Residential real estate and houses of the *ajanib* people were confiscated in 1996. The prohibitions on Kurdish political parties, the use of the Kurdish language in education and publication, and cultural activities, including *Newroz*, proceeded in this period (Gunter, 2014, p. 21; McDowall, 2020, pp. 904-905).

Similar to his predecessors, Assad considered Kurdish nobles and *aghas* as pioneers of Kurdish nationalism. So, he tried to undermine their positions by a land reform. The land reform policy was expanded into the Arab Belt policy (Yildiz, 2005, p. 36). Many Arabs from Al-Raqqa and Aleppo were displaced following the construction of Tabqa Dam and Lake Assad and forced to move into the areas in northeast Syria (Hasan, 2020, p. 7). 41 "model" villages, each of which contained 150-200 houses, and farms were established for them. They

were compensated with sums of money by the government (Tejel, 2009, pp. 61-62). 7000 Arab families were armed and settled in Jazira along the Syrian-Turkish border during this period (Nazdar, 1993, p. 200). On the other hand, the government ordered Kurdish inhabitants, deprived of the right to ownership, out of their homes to change the demographic structure of the region. Based on an interview with a Kurdish citizen from the area, the Human Rights Watch (1996) reports that:

> The government built them homes for free, gave them weapons, seeds and fertilizer, and created agricultural banks that provided loans. From 1973 to 1975, forty-one villages were created in this strip, beginning ten kilometers west of Ras al-'Ayn. The idea was to separate Turkish and Syrian Kurds, and to force Kurds in the area to move away to the cities. Any Arab could settle in Hasakah, but no Kurd was permitted to move and settle there.

Although Assad halted this settlement campaign in 1976 because of his politics of co-optation, he did not reverse the status quo (McDowall, 2020, p. 903).

3. 1. Policy of Co-optation

Hafez al-Assad's decision to abandon the Arab Belt in 1976 and follow a relatively tolerant policy towards the Kurds was stemming from his pragmatism. He coopted different social elements of Syria, including the Kurds, vis-à-vis his domestic and international opponents (Chailand, 1994, p. 87). Assad released some Kurdish prisoners and started delivering infrastructure services to Kurdish areas during the 1980s. He even overlooked the Kurdish political movements in Syria during this period. Certain Kurdish individuals and groups were integrated into the political system as long as they maintained a pro-Assad orientation. Additionally, he gave some military positions to the Kurds, especially to the Alawi Kurds (Tejel, 2021, p. 443).

On the other hand, in the international arena, Assad used the Kurdish issue as a trump card against the regional opponents: Iraq and Türkiye (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 242; Ahram, 2019, p. 136). He cooperated with certain Kurds and exploited the Kurdish issue to confront regional

challenges. In this way, Assad aimed to steer the struggle of violent Kurdish nationalist movements towards the "true Kurdistan(s)" in Iraq and Türkiye. In exchange for his sponsorship, they would not make a claim on northeast Syria. For this reason, Kurdish leaders, such as Talabani and Öcalan denied the legitimacy of Syrian Kurdish movements and pushed the problems of Syrian Kurds into the background (McDowall, 1998, pp. 69-70). For instance, in parallel to the Syrian regime, Öcalan publicly asserted that Kurds were not "native" in Syria. So, they should join his fight against Türkiye (Gambill, 2004; McDowall, 2020, pp. 907-908).

In addition to ideological conflicts between the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'ath movements, there were economic disputes between the two countries, such as using the Euphrates waters and the Kirkuk/Mediterranean oil pipeline (Tejel, 2019, p. 372). Assad saw the Iraqi Kurdish Upheavals in 1974-75 as an opportunity to weaken Iraq. With the failure of this armed struggle, Talabani and other opposing leftist factions left the KDP and established the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975 in Damascus. The PUK benefitted from the sanctuary in Syria for many years in its struggle against the Iraqi central government. The Iraqi-Syrian relations deteriorated more during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Assad supported Iran and condemned Iraq's belligerence (Tejel, 2021, p. 443). He argued that the Iraqi invasion of Iran would weaken the Arab struggle against Israel. To return the favour, Iran sided with Syria during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 (Saouli, 2020, pp. 70-71). This strategy towards Iraq came to an end with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the strengthening of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2003. Then, the Iraqi Kurds started to speak up for their ethnic brethren in Syria (Tejel, 2009, pp. 79-80).

Meanwhile, Türkiye and Syria had historical animosity because of the Turkish annexation of Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay) in 1939. Syria did not recognize it for many decades. Moreover, Türkiye started its massive irrigation project, known as the Southeastern Anatolia

Project (GAP), in 1980. The Assad regime showed a strong reaction to this project, since the construction of many dams along the Euphrates would bring about serious water shortage in Syria (Oktav, 2004). Also, the agricultural sector gained more prominence in the Syrian economy following the decrease in oil revenues in the late 1970s. In this context, Assad decided to make use of the Kurdish unrest in Türkiye. He strategically allied with the PKK to create pressure on Türkiye. He allowed the PKK members to cross the border and provided them with financial, logistical and military support and safe havens in Syria. Then, the PKK established training camps in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, which was controlled by the Syrian army.

The PKK launched its campaign of terrorism against Türkiye in August 1984 (White, 2000). During the 1980s and 1990s, Assad patronized the PKK to undermine Türkiye. In this period, according to certain sources, thousands of Syrian Kurds joined the PKK. At least 7,000 of them either died or "disappeared" in the violent conflict between the PKK and Turkish armed forces (Montgomery, 2005, p. 134). Moreover, there were the PKK offices in Damascus, Aleppo, Afrin, Qamishli, Hasakah and so on. The Syrian government even acknowledged recruitment in the PKK "in lieu of compulsory military service" (McDowall, 2020, pp. 906-908). Additionally, some candidates, openly affiliated with the PKK, were elected to the Syrian Parliament in May 1990 (Tejel, 2009, p. 77).

The PKK's collaboration with the Assad regime strained the relations between Türkiye and Syria more. In 1996, Türkiye flexed its military muscle and declared to be ready to use force against Syria, referring to Article 51 of the UN Charter (Sezgin, 2002, p. 49). Eventually, Assad had to acquiesce to Turkish demands. He recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization, stopped his sponsorship, and expelled Öcalan, as a result of the Adana Agreement in October 1998. The agreement also indicated that the territorial dispute over Hatay ended. Besides, it was mentioned that Türkiye would enter Syrian territory if Syria

failed to stop activities "jeopardizing the security and stability" of Türkiye (Patton, 2019, p. 200).

Even if the PKK prioritized its activities against Türkiye and ignored the Kurdish issue in Syria during the 1980s and 1990s, it became organized among Syrian Kurds and got a foothold in Syria (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021, p. 133). This provided a basis for the rise of PYD, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Thus, the policy of co-optation had paradoxically caused Syrian Kurds to be more politicized, radicalized and militarized (Allsopp, 2015, p. 91). In addition, the lethargy of traditional Syrian Kurdish political parties bolstered the PKK in Syria, especially among young, undereducated, leftist and poor people (Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 70-71; Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021, p. 134).

4. Bashar al-Assad

When Bashar al-Assad came to power after the death of his father in 2000, it was understood that Syria turned into a "presidential monarchy" (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 67). At the beginning of his rule, there was an expectation of democratic reforms and economic revival. Similarly, Kurds expected that there would be some progress in the Kurdish issue in Syria. However, Bashar continued his father's authoritarian legacy and methods.

4. 1. Damascus Spring

In his inauguration speech on 17 July 2000, Bashar al-Assad stated: "I find it absolutely necessary to call upon every single citizen to participate in the process of development and modernization" (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2000). This speech raised hopes for the liberalization and democratization of Syria. Bashar was assumed to be less authoritarian than his father and expected to start a "glasnost" policy through economic and political reforms.

The Syrian opposition and civil society revived to some extent in early 2000. Political opponents from diverse backgrounds expressed their demands for freedom, equality, justice and democracy (Wikas, 2007, pp. 4-7). First, 99 'prominent intellectuals' called for the termination of the 1963 State of Emergency; declaration of an amnesty for political prisoners; return of political deportees and exiles; establishment of the rule of law for freedom of assembly, freedom of the press and freedom of expression; and freedom of public life from the laws, constraints and various forms of surveillance (Al-Hayat, 27 September 2000). This statement abstained from objecting to the regime directly and calling for a transition to democracy. Thus, the Assad regime overlooked it. Then, 1000 members of Syria's intelligentsia moved forward and demanded political plurality, a multi-party system, comprehensive political reforms, recognition for freedom of the press, independence of the judiciary, equal economic opportunities, elimination of discrimination against women, and the lifting of the state of emergency (Carnegie Middle East Centre, 2012).

Although the "Damascus Spring" encouraged hope for democratization, liberalization, political, and economic reforms, it was later understood that the Assad regime would never take the necessary steps except for some minor reforms such as releasing political prisoners after the closing of the infamous *Mezze* prison, reemergence of human rights organizations or allowing the first private newspaper in the country (Leverett, 2005, p. 89). Ultimately, Assad said that he had been misunderstood. The call for the reforms was dictated by foreign channels, and he would allow no one to "undermine" Syria (Zisser, 2003).

Syrian Kurds benefited from the Damascus Spring, as well. In this period, Assad softened state policies towards Kurds by allowing Kurdish political organizations, Kurdish language education in private courses and the distribution of Kurdish books and music tapes (Gambill, 2004). A discussion forum under the name of *Jaladat Bedirkhan*, organized by the Kurdish politician Mashaal Tammo, was also founded in Qamishli to give visibility to the Kurdish

issue (Wikas, 2007, p. 6). Meanwhile, the Damascus Spring gave an opportunity to build a bridge between the Syrian Arab opposition and Kurds (Ziadeh, 2009). Both sides noticed that they would create pressure on the regime to realize democratic reforms if they acted together (Çifçi, 2018, p. 312). However, in a short span of time, Assad ended his limited tolerance of the political opposition and returned to repressive policies (Zisser, 2014, p. 206). The political discussion forums were declared illegal and closed. Many members of the Damascus Spring and Kurdish political activists were arrested by the end of 2002 (Yildiz, 2005, p. 41). So, the hope of cultural and political opening to the Kurdish issue was lost. Assad continued policies of marginalization and oppression (Ahram, 2019, pp. 148-149).

4. 2. The "Syrianization" of the Kurdish Issue

According to Tejel, with the failure of Hafez al-Assad's co-optation policy, Damascus encountered its own Kurds. Then, the Syrian Kurdish issue became more apparent (Tejel, 2019, pp. 373-375). His strategic game had some costs. Firstly, Damascus had to acknowledge the intensification of transnational relationships between Kurds in Syria and Kurds in neighbouring countries. Secondly, Syria gave up its territorial sovereignty in Kurd Dagh to the PKK militants due to their cooperation against Türkiye during this period. Lastly, the Kurdish leaders such as Öcalan, Barzani and Talabani, instead of Assad, gained symbolic power in the minds of many Syrian Kurds. Consequently, the Kurdish identity and pan-Kurdish nationalism revived, and some Kurdish political figures started to adopt the "Rojava" or "Syrian Kurdistan" discourse (Tejel, 2021, p. 444).

The rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria following the Adana Agreement caused serious troubles for the PKK. Because of Türkiye's threat of war, the Assad regime stopped its alliance with the PKK and delivered many PKK militants to Türkiye (Knapp, 2018, p. 388). As I explained in the previous chapter, after his arrest in 1999, Öcalan transformed the

PKK's ideology, structure and strategy. He also led PKK militants to form a new party in Syria. Then, the PYD was established as the Syrian branch of the PKK in 2003 (Gunes and Lowe, 2015, p. 4). Yet, the regime heavily suppressed its members and activities by 2011 (Tejel, 2019, p. 376).

Meanwhile, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 bolstered Kurdish nationalists in the Middle East. The Iraqi Kurds were close allies of the US against Saddam. After the invasion, the 2005 constitution of Iraq recognized the Kurdish autonomy under the KRG. The Assad regime was afraid that the autonomous Kurdish entity in Iraq would inspire Syrian Kurds and would create "danger" in the near future. While the political status of Iraqi Kurds was becoming stronger, the situation of Syrian Kurds remained precarious till the emergence of the Syrian civil war.

4. 2. 1. Qamishli Riots

During a local football match played in Qamishli on 12 March 2004, Arab fans shouted slogans supporting Saddam and insulting Barzani and Talabani because of their cooperation with the US in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, whereas Kurdish fans shouted to support the US and the Iraqi Kurdish leaders (Kurdwatch, 2009, pp. 4-5). Then, they fought each other with sticks, stones and knives. Amidst the chaos, security forces commenced fire into the crowd, causing the death of at least 7 and wounding dozens of people. The next day turned into another bloodshed. The security forces, this time, fired on the funerals of Kurdish supporters. Eventually, the tension between the Assad regime and Kurdish groups erupted into massive riots in different towns, including Hasakah, Amuda, Afrin, and Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo and Damascus (Savelsberg, 2014, pp. 91-93). At least 36 people died, over 100 people were injured, and more than 2000 people were arrested during the protests (Amnesty

International, 2005). While the wounded were taken to hospitals and watched by the security forces, most of the detainees were subjected to torture (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

During the Qamishli Riots, Kurdish people chanted slogans, which were never seen before in Syria, like "liberation," "free Kurdistan," "kick out the Arab settlers," and "*Serhildan* (Uprising) until the occupation ends" (Hamidi, 2005). Demonstrators also attacked the statues of Hafez al-Assad. This act was symbolically important since they represented the Assad regime. Agitators wanted to remind of the toppling of Saddam's statue (Gunter, 2014, p. 93).

Another significant point in the Qamishli Riots is Kurdish unity and solidarity. The protests witnessed a mass Kurdish mobilization by attracting people from various political parties, ideological backgrounds and regions (Tejel, 2014, p. 223). Also, Kurds in Türkiye, Iraq and Iran announced their support for their cognates. This ethno-national movement contributed to the progress of "Kurdishness" in Syria (Gunter, 2014, p. 94). The Syrian officials called the Kurdish unrest "the work of bandits 'controlled by foreign hands' and saboteurs 'from neighbouring countries' intent on undermining the country's stability" (Tejel, 2009, pp. 116-117).

Another mass demonstration broke out because of the death of Sheikh Mohammed Mashouq al-Khaznawi in 2005. As a prominent Kurdish cleric, he was critical of the regime, especially after the Qamishli Riots (Tejel, 2009, p. 101). He also made statements demanding Kurdish cultural and political rights (Lowe, 2006, p. 6). In an interview, he even stressed the need to change the Syrian regime, mentioning the US interventions in the Middle East to get rid of dictators (Koring, 2005). Not long after this interview, Khaznawi was kidnapped on 10 May 2005 and was found dead three weeks after his abduction (BBC, 2005). Many Kurds believed the regime assassinated him for his opinions on the Kurdish issue (Human Rights Watch,

2009). Following his funeral, Kurdish people organized large demonstrations in northeast Syria and chanted slogans for Kurdish autonomy again (Gunter, 2014, p. 95).

The Qamishli and Khaznawi incidents showed that the regime's long-standing oppression and ethnic discrimination policies only paved the way for further politicization of the Kurdish issue in Syria. The revival of Kurdish nationalism in Syria had a critical impact on the Kurdish position towards both the Syrian regime and opposition before and during the 2011 Uprisings.

4. 3. Damascus Declaration

The assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 and allegations of the Assad regime's involvement in the affair put the regime in a more difficult position in the international arena. This situation encouraged the rising (but fractured) opposition to the regime. The emboldened Syrian opposition, consisting of various members of the Damascus Spring, secular groups, Muslim Brotherhood and Communists, and Kurds, issued the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change on 16 October 2005 (Wikas, 2007, p. 7). In this declaration, the Syrian opposition labelled the regime "authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish," and "call[ed] for an end to Syria's emergency laws and other forms of political repression, and for a national conference on democratic change" (Zoepf, 2005). They stated that oppressive policies subverted the social fabric of Syria and ruined the country's economy (Carnegie Middle East Centre, 1 March 2012).

Besides, the Declaration mentioned the Kurdish issue in Syria and proposed:

> A democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, in a manner that guarantees the complete equality of Syrian Kurdish citizens with the other citizens, with regard to nationality rights, culture, learning the national language, and the other constitutional, political, social, and legal rights on the basis of the unity of the Syrian land and people (Damascus Declaration, 2005).

The Damascus Declaration was a crucial step to develop relations between the Syrian opposition and Kurds against the regime. However, it did not create a strong bond between these two groups (Çifçi, 2018, p. 314). While the KDPS and some other Kurdish parties signed the Declaration and believed that it would prepare a common ground for democratic change and the solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, four Kurdish political parties, including the PYD, refused to sign the text. The latter had doubts about how the reformation process would unfold when the democratic transition was achieved. They asserted that it did not acknowledge the fundamental historical, territorial and national rights of Syrian Kurds, and uttered that the Kurds were not 'guests living in an Arab country'; on the contrary, they lived on their own land (Tejel, 2021, p. 445).

Before the 2011 Syrian Uprisings, there was a delicate balance between the Kurdish political parties and the Assad regime, although there were some tensions from 2008 onward, such as Decree 49.[14] Kurds were aware of the level of the state oppression and the lack of support from the Syrian opposition for the Kurdish issue in the country. Under these circumstances, Kurdish political movements in Syria would not take a major part in the activities against the regime. In return for this, the regime would adopt a more flexible attitude toward cultural expressions of the Kurdish identity (Tejel, 2019, p. 375). However, the Kurdish issue in Syria evolved in an unexpected direction with the eruption of uprisings and civil war, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

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[14] On 10 September 2008, a legislative decree (No. 49) was issued. This decree regulated the right to private housing and property in the border areas, covering the Hasakah Governorate and the northern part of Aleppo. The ownership, sale, and lease of real estate in these areas would be subjected to central government authorization. Kurdish circles described the decree as "anti-Kurdish" and a continuation of the "Arab Belt" (Kurdwatch Report 6, July 2010, pp. 3-4).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the genesis of the Kurdish issue in Syria and its historical evolution considering domestic and regional political contexts together. I aimed to provide a more specific explanation. Political actors do not act in a vacuum. They respond to political developments in a particular context based on their identities and their perception of interests and threats. Therefore, before discussing the emergence of the Kurdish state-like entity as a byproduct of the Syrian civil war, reviewing the historical background of the Kurdish issue in Syria and the geopolitical context in which Kurdish nationalism emerged is fundamental to evaluating the PYD's state-making activities. It may contribute to understanding the rationale of the Kurdish position in the 2011 Syrian Uprisings. The Kurdish identity in the country was consistently denied and heavily suppressed by successive Syrian governments. Arab national identity was central to Syria's state-building project. Although we saw the politicization of the Kurdish identity in Syria and the emergence of Kurdish nationalism evidently at the beginning of the twenty-first century due to changing domestic and regional circumstances, the status quo of Syrian Kurds remained the same until 2011.

Describing the historical background of the Kurdish issue is also crucial for understanding its spillover effects. Kurdish nationalists believe that the success in one part of the so-called "Kurdistan" would positively inspire "the other parts of Kurdistan." The PKK's pan-Kurdish agenda and its aspiration for an "independent and united Kurdistan" must be viewed in the same manner. For this reason, it is not acceptable for Türkiye to be a neighbour to a state-like entity under the control of PYD due to its organic ties with the PKK.

Chapter 4: The Rise of the PYD

Introduction

As I stated in the previous chapter, Syrian Kurds had been systematically repressed and marginalized for many decades when the Syrian Uprisings started in 2011. Having absolute power, the Assad regime practised a wide range of oppressive policies all over Syria, and Kurds took their fair share of this oppression. From the perspective of the regime, Syria was inherently Arabic, so Kurds were "others" in the country. Because of its oppressive policies, Syrian Kurds were fragmented and intimidated. There was no prospect of a Kurdish autonomous rule in Syria at the time. The regime would not allow for even the articulation of this idea. However, the Syrian civil war changed everything. The Syrian army left the country's northern parts in July 2012, and the PYD swiftly took control of these parts. It proved more powerful and organized than all other Kurdish political groups and formed an autonomous Kurdish entity over large parts of Syria. Then, the PYD performed quasi-state activities such as security, taxation, law, education, health, economy, etc. Besides, it gained an international reputation by acting as ground forces in the US-led global coalition formed against ISIS and managed to establish "diplomatic" relations with the US, various European countries, and Russia. Hence, the PYD benefitted immensely from the civil war in Syria.

The case of PYD provides an empirically interesting example of how an ethno-nationalist VNSA with territorial aspirations engages in a variety of state-making activities in the context of state failure and territorial breakup, as I mentioned before. For this reason, this chapter traces the emergence of the PYD rule in northeast Syria and its objectives and outlines the factors that explain the rise of the PYD. In this way, it seeks to understand the geopolitical context and circumstances that made it possible for the PYD to establish a *de facto* autonomy and expand its territory through war-making capabilities. Comprehending the reasons behind

the rise of the PYD would provide a better framework for the PYD's state-making activities and its quest for legitimacy and international recognition to survive in a complex geopolitical environment surrounded by wartime realities.

Most of the arguments in the literature indicate that the PYD came into prominence through its coercive power and cooperation with the Assad regime. They are accurate but incomplete. In this regard, I will attempt to offer a more in-depth analysis of the emergence of the PYD rule in northeast Syria. The PYD's organizational skills, transnational ties, and social relations with the local Kurdish population played a fundamental role in its success and its mobilization of various resources, which are crucial for war-making. From the beginning, the PYD excessively benefitted from the PKK's ideological, organizational, and military support. In other words, the PYD's success may be best understood by going beyond the idea of coercion and considering its relationship with the PKK.

1. The Syrian Uprisings and the PYD's Position

The Syrian uprisings posed a complicated problem for Kurds since they had to take a position vis-à-vis the escalating crisis. They needed to act cautiously and select the right partners in case of a regime change. Whilst there were demonstrations organized by young activists targeting the regime, most of the Kurdish political parties adopted a wait-and-see strategy at the beginning (Tejel, 2021, p. 446). Syrian Kurds would not trust the Assad regime due to the long-standing policy of marginalization, repression, and Arabization (Issaev and Zakharov, 2021, p. 96). Meanwhile, the Syrian National Council (SNC), as the main body of the opposition, took a similar stance against the Kurdish issue in the country. As a result, the support of Kurdish political parties to the Syrian opposition, especially to the armed rebellion, was limited (International Crisis Group, 2013; Van Dam, 2017). Only Mishaal al-Tammo, the leader of the Kurdish Future Movement, participated in the Syrian Uprisings. He took charge

of mediation between the Arab and Kurdish opposition. Yet, he was assassinated shortly after this. The supporters of Tammo blamed the regime for murdering him[15] as it had a vital interest in eliminating this kind of figure (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 87).

On the other hand, the PYD declared that the "Syrian Revolution" was not "their own," so it would remain "neutral" between the Syrian opposition and the regime (Tejel, 2019, pp. 375-376). It would adopt a "third road" position. Moreover, since Türkiye had a considerable influence on the opposition, the PYD was reluctant to side with it. According to the PYD, the escalation of the crisis would pave the way for increasing interventionism from external powers, i.e., Türkiye, in the domestic affairs of Syria (Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013, pp. 189-217).

In the context of Syria's future, the PYD declared two major goals: achieving autonomous rule and making Kurdish rights officially recognized (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012). It demanded that "Democratic Autonomy" or "Democratic Confederalism" be established not only for Kurds but all Syrians (Lowe, 2014, p. 238). As explained in Chapter Two, while the former encourages people to self-govern instead of forming a relationship with the state and leaving all the governance to it, the latter prioritizes councils even at the lowest level in the local context, ranging from streets to regions, so that local administrations can be better organized (Öcalan, 2010; 2017). Accordingly, the PYD claims that the nation-state or federalism does not exist in its agenda. Contrarily, following Öcalan's ideas, it asserts that Middle Eastern peoples should abandon the nation-state system and they should adopt a communal self-organizational system instead (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013). In other words, the PYD emphasizes it seeks a firm break from centralized and representative systems, and its political project aims to make the society stronger (vis-á-vis the state) through a non-statist democracy (Knapp et al., 2016).

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[15] According to certain sources, the PYD took part in the deed (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012).

The PYD's then-co-leader Salih Muslim said:

> We believe the nation-state is the main problem and the source behind the problem in the Middle East ... We want to get away from a nation-state position (Talk at the House of Commons, UK, 2015, as cited in Çifçi, 2018, p. 320).

Accordingly, as discussed in the literature review section, the PYD rule is mostly seen as a "revolution," and its so-called "Rojava" model is presented as a system of governance that is radical democratic, anti-statist, anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist, bottom-up, decentralized, egalitarian, inclusive, eco-friendly and gender-equal (Charountaki, 2015; Cemgil and Hoffmann, 2016; Üstündağ, 2016). With this "alternative" model, the PYD aims to break away from the Assad regime's and the Islamist forces' domination (Knapp et al., 2016). The motivation for such a system is arguably to overcome the modern states' failure to apply direct democracy, "the [Athenian] principle of freedom as non-domination" (Cemgil, 2016, p. 420), and to go beyond the Westphalian territorial assumptions and modes of governance (Hosseini, 2016; Gunes, 2019; Jongerden, 2019).

One of the PYD militants declares:

> The new organization of the Kurdish zones is born out of the thought of Abdullah Öcalan's. It is a deep and thoughtful ideology, designed to protect the population by the formation of local councils. It is the first step towards self-determination for Syrian Kurds. The goal is for people to govern themselves, without any bureaucracy and elites. Power comes from the base (Baczko et al., 2018, p. 170).

In light of this information, it can be said the PYD rule in northeast Syria is where the theories of Öcalan are brought to life. These theories were proposed especially in his work titled *Democratic Confederalism* (Öcalan, 2017). From this perspective, the so-called *Rojava* is a *space*, that would be framed by Öcalan's ideology (Tejel, 2020, p. 262).

Previously, Öcalan's ideas merely affected how the PKK and PKK-affiliated organizations operated. Moreover, the PYD rule, and its state-making activities, had been "unimaginable" before the Syrian civil war. Yet, the establishment and survival of it turned the ideology of Öcalan into reality. So, it is essential to fathom how the PYD came to gain so much power to govern a significant portion of Syria and become one of the key players in the region. For this purpose, I will discuss first its relations with the Assad regime, and then with the PKK below.

2. The Relationship with the Assad Regime

As I explained in the previous chapter, Hafez Al-Assad supported the PKK against Türkiye for many years for various reasons, including the territorial dispute on Hatay (the Sanjak of Alexandretta) and Turkish dams built on Euphrates, which threatened the water supply of Syria (McDowall, 2020, p. 637; Tejel, 2021, p. 443). He allowed Öcalan to establish bases in Syria and the Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon. Also, Syrian Kurds were encouraged to join the PKK. In return, the PKK historically ignored the suffering of Syrian Kurds under the Assad regime (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 10).

However, here, it should be emphasized that the relationship between Hafez al-Assad and the PKK is not similar to the relationship between Bashar al-Assad and the PYD. With the start of the Syrian Uprisings in 2011, the Assad regime wanted to appease Kurds and ensure they were not part of the opposition. For this reason, it agreed to meet two primary demands of the Syrian Kurds: some stateless Kurds were given citizenship, and Decree 49, which was economically detrimental to the Kurds living in the border area, was revoked. In April 2011, about 400,000 *ajanib* Kurds were given citizenship. However, the issue of *maktoumeen* was not resolved (Lowe, 2014, p. 35).

The tactic was clearly to make sure Kurds would not take part in the opposition and so that no other front against the regime would be opened (Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013, p. 203). Assad, already dealing with the opposition, was not powerful enough to suppress another uprising. Considering the historical context of the Kurdish issue in Syria in which the Kurdish population had been marginalized and oppressed and the assimilationist Arabization policies were applied in an organized manner, there is no reason to assume that the Assad regime developed a respect for Kurdish rights (Boyraz, 2020, p. 4). Hence, neither the KDPS parties nor Kurdish activists trusted the regime (International Crisis Group, 2017; Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, 2019).

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the PYD came up with a seemingly "third road" position that would not prioritize either of the sides. It stressed that: "We are not with the opposition or the regime. We follow the third way; we believe in the democratic nation [project]. This is a new idea" (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 68). However, at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Öcalan stated that it was the PYD, not the tribal leaders, whom the Assad regime should negotiate with to get support. He indicated the PYD would support the regime if it recognized the Kurdish identity and their cultural rights and acknowledged the democratic self-administration (Savelsberg, 2019, p. 358).

Meanwhile, as the Syrian Uprisings began, then-Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan stated Assad was an illegitimate leader and explicitly took the opposition's side. Then, Turkish-Syrian relations collapsed. Under these circumstances, an "alliance of necessity" or a "marriage of convenience" occurred between the regime and the PYD. As his father did in the 1980s and 1990s, Bashar al-Assad decided to utilize the PKK/PYD to pressure Türkiye. In this regard, the cooperation between the Assad regime and the PYD can be seen as a case of "better the devil you know." Their common threat perception brought them together (Pusane, 2018, p. 78). Seeing the cooperation between the Syrian opposition and Türkiye as an obstacle to the

PYD's autonomy, Muslim declared: "If the regime collapses because of the Salafis, it would be a disaster for everyone" (Cockburn, 2015).

Within this context, Assad facilitated the PKK's re-entry into Syria in 2011 (Acun and Keskin, 2017; Baczko et al., 2018). Thanks to direct contacts between the regime and the PKK, Muslim and many PKK militants were permitted to come back to Syria following a lengthy period of exile in Qandil (Netjes and van Veen, 2021). Before 2011, as a PYD representative put it, "The PYD was forbidden in Syria and Türkiye. You can say that the majority of the PYD was locked up in regime prisons. In Damascus? In all provinces!" (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 11). Yet, the convicted PYD members arrested by the regime, as a result of the rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria in the 2000s, were released (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 11). These developments provided a basis for a rumour, indicating that there was an agreement in place between the Assad regime and the PYD (International Crisis Group, 2014). There would be a division of labour in terms of suppressing the opposition and securing the control of some cities and military bases in northeast Syria. The Assad regime's historical relationship with the PKK and the smooth rise of the PYD paved the way for such allegations (Lowe, 2014, p. 231).

In July 2012, the Assad forces were retracted from the areas of northeast Syria where Kurds constituted the majority, as a result of which a substantial amount of military equipment was left behind (Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 91-92). Assad's decision pursued two fundamental goals. First, his army would not have to open a "second front" to suppress the potential Kurdish opposition; this way, he could concentrate on other areas: Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Latakia. Second, Assad hoped a PKK/PYD-dominated buffer zone would incapacitate Türkiye (Tejel, 2019, p. 376). Following the regime's withdrawal, the PYD, as the most organized Kurdish political and military actor, capitalized on the power vacuum and brought Kobane, Afrin, Amudah, Ras al-Ayn and Malikiyah under its control in less than a week

(Lowe, 2014, p. 228; Savelsberg, 2014, p. 98). Then, the PYD started acting like a quasi-state actor in northeast Syria.

During the transition, there was no notable armed conflict (Baczko et al., 2018, p. 168). Given the general *modus operandi* of the regime and the fact that the PYD did not have to engage in any significant armed conflict when taking control of these areas, I can assert the existence of specific agreements between the regime and the PYD, be them official or unofficial. The common enemy anxiety led both sides to cooperate. However, the PYD was not given unconditional control. In return, it was to overcome Kurdish protestors and refuse to align with the FSA (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 25).

Netjes and van Veen (2021, pp. 76-77) clarify that the Assad regime depended on the PYD to overcome the protests in northeast Syria and to maintain trade through nine leaked and verified documents. Similarly, Acun and Keskin (2017) provide various documents proving that they were each other's trade partners. Moreover, interviews conducted by various journalists, scholars and researchers reveal the network of relations between the regime and the PYD (International Crisis Group, 2014; Baczko et al., 2018; Schmidinger, 2018; Netjes and van Veen, 2021). A report published by the United Kingdom (UK) Government also demonstrates the relationship, focusing on the fact that the PYD did not work together with the Syrian opposition (UK Government Report, 2015). Besides, the Regime-PYD partnership runs the oil facilities in northeast Syria under the PYD control for common benefits (Netjes and van Veen, 2021).

In line with the relationship with the Assad regime, the PYD prevented the Kurdish population from effectively participating in the Syrian Uprisings, dissolved demonstrations and arrested many activists. For instance, on 27 June 2013, some Kurdish opposition activists were killed by the PYD (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The offices of other Kurdish parties or

organizations were attacked by the PYD. Their members were subjected to violence (Baczko et al., 2018, pp. 167-168). As a result, "provisionally" leaving the northeastern front to the PYD, the regime kept it out of the opposition and utilized the PYD for its benefit (Leezenberg 2016, p. 681).

Moreover, the PYD and the Assad regime's intelligence units, namely *al Mukhabarat* and *Shabbiha* forces, were acting together to keep the region and people under their control (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 12; Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 26). Kurdish politicians opposing the PYD were killed by these intelligence units (Caves, 2012, p. 5).

Besides, the Assad regime kept security forces, provided public services, ran administrative offices, and paid the officers' salaries in cities such as Qamishli and Al-Hasakah. The Syrian government structures existed parallel to the PYD structures in these cities (Barfi, 2016, p. 5).

The cooperation between the Assad regime and the PYD was a pragmatic arrangement that served the survival interests of both actors (Sary, 2016). The PYD got significant resources in northeast Syria for war-making thanks to its relations with the regime. Following its military units getting pushed out of Ras al-Ayn in November 2012 by certain rebel groups, the regime supplied the YPG with weapons, cash and diesel via Qamishli airport (International Crisis Group, 2014). Trade between the Assad regime and the PYD-controlled areas continued throughout the Syrian civil war. The regime transferred oil and gas fields in Rumeilan, Sweidiya and Jebeisa to the PYD (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 24).

Other incidents indirectly reveal that a "tacit" agreement between the Assad regime and the PYD existed. The PYD-controlled areas suffered little from airstrikes and large-scale operations conducted by Russia and the regime in contrast to rebel-controlled areas (Kızılkaya et al., 2021).

One of the leading figures of the PYD, Aldar Khalil said:

> We won't take the regime down by doing this. Why would we control it and let our city be bombed from the air. … We will not risk our cities because some parties say, 'kick out the regime' (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 70).

Furthermore, the PYD did not engage in any major conflict with the Assad regime while expanding its territorial dominance (Leezenberg 2016, p. 681). On the contrary, the PYD's military support made it much easier for the Assad regime to emerge victorious in the battle for Aleppo in 2016 (Balanche, 2015, 2016).

The collaboration between the Assad regime and the PYD was never admitted by the PYD's spokespersons (Schmidinger, 2018). They remained ambiguous on the issue. However, in an interview on 6 December 2015 with *The Sunday Times*, Bashar al-Assad publicly stated that "the government had provided the 'Kurds' [the PYD] with arms and … they had cooperated in fighting terrorism" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2015). The incidents from the beginning of the Syrian Uprisings onwards clearly show that a "tacit" relationship existed between the regime and the PYD.

3. The PYD-PKK Relationship

> *It's all PKK but different branches… Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK, sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK.*[16]

The PYD's history dates to the beginning of the PKK activities in Syria in the 1980s and the 1990s, as explained in the previous chapter (Tejel, 2009, p. 79; Schmidinger, 2018, p. 5). Between 1979 and 1998, Öcalan resided in Syria and certain parts of Lebanon under the control of Syria. At this time, the PKK organized among the Kurdish population in Syria (Gunes, 2012, p. 99). Yet, with the Adana Agreement signed between Türkiye and Syria in 1998, the Assad regime was supposed to end its support to the PKK. After the normalization

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[16] Ms Ruken, a YPG militant (Bradley and Parkinson, Wall Street Journal, 2015).

of Turkish-Syrian relations and the capture of its leader, the PKK had to transform its ideology, organizational structure and strategies, as shown in Chapter Two. Öcalan, via his lawyers, ordered the PKK to form multiple organizations in Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria to continue its activities (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 11). Then, in its Eighth Congress, that took place on 4-10 April 2002, the PKK decided on founding the PYD to exert an influence over the Syrian socio-political environment. Consequently, it was the militants from the PKK that established the PYD in 2003 (Gunes and Lowe, 2015, p. 4).

The founding members of the PYD like Şilan Kobani (Meysa Baqi), Zekeriya (Zekeriya İbrahim), Fuat (Hikmet Tokmak), Cemil (Nebo Ali) and Ciwan (Hacı Cuma Ali) were listed as the members of the PKK as well (Soner et al., 2017, p. 17). Moreover, Osman Öcalan, the brother of Abdullah Öcalan, mentioned that he led the PYD's foundation. He noted:

> I found the PYD as I did the PJAK… The PYD is connected to the PKK and acts upon the PKK orders (Soylu, 2016).

When defining the founders of the PYD, Ayse Efendi, the co-chair of the Kobane's People's Assembly, said:

> They have been educated by Mr. Öcalan. Most people have seen him and eaten with him. The people of Kobane admired Öcalan" (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 61).

The tie between the PYD and the PKK is far from being simple. It is a multifaceted, complex, and evolving one, depending on the circumstances on the ground. In 2005, the PKK established the KCK, so that all armed and political organizations in the Kurdish-majority areas of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria could be connected. Under the KCK system, offshoot political parties in these countries operate under different acronyms but work in line with the common purpose. They are all loyal to Öcalan's leadership and ideology, and the KCK explicitly has the PYD listed as its member (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 5; Lowe, 2014, p. 227).

The previous charters of the PYD also reveal how it is connected to the PKK and the KCK. The PYD's pre-2015 internal code stated that:

> The PYD considers Abdullah Öcalan as its leader and KONGRA-GEL as the supreme legislative body of the people of Kurdistan and KCK-Rojava as its system of democracy for Kurdish people in Syria (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 62).

Recognized to be the KCK's legislative body, KONGRA-GEL was also mentioned as the ultimate legislative body of the so-called "Kurdistan" in the PYD's charter. Similarly, the PYD duplicated the KONGRA-GEL model and mentioned the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) as its guide whilst forming its governance (Tosun, 2019, p. 108). As a result, despite the PYD denying any links to the PKK and trying hard to downplay the depth of the relationship, it is openly a member of the KCK and shares the same charter with it.

Moreover, there are powerful indicators that the PKK dominates the decision-making mechanisms of the PYD and the YPG on strategic issues. The PKK appoints the leaders of these organizations thanks to its dominant position in the KCK (Acun and Keskin, 2017). Most prominent figures in the PYD/YPG received their ideological and military training in Qandil in the 1990s and 2000s. Most notable of these people are Salih Muslim, Mazloum Abdi, Ilham Ahmed, Polat Can, Xebat Derik, Rojin Ramo and Aldar Khalil (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 7). While the PKK's Qandil leadership has a decisive impact on local administrations and political bodies of the PYD, the PKK militants oversaw the YPG units and trained them. Considering this information, it is safe to say that the PYD shares the same ideology, leadership and aims as the PKK. This view is also supported by many various researchers' interviews and international non-governmental organizations' reports, e.g., Baczko et al. (2018), Allsopp and Wilgenburg (2019), Savelsberg (2019), Tejel (2019), Netjes and van Veen (2021), and International Crisis Group (2013, 2014, 2017, 2019). Therefore, the PYD's ideology, organizational structure and goals cannot be fully understood if separated from Öcalan's thoughts and the PKK (Öğür and Baykal, 2018, p. 52).

A KCK member explains:

> Abdullah Öcalan visited Kobane in 1997, and from that moment Syrian Kurds began to follow him. 5,000 PKK Syrian Kurds were killed in the fight in the mountains. Therefore, there is a natural link between the PKK and PYD (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 5).

On the other hand, Khalil (2017) writes:

> We don't deny our relationships with all Kurdish parties in the four parts of Kurdistan, as we don't deny our connection to Öcalan. In fact, as I write this, I am proud to say I have a photo of Öcalan on my desk next to me (Lee, 2020, p. 84).

These remarks indicate an organic relationship between the PYD and the PKK. However, the PYD does not admit that it functions as a sub-branch of the PKK and attempts to eliminate its relation to the PKK (Lowe, 2014, p. 233). As the PYD gained power, it downplayed its PKK affiliation and changed its charter due to domestic and international legitimacy concerns. For instance, the PYD removed all mentions of the "PKK" from its program during the Fifth Congress in 2012. In the Sixth PYD Congress held in 2015, the KONGRA-GEL was no longer referred to as the Kurdish people's legislative body (Çelebi, 2019, pp. 10-11). The reason for these changes is the listing of the PKK as an international terrorist organization. So, the PYD would be associated with a terrorist organization, and its pursuit of legitimacy and democratic governance would not be convincing enough (Özçelik, 2020, p. 697).

3. 1. Armed Forces and the Capability of War-Making

Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun! (Mao Zedong)

The PYD's connection to the PKK explains how it was able to create, mobilize and arm the YPG so quickly at the beginning of the Syrian crisis (International Crisis Group, 2017; Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, 2019). The PYD got into power mainly through its military power (Acun and Keskin, 2017, pp. 22-23). It made great use of the PKK's fighting experience as soon as the Syrian civil war started with no end in sight. Back in 2011, Öcalan

advised that the PYD should form its defence units. He stated that the *Muslim Brothers* would kill Kurds indiscriminately if they got into power. For this reason, it was a must that Kurds be strong enough, in any case, to defend themselves (Hezenparastin, 2011). Then, the YPG was established in the summer of 2011. In addition, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), another military unit for defence consisting of women, was founded in 2012. Along with the YPG/J, *Asayish* were built as police forces in the early stages of the civil war. The militarization of the Kurdish struggle in Syria was a new development though many Syrian Kurds previously fought for the PKK in its battle against Türkiye.

According to its international website, the YPG is:

> more than a military force. It is a revolutionary organization that protects the transformation towards the ethico-political society against its external and internal enemies in accordance with the principles of democratic confederalism (YPG International, 2017).

In this way, the YPG showed its commitment to Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism project (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, pp. 64-67).

Even if it was new in the Syrian arena, the YPG had decades of war-making capabilities inherited from the PKK (Ozkizilcik, 2021). The PKK provided the YPG with fighters, knowledge and skills. Hundreds of PKK militants moved from Qandil to northeast Syria at the beginning of the Syrian crisis (Tejel, 2019, p. 376; Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 24). They were experienced in fighting and devoted themselves to the "revolution" (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 118). Many of them fought against Türkiye in the 1990s and had the military discipline that other warring parties in northeast Syria lacked (McDowall, 2020, pp. 670-671). These "PKK veterans (of Syrian or Turkish origins) … provided a 'skeletal' structure for the YPG, 'fleshed-out' by local recruits" (Jenkins, 2016). Additionally, they ideologically and militarily trained the YPG's local recruits about Öcalan's ideology

(Leezenberg, 2016, pp. 682-683). In this way, the PKK assisted the YPG in ideological, operational and organizational capacity.

The PYD has been the main (even if not only) military actor among the Kurdish parties in northeast Syria since the beginning of the crisis (Gunes, 2019, p. 68). Other Syrian Kurdish parties have a limited number of fighters and were unable to challenge the PYD's military power (Savelsberg, 2014, p. 99). Furthermore, "its allegiance to Öcalan [as a symbol which] helped to rally sympathizers and avoid internal splits" (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 1). In other words, the PYD is not only militant but also well-organized under the guidance of a "charismatic" leader (McDowall, 2020, p. 636). Its common characteristics with the PKK, such as authoritarianism, strict hierarchical system, and harsh response to criticism, played a crucial role in the PYD's political and military control over northeast Syria amidst the brutal conditions of the warfare (Lowe, 2014, pp. 229-233).

On the other hand, the PYD rule had certain limitations. The Kurdish enclaves were not contagious. Most of the Kurdish population resided in places, such as Aleppo and Damascus, over which the PYD did not have power. People living in the enclaves could only meet their food and energy needs through Arab neighbours. Further, the PYD's actions were unilateral since it lacked domestic and international legitimacy and recognition. Yet, with the rise of a perfect enemy at the end of 2014, this situation changed. The fight against ISIS enabled the PYD to widen its domination over mixed and Arab-majority areas and to establish continuous territorial control in northeast Syria. Besides, it gained international popularity and "legitimacy" through its struggle against ISIS, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Six. Thus, it can be asserted that the PYD was the most successful VNSA in Syria in terms of attracting political, military, financial and logistical support from various international actors. Despite Türkiye's fierce opposition, the US-PYD alliance against ISIS was the clearest example of this success.

In the middle of September 2014, ISIS attacked Kobane. Due to ISIS's fighting prowess and the initial absence of US support, ISIS took control of nearly all of Kobane town. It pushed about 200,000 Kurdish civilians to move toward the Turkish border by the end of September (Filkins, 2014). Nonetheless, the PYD managed to turn this near-certain defeat into a symbolic victory. This battle became a critical turning point in stopping the advancement of ISIS. In the end, ISIS had to lift the siege and withdraw its forces from the town, and the PYD regained control of the town in January 2015.

One of the determining elements that made the PYD defeat ISIS was the military aid it got from the US. With the dramatic spread of ISIS and the collapse of the Iraqi army at Mosul, the US strategic interests in the Middle East were severely threatened. ISIS attempted to change the socio-political structure of the region with a global revolutionary jihadist agenda. Under these circumstances, the US felt compelled to act against it and merely focused on defeating ISIS (Gani, 2020, p. 222). However, the Obama administration was against deploying American troops to the ground from the very beginning of the crisis (The US National Security Strategy, 2015; Krieg, 2016; Sarı Ertem, 2018). Meanwhile, the FSA was not eager to fight ISIS rather than the Assad regime, which is why the US's train-equip program for the FSA failed. On the contrary, the PYD, which had no intention of fighting the regime, demonstrated its willingness to fight ISIS. Consequently, it strategically benefited from the US focus on ISIS.

The YPG was used as ground forces of the US-led international coalition to "degrade and destroy" ISIS (Mumford, 2021, pp. 32-38). Its fighters provided intelligence about the coordinates of ISIS positions, and the US-led Air Force hit these targets. Following the battle for Kobane, the US equipped the YPG with diverse and advanced weapons, ammunition, and vehicles (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 45; Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 105-106). Also, the YPG fighters were trained by the US Special Forces, and American officials visited the PYD-

occupied areas (Clawson, 2016, pp. 53-54). Then, the US troops were eventually deployed to northeast Syria. Besides, the US established a de facto no-fly zone, which protected the PYD for a long time. Hence, building a strategic partnership with the US against ISIS has been vital for the PYD in terms of remaining autonomous and expanding its territorial control over the non-Kurdish regions of Syria (especially east of the Raqqa-Deir Ezzor axis) (Netjes and van Veen, 2021). As a result, the PYD highly benefitted from the fight against ISIS and used it as a pretext to "legitimate" its violence and enlarge its territorial control.

During this process, many countries, that had recognized the PKK as a terrorist group, praised and supported the PYD in their campaign against ISIS. They ignored its ties to the PKK. Western media outlets cheered the PYD and identified it as the sole rampart against *Jihadists*. Its discipline in warfare, secularism and alleged democratic qualities were emphasized. As it will be shown in the next chapter, the PYD also created an image of inclusive local governance that was sensitive to issues such as minority rights and gender equality to enamour the Western world (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 7). In this way, the international support to the PYD was "legitimized" (Bila, 2016, pp. 163-191).

However, the YPG's military victories raised Türkiye's security concerns. Türkiye made its discontent clear regarding the increasing international support for the PYD. So, to alleviate Türkiye's concerns, the YPG rebranded into a multi-ethnic/religious group entitled the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 111). The US Army General Raymond Thomas, the head of Special Operations Command, explains the creation of the SDF:

> We literally played back to them: 'You have got to change your brand. What do you want to call yourselves besides the YPG?' With about a day's notice, they declared that they are the Syrian Democratic Forces… *I thought it was a stroke of brilliance to put democracy in there somewhere*. But it gave them a little bit of credibility (Reuters, 2017).

By rebranding the YPG forces under the new title of the SDF, the US officials argued that they were not supporting the YPG but a coalition consisting of various ethnic and religious

groups. Put differently, the SDF came into being so that its tie to the PKK would be invisible. Yet, even the foundation of the SDF on 12 October 2015 was made public by the YPG itself. The PYD leads it, and most of its militia forces are from the YPG (Savelsberg, 2019, p. 361). Meanwhile, the US knew that defeating ISIS would need heading for the Arab-majority areas of northeast Syria. For this reason, it was necessary to establish an organization consisting of not only Kurds but also Arabs (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 46). According to various sources, before the Raqqa Operation, the YPG/J had roughly 50,000 Kurdish fighters, in addition to 23,000 Arab fighters under the banner of the SDF (McDowall, 2020, p. 685).

Following the fight against ISIS, the YPG transformed its organizational structure and warfare techniques with the support of the US-led international coalition. In other words, the PYD was restructured into a quasi-state security force (Pusane, 2018, p. 84; Rashid, 2018, pp. 54-58; Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, pp. 64-65). The PYD even enforced compulsory military service in its controlling areas in the fight against ISIS (Acun and Keskin, 2017). Male Syrian Kurdish citizens between the ages of 18 and 30 were required to join the YPG, while Kurdish women were allowed into it voluntarily. Also, each family had to send at least one member to the YPG for six months. If a family had only one male child, they were exempted from this practice.

In the meantime, it must be mentioned that neither Russia nor Iran attempted to prevent the PYD's military activities because of its ongoing relations with the Assad regime (Leezenberg 2016, pp. 681-683). The PYD was careful about managing its relations with both the US and the Assad regime. As Mazloum Abdi, the SDF's commander, said: "We remain in constant contact with the regime because we live side by side and we face common security problems" (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 45).

To sum up, the YPG has been resilient throughout the Syrian civil war thanks to the PKK's war-making capabilities and organizational skills. The PYD has been able to capitalize on the warfare in Syria through its military strength and pragmatism. Then, it attained a hegemonic position in northeast Syria and consolidated its rule.

3. 2. Transnational Ties

VNSAs exploit overseas diasporas to expand their influence and get financial, logistical, political, and military support. The PKK is among such actors (Akartuna and Thornton, 2021). It has been developing transnational links with the Kurds in different countries for decades (Kaya and Whiting, 2017, p. 87). Also, ethnic insurgencies become more resilient and viable if they rely on ethnic groups stretched over international borders and receive cross-border aid from their ethnic kins (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021, p. 132). Therefore, transborder and transnational ties are resourceful for VNSAs in terms of expanding their calibre (Aydınlı, 2016, p. 17). Besides, the "discursive" support coming from external actors/diaspora groups would "legitimize" them in the eyes of international actors.

Since its foundation, the PKK has formed a wide range of networks in Europe, where most of the Kurdish diaspora live (Aydın and Emrence, 2015, pp. 24-27). This diaspora allowed the PKK to promote itself in Europe. To realize its goals, it engages in certain regular activities in European countries, such as propaganda, protests, recruitment, and fundraising. It is no secret that the PKK receives funds from its sympathizers through donations, membership fees, sales of publications, special events and campaigns. According to a report of the European Police Office (Europol) in 2018, the PKK systematically collects money through the front companies and organizations within the "legal framework" (Europol, 2018, p. 11).

In addition, the PKK is recognized to have been involved for a long time in "organized crime activities such as money laundering, racketeering, extortion and drug trafficking" (Europol,

2022). A broad drug trafficking network in Europe run by the PKK has been a remarkable source of income for it (White, 2015). For instance, the PKK earns between $1.5 billion to $3 billion annually from drug trafficking (Anadolu Agency, 2019). These financial sources are collected and canalized towards activities of the PKK. Since the PYD operated like a Syrian branch of the PKK, it could be said that the PYD also benefitted from the PKK's existing financial sources and funding (Oktav et al., 2018, p. 13).

Moreover, the PKK's media outlets in different European countries, such as *Roj TV* and *Serxwebun*, are used to make the organization's propaganda (Bayraklı et al., 2019). Additionally, the PKK lobbies the EU supranational organizations to justify its actions and get international support (Çelik, 2019, p. 128). Similarly, the Kurdish diaspora in Europe provided the PYD with the image of a "legitimate" and "democratic" organization. The ability of its leaders to represent the PYD in various European capitals facilitated international political support for the PYD (Acun and Keskin, 2017, pp. 21-22). These transnational and foreign ties were beneficial in advancing the PYD's domestic and international interests.

The PKK's transborder/transnational ties were also a militarily vital element for the PYD throughout the critical stages of the Syrian civil war. As explained above, the Kobane siege and the defeat of ISIS was a turning point through which the PYD managed to consolidate power over a significant part of northeast Syria. During the siege, the PKK and the PYD mobilized thousands of volunteers from distinct parts of the world. Especially Kurds in neighbouring countries strongly supported the PYD in terms of manpower. According to Tezcür and Yıldız, approximately 1500 people came to Kobane by November 2015, and 785 PKK sympathizers from Türkiye died from 2013 to 2016 as YPG militants (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021, p. 137, 135). On the other hand, an *Atlantic Council* study reported that Kurds from Türkiye formed nearly 50 per cent of the YPG's self-reported casualties within that

period (Stein and Foley, 2016). This data offers valuable insight into how the PYD increased its military power with its transborder/transnational ties and mobilization efforts.

Meanwhile, the so-called "Kobane resistance" narrative was used to spread a sense of pride among Kurds and to inspire the international community. The Kurdish diaspora ran a global solidarity campaign to save Kobane from ISIS (Khalaf, 2016, p. 21). The Kobane struggle turned into an international symbol, and the PYD gained considerable sympathy abroad via its positive media appearance (Graeber, 2014). The PYD's secular position consolidated its international image. Being aware of the global concern about ISIS' atrocities and "Islamic terrorism", the PYD's then co-leader Muslim, in an interview with Çiviroğlu, said that:

> I want the American public and the entire world to know that we are trying to stop these jihadist groups, and we want them to stand with us. These people attack innocent civilians and kill children, women and old people simply because they are Kurds (Salih Muslim, 2013).

The representations of female PYD fighters versus "barbaric" bearded male ISIS terrorists in international mainstream media strengthened the PYD's image of secular democracy and gender equality in harmony with Western ideals (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş, 2018). Then, many radical leftist foreign fighters from Western countries, most of whom were PKK sympathizers, travelled to northern Syria and joined the PYD (Harp, 2017; The Carter Center, 2017). They received intensive military training from the YPG to support the so-called "Rojava Revolution" (Europol, 2022).

As a result, the PYD attracted a great deal of attention from not only the Kurdish groups but also the non-Kurdish global audience through its transnational ties and ideological stance. This facilitated international and transnational support for the PYD and increased its war-making capabilities to survive in such a complex region.

3. 3. Ideological Power and Social Support

Historically speaking, the PKK profoundly infiltrated the Syrian Kurdish community and viewed this community as a source of fighters it could use in its campaign against Türkiye (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 61; Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 13). Thousands of Syrian Kurds were recruited by the PKK since the 1980s. During this process, the PKK obtained a devoted and durable popular base in northeast Syria.

Many people in the region had someone from their families in the PKK camps. Families of the militants became part of the PKK's network and functioned as the mainstay of its grassroots mobilization (Katman and Muhammad, 2022, pp. 242-243). Hence, the PKK has been a successful organization in terms of not only recruiting membership but also loyalty. Since the PYD came into being following the PKK restoring its heritage and organizational remnants, the PKK's socio-political influence in northeast Syria served the PYD's interests. It had little difficulty gaining a significant level of social support among the Kurdish population in the region.

On the other hand, as Mann emphasized (1986, p. 22; 1993, p. 7), ideological power increases the power of a socio-political organization by enhancing the meaning of its existence. In this regard, modern ideologies, especially nationalist ones, play a crucial role in the war-making activities of states and VNSAs, as I underlined in Chapter One. The self-narrative of the PKK (and so the PYD) defines itself as a heroic, revolutionary and nationalistic organization aiming to resist, challenge and revolutionize society's norms (Oktav et al. 2018, p. 4). According to this narrative, the PKK is to be the "future army" of a liberated group and territory. It adamantly defined a particular region as a "homeland" and resorted to political violence for the independence of the so-called "Kurdistan" for many decades (McDowall, 2020, p. 636). It also promoted Kurdish cultural identity through public and cultural activities

like *Newroz*. In this way, the PKK historically earned sympathy among Syrian Kurds as an ethno-nationalist VNSA.

Moreover, the populist model of the PKK, and so the PYD, based on Öcalan's personality cult, is not like traditional Syrian Kurdish parties (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021). While they primarily utilized parochial networks comprising family or tribe connections, the PKK appealed to Kurdish people from various backgrounds (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, pp. 18-19). The Kurdish Insurgency Militants dataset has the biographical information of 9,196 PKK militants who were active in the organization between 1984 and 2016 (Tezcür, 2016). This dataset shows that the number of PKK militants born in Syria was 1096. The PKK is quite popular among young, poor and undereducated Kurds in Syria, especially among *ajanib* and *maktoumeen* people (McDowall, 2020, p. 671). Additionally, the PKK has been recruiting women for a long time in line with its gender equality discourse. 15 per cent of the PKK militants born in Syria were women. The PYD mobilized many women during the Syrian civil war, and they fought in the ranks of the YPJ. The misogynistic ideology of ISIS was called out by the PYD for being an existential threat to women's security (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021, pp. 133-135).

In short, the PYD expanded its societal base and mobilized different segments and classes of the Kurdish population during its war-making activities in northeast Syria thanks to the ideology, organization and social networks built by Öcalan and the PKK.

Conclusion

Although it is quite a young organization compared to other Kurdish organizations and parties in Syria, the PYD got the upper hand in an environment of a weakened regime and fragmented opposition amid the civil war. Its pragmatic attitude and tactical relations with various actors, depending on the changing circumstances, helped the PYD to realize its aspirations. In particular, the "tacit" relations with the Assad regime and organic ties with the PKK played an essential role in the PYD's war-making efforts. In addition, its military background, solid organizational structure, ideological power, transnational connections and ability to mobilize masses all combined and put the PYD in a hegemonic position in northeast Syria. In other words, while institutional and military readiness was critical against the backdrop of a brutal civil war, ideological power was necessary to mobilize the masses to capture territory and defend it from competitors. Besides, the PYD's transborder ethnic and transnational linkages were decisive in its war-making efforts during the milestones of the Syrian conflict.

Especially following the fight against ISIS, the PYD gained considerable international attention. Before the rise of ISIS, the PYD rule had certain limitations, and its cantons were not united. The Assad regime was the main collaborator of the PYD because of the hostile relationship with the Syrian opposition and Türkiye. Yet, the PYD presented itself as a useful actor in the fight against ISIS and sought international legitimacy and recognition by allying with the US-led international coalition. This strategy was in line with the PKK's long-term agenda and goals. In this process, the PYD used the presence of ISIS in Syria as an excuse to extend its territorial control and connect the cantons. Western countries and communities sympathized with the PYD's role in the victory over ISIS. The PYD also worked hard to form a positive image through its political discourse, supporting pluralist democracy, minority

rights, gender equality and so on. Acting this way was necessary for the PYD to secure its survival and challenge arguments questioning its territorial control.

Consequently, the PYD emerged as an important political actor with regional geopolitical implications. Once a VNSA, the PYD became a quasi-state actor that had relations with different international actors. Its rule constituted almost 30 per cent of the territory in Syria. Between 2012 and 2018, the PYD's *de facto* autonomy seemed unstoppable. Yet, because of its ties with the PKK, Türkiye saw the PYD's existence at its southern border and its state-making activities as a national security threat. With the decline of the ISIS threat, Türkiye exerted more pressure on the PYD. After Türkiye's military operations carried out in 2018 and 2019, the PYD lost control of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn, and Tal Abyad. Meanwhile, the Assad regime signalled that it aimed to regain control of the PYD-dominated areas after securing its position. Therefore, considering the complex and hostile environment around the PYD and the unpredictable political landscape of Syria, it is ambiguous whether the PYD's *de facto* autonomy in northeast Syria will survive as a state-like entity or not.

Chapter 5: The Kurdish State-Like Entity in Northeast Syria

Introduction

As emphasized in the Introduction, the weakening of state authority creates a power vacuum and causes the rise of VNSAs. When people feel that the state cannot protect them, meet their basic needs and address their grievances, they may turn to alternative sources of security and governance. In this context, VNSAs capitalize on state deficiencies. They attempt to monopolize the means of violence by eliminating rivals in a given territory and simulate the functions of a state by creating state-like entities. Similarly, as highlighted in the previous chapter, the PYD took advantage of the power vacuum in the context of a state failure and emerged as a dominant political and military actor in northeast Syria. Then, it established various administrative institutions and security forces. Following the anti-ISIS war in Syria, the PYD got international attention with its governance model.

The PYD argues that its "alternative" governance model was conceived to address the inherent flaws of the existing modern nation-state system, rather than aiming for secession or the establishment of an independent Kurdish federal region within Syria (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 12). According to the PYD's discourse, its objective was to enact comprehensive societal reforms and promote freedom, pluralism, social equality and democracy. So, the PYD advocated for "Democratic Autonomy" or "Self-Administration" at the local level. As discussed in Chapter Two, Öcalan refers to this model as a "non-state political administration" or a "democracy without a state."

On the contrary, I assert that the PYD's activities are an example of state formation. Despite its ideological and rhetorical rejection of the nation-state system, the PYD replicates the modern state-making mechanisms in northeast Syria. It exercises administration, monopolizes

violence in a certain territory, enforces conscription, imposes taxation, establishes a legal system, provides public services and education, seeks legitimization, employs nationalist symbols, engages in mapping and bordering, conducts para-diplomacy and so on. In doing so, the PYD wants to establish a Kurdish sovereign rule under its control in northeast Syria and aspire to the power that independent states enjoy in the international arena.

In this chapter, I will shed light on three fundamental and interrelated aspects of modern state-like practices of the PYD: administration, security and diplomacy. The first aspect pertains to the administrative practices. By establishing institutions and implementing rules, the PYD aims to govern, provide public services, strengthen its rule and found a new political order. The second aspect involves maintaining territorial control by coercive power. The PYD recognizes that institutionalized political governance in a specific territory relies on the monopolization of violence. The third aspect focuses on para-diplomatic activities. The PYD's state-making activities do not necessarily result in the establishment of an internationally recognized Kurdish state or autonomous rule. The political changes are open-ended and contingent. Formal recognition by other sovereign states is compulsory for a political entity to attain statehood in a given territory. For this reason, the PYD engages in diplomatic activities to reinforce its authority and get international recognition in the long run.

Meanwhile, the legitimization of political authority is the basis of the willingness to obey. It depends on both material and non-material factors. VNSAs recognize the importance of establishing social consent in the construction of a state-like sovereign rule. Likewise, the PYD seeks to legitimize its rule with both rational and symbolic mechanisms. Since the acceptance of authority is tied not only to the provision of public services but also to the identity of the population, the PYD mimics modern nation-states in terms of symbolic representation, indoctrination and mobilization procedures and tries to foster a sense of shared

(national) identity among the population with a peculiar logic of territorialization. Yet, the PYD's legitimization efforts will be elaborated separately in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I will lastly conduct a critical analysis of the PYD's quasi-state activities, one-party rule and ethno-nationalism. This analysis demonstrates how the PYD's path toward statehood diverges from its discourse.

1. Administration

This section will first dwell on the ideological background of the PYD rule, then explain its evolution, and finally reveal the structure of the PYD's administrative exercises.

1. 1. Ideological Background

According to Öcalan (2011, 2017), the nation-state model is unsuitable for the Middle East as it fragments peoples, imposes artificial borders and perpetuates the oppression of ethnic minorities. He also argues that, rooted in authoritarian leadership and gender hierarchy, modern state formation in the region paved the way for social inequalities and cultural injustices (Öcalan, 2013, 2015). Thus, Öcalan proposes replacing this unnatural system with a confederation of grassroots public associations, following Bookchin (1991). This model allegedly prioritizes participatory democracy and seeks to establish self-governance through a network of interconnected local assemblies. It claims to enable the democratization of social organization through a bottom-up decision-making process. In addition, as specified by Öcalan (2013, p. 55), the pursuit of justice needs to involve establishing democratic, gender-equal and eco-friendly societal political structures, in which the state does not hold central authority.

Öcalan tries to challenge the hegemony of the nation-state system by advocating for radical democracy, self-governance, cooperative economy, gender equality and ecological sustainability. These viewpoints are central tenets of the organizations affiliated with the PKK. In a similar vein, the PYD embraces Öcalan's critique of the modern nation-state and his call for "Democratic Confederalism" for the Kurdish people (Bröker, 2016, p. 7). It thinks that all nations of the Middle East must do away with the capitalist bureaucratic nation-state system and instead adopt communal self-organization (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013, pp. 163-185). Accordingly, the PYD ostensibly aspires to establish a "stateless" order that would allow people to govern themselves freely within existing borders (Okrest et. al., 2017). So, in the literature, it is frequently argued that the PYD prioritizes the strengthening of society through a non-statist democracy in contrast to state-centric political agendas (Allsopp, 2015; Gunes, 2019; Jongerden, 2019; Knapp et. al., 2016; Lowe, 2014; Maur and Staal, 2015). Concerning this, the PYD members put forward 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 (Internationalist Commune, 2014).

Therefore, they claim to propose an "alternative" approach that could address the socio-political problems stemming from the nation-state model in the Middle East (Cemgil, 2016).

Besides, the PYD's bylaws advocated for gender equality and supported women's engagement in the public sphere to consolidate social justice (Acun and Keskin, 2017). The local committees in the cantons are required to include a nearly equal representation of men and women (with a 40 per cent women's quota) (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2018, p. 247).

As a result, the PYD's vision seems to aspire to dismantle oppressive, hierarchical, patriarchal and homogenizing attributes of the nation-state system. However, a deeper examination of its administration reveals stark inconsistencies, as will be elucidated below.

1. 2. Evolution of the PYD Rule

On the eve of the Syrian civil war, the PYD founded two organizations, namely the People's Council of West Kurdistan (*Meclîsa Gel a Rojavayê Kurdistanê*-PCWK) and the YPG in the summer of 2011 (Aiboga et. al., 2016, pp. 83-85). With this initiative, the PYD came up with an administrative framework. The elections were held for the first PCWK in November 2011. As the political wing, it worked with the Movement for a Democratic Society (*Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk*-TEV-DEM), which was a broader civil society movement. Acting as the central authority over local and district councils, the PCWK consisted of various political and civil society organizations. Nonetheless, all of them had associations with the PYD (Lowe, 2014, pp. 227-228). Additionally, no other party except for the PYD took part in the elections (Savelsberg, 2014, p. 101).

In November 2013, the PYD founded the "Transitional Administration for Rojava," highlighting that its rule was a "democratic self-governing collective self-administration from below" (Phillips, 2015, pp. 162-163). However, all participants of the Transitional Administration had ties to the PYD. Neither the Kurdish National Council (KNC) nor any major Kurdish political parties like *Yekîtî*[17] were among the participants (Savelsberg, 2014, p. 101). Later on, the PYD established Democratic Autonomous Administrations (DAAs) in Afrin, Jazira and Kobane in January 2014 (Acun and Keskin, 2017, pp. 21-23).

In December 2015, the PYD established the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) by cooperating with different ethnic groups and tribes living in the region (Knapp et. al., 2016, p. 114). The role of TEV-DEM and PCWK diminished with the coming of the SDC. Thereafter, the "Federal Democratic System of Rojava-Northern Syria" was formed in March 2016.

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[17] Pro-KDP Yekîtî Party was formed in November 1999 under the auspices of Barzani (Bechev, 2013). This party wanted Kurdish to be recognized as the official language, autonomous administration in the Kurdish areas "organized and run by Kurds," and formation of security units by the residents of these areas (Gambill, 2004).

During the proclamation of the federation, there were pretended representatives of different ethnic and religious groups. Following the proclamation, the "Social Contract Committee of the Founding Parliament of the Democratic Federalism in Northern Syria" was formed (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 23). The committee's goal was to develop a "legal and political vision" for the system.

In December 2016, a new version of the Social Contract was proposed, and the word "Rojava" was left out. This action angered certain Kurdish groups both in and outside Syria (Tejel, 2021, p. 449). The reason was the potential of incorporating Raqqa and Deir Ezzor into the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" (DFNS) (Wilgenburg, 2020, p. 152). In doing so, the PYD stressed the multi-ethnicity of the new federal system. Towards the end of 2016, the PYD managed to double its territory by seizing Arab-majority areas in northeast Syria thanks to its cooperation with the US under the banner of SDF (Baczko et. al., 2018, p. 176). After the Raqqa Operation carried out in October 2017, the PYD-led federation was split into three regions: Afrin, Euphrates and Jazira. Nevertheless, Manbij, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor were not included. It was accordingly at their discretion to later join the federal system either through popular vote or a decision taken by their councils (Wilgenburg, 2020, p. 153).

In September 2018, the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" (AANES) was announced by the PYD. The AANES' duty was to ensure "coordination" between the separate cantons, together with the SDC and the TEV-DEM (Rojava Information Center, 2019). The goal of creating the AANES was to unite all the local administrations (Hawar News, 2018). In this way, the PYD reinforced its monopoly over the "autonomous" administrations. The statements of Berivan Khalid, the co-chair of the Executive Council of the AANES, prove this claim: "The SDF created this self-administration because there was the need to unify the several local administrations *under one umbrella*" (Wilgenburg, 2020, p. 154).

When announced, the AANES constituted almost 30 per cent of the territory in Syria. It had two principal objectives: that Kurds' rights shall be recognized constitutionally, and "Democratic Autonomy" shall be established (Netjes and van Veen, 2021). The AANES consists of the Interior Body, Education Body, Local Administration Body, Economy and Agriculture Body, Finance Body, Culture and Art Body, Health and Environment Body, Social Affairs and Labour Body, and the Women's Body. Also, ten commissions and seven offices were formed, including Foreign Relations, Defence, Advisory Office, Oil and Natural Resources, Media Offices, Religion and Faith Office, and Planning and Development Office (Wilgenburg, 2020, p. 154). As is seen, the AANES system is very similar to the modern states' bureaucratic systems with different branches.

To sum up, with the decline of the state apparatus in northeast Syria, the PYD assumed administrative control, drafted a constitution, conducted elections and set up various local councils. Between 2012 and 2018, the PYD's *de facto* administration seemed unstoppable. However, after the fall of ISIS, Türkiye exerted more pressure on the PYD and organized various military operations against it in 2018 and 2019. Then, the PYD lost control of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad (Netjes and van Veen, 2021).

1. 3. Structure of Democratic Autonomous Administrations

The DAAs supposedly adhere to a decentralized and bottom-up approach, as demonstrated in Figure 6. At the bottom of this structure are the Communes, which are assemblies comprising households, then comes the Neighbourhoods/Villages formed by these communes, and at the top are the District People's Councils. The PCWK, encompassing urban centres, villages, and communes, serves as the comprehensive assembly in this framework. The process of decision-making is purportedly structured to ascend from communes to the cantons. Across these four tiers, there exist eight commissions focusing on various aspects, including women,

defence, economics, politics, civil society, free society, justice, ideology and health (Knapp et. al., 2016, pp. 88-90; Dinc, 2020, pp. 5-6).

Figure 6: Structure of Democratic Autonomous Administrations (Knapp et. al., 2016, p. 92)
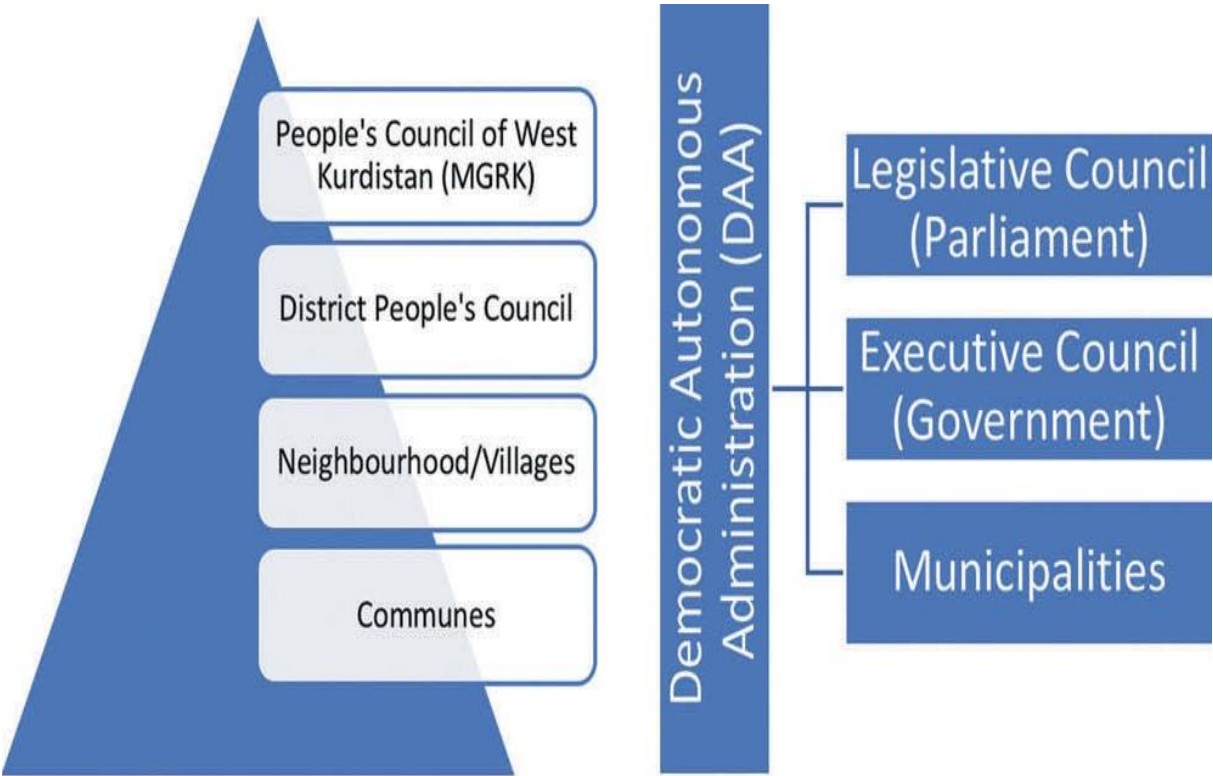
Moreover, as depicted in Figure 7, along with municipalities, the governance of these cantons is divided into three primary entities: the Legislative Council (akin to a parliament), the Executive Council (resembling a government) and the Judicial Council (for judiciary matters). This structure also incorporates a Supreme Election Board and a Supreme Constitutional Court. Besides, a coordinating council operates across all cantons, whilst each canton formulates its specific policies and delivers public services. Maintaining security within cantons is entrusted to *Asayish* Forces, as will be shown below.

Figure 7: The Structure of Cantons (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 27)
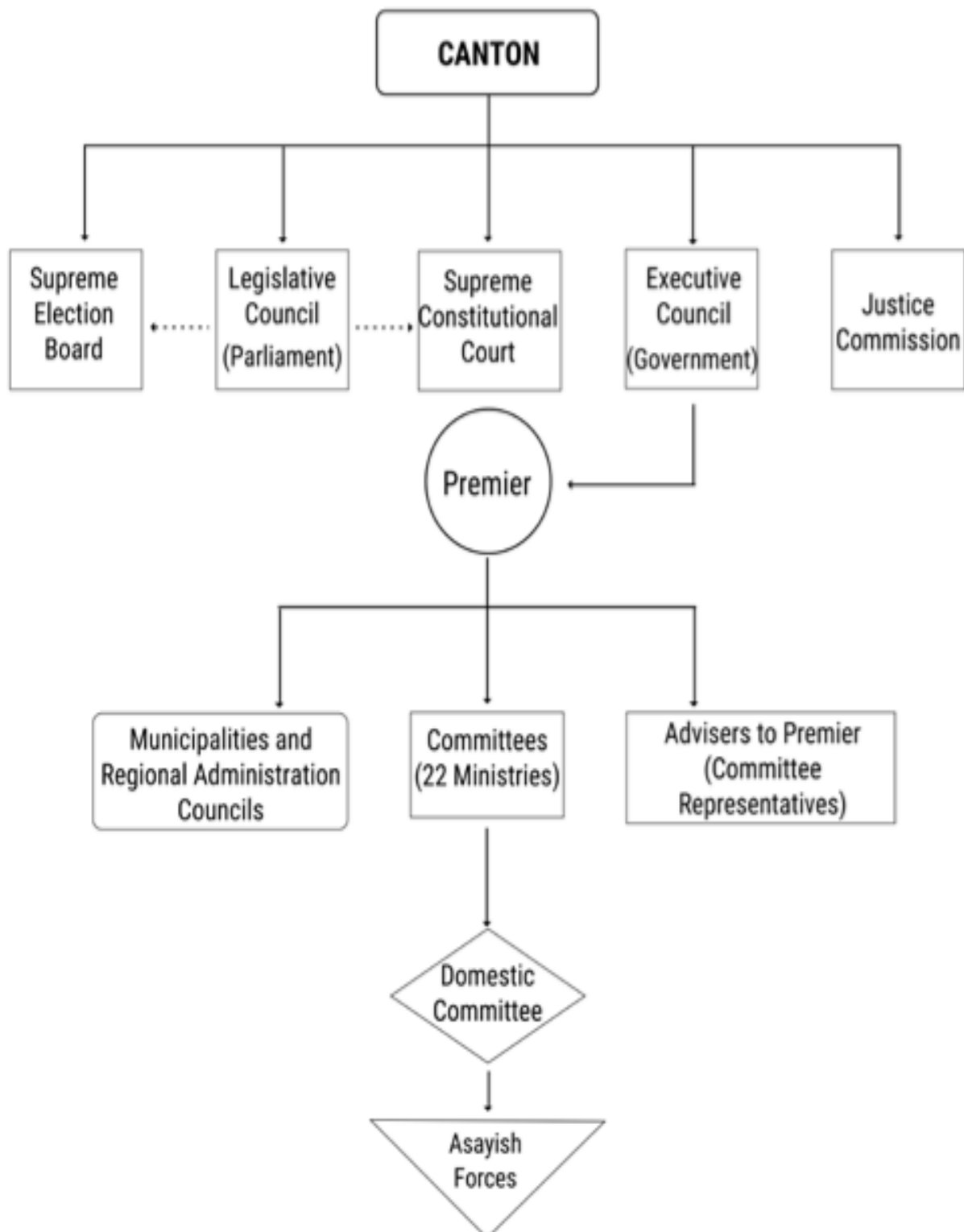
On the other hand, all cantons have councils, committees, commissions and cooperatives as part of their executive structures. As outlined in Article 95 of the "Rojava" Social Contract of 2014, the list of the bodies of the Executive Council (akin to ministries) are:

1. Body of Foreign Relations
2. Body of Defence
3. Body of Internal Affairs
4. Body of Justice
5. Body of Cantonal and Municipal Councils and affiliated to it:
      Committee of Planning and Census
6. Body of Finance, and affiliated to it:
      a) Committee on Banking Regulations.
      b) Committee of Customs and Excise.
7. Body of Social Affairs
8. Body of Education
9. Body of Agriculture
10. Body of Energy
11. Body of Health
12. Body of Trade and Economic Cooperation
13. Body of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs
14. Body of Culture
15. Body of Transport
16. Body of Youth and Sports
17. Body of Environment, Tourism and Historical Objects
18. Body of Religious Affairs
19. Body of Family and Gender Equality
20. Body of Human Rights
21. Body of Communication
22. Body of Food Security

Among the areas these bodies are responsible for are social, political, cultural, religious, economic, legal and diplomatic areas. In light of this information, it is safe to say that the organizational structure of the PYD administration bears resemblance to that of 'a government, replete with ministries, parliament, and higher courts' (Graeber, 2016: xvii).

1. 4. The "Rojava" Social Contract

With the declaration of cantons in January 2014, the "Rojava Social Contract" was adopted as the governing framework (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 15). Although the PYD is allegedly against the modern nation-state constitutions, the Social Contract served as a

provisional constitution containing 96 articles that define regulations, rules and individual responsibilities.

The Social Contract also addressed issues related to ethnic, cultural and religious identities and gender rights. According to the provisions outlined in the Charter, the acknowledgement of ethnic and cultural diversity, the facilitation of ethnocultural groups' demands and the advancement of their identities were of paramount importance. This sentiment was echoed in the opening paragraph of the preamble, which stated:

> We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter, which has been drafted according to the principles of Democratic Autonomy.

It continued as:

> In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples' right to self-determination.

> We, the people of the Autonomous Regions, unite in the spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation so that all may express themselves freely in public life. In building a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs (The Social Contract, 2014).

Meanwhile, the Charter underscored fundamental principles of rights and freedoms that align with international human rights agreements and conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 21 and 22 of the Social Contract).

2. Security

Sovereignty, considered the main principle of the Westphalian international order, refers to the establishment of public authority within distinct and exclusive jurisdictional domains (Ruggie, 1986, p. 143). It is contingent upon the state's capacity to monopolize the use of violence over a specific population and territory against external actors (Tilly, 1985; Davis, 2009; Sinno, 2011). State territoriality, which encompasses the consolidation of territorial hegemony over a particular area, plays a vital role in a state's claim to sovereignty (Taylor, 1994). Making of a territorial order through effective physical control over political borders enables states to exercise their sovereign authority.

On the other hand, in situations where the state fails, VNSAs strive to gain control over territories and form a militant governance. They try to enhance their material capacity with territorial control to ensure their survival. Also, VNSAs tend to create a "security island" where they can defend their identity against internal and external threats (Chojnacki and Branovic, 2011; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023). Given the scarcity of it during times of civil wars, the provision of "security" is highly valuable for the local population. VNSAs that can offer it garner a positive reputation among civilians and gain substantial support (Schlichte, 2009).

The PYD seized territorial control and prevailed against other rival groups in northeast Syria through its war-making capabilities since the beginning of the civil war. From the outset, the PKK provided the PYD with the military expertise and resources necessary for organizing armed forces, which were crucial for maintaining political control. Many fighters and commanders within the YPG received military training in the PKK camps and were committed to the "revolution" (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 118).

Coercion has been a key element in the PYD's governance, particularly in the context of a civil war. One of the coercive measures taken by the PYD against the ISIS threat was the implementation of compulsory military service. In doing so, the PYD attempted to recruit more fighters and strengthen the YPG's military capabilities. By bolstering armed forces, it tried to solidify territorial and political control. Moreover, the Kobane War was portrayed as a symbol of "resistance" and Kurdish nationalism. With this portrayal, the PYD aimed to generate legitimacy for its rule both domestically and internationally, as its details will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

2. 1. Armed Forces

According to Article 15 in the "Rojava Social Contract" of 2014:

> The People's Protection Units (YPG) is the sole military force of the three Cantons, with the mandate to protect and defend the security of the Autonomous Regions and its peoples, against both internal and external threats. The YPG act in accordance with the recognized inherent right to self-defence.

Therefore, the YPG operates like an army in northeast Syria. It functions under the guidance of a High Military Council. The YPG consists of conventional armed forces and local "self-defence" forces, with a clear hierarchy and command system. The operational structure of the YPG forces is as follows:

Tim: A small unit consisting of 3 to 5 individuals.

Taxim: A slightly larger unit comprising 6 to 10 individuals.

Siriya: A unit consisting of three taxim, totalling 18 to 30 individuals.

Katiba (Tabor): A larger unit composed of three siriya, totalling 48 to 90 individuals.

The highest level of command within the brigades is the *Ayalat* or Provincial Command.

The YPG recruits undergo physical, military and ideological training in military academies, known as *Buyut al-Askar* (Acun and Keskin, 2017, pp. 19-24). Also, the YPG has a military intelligence branch to gather information about enemies. In addition, there is a "special force unit" within the YPG, designed specifically as an "anti-terror" unit (Barfi, 2015).

Estimates suggest that the total number of militants under the command of the YPG is approximately 40,000, with around 10,000 of them being members of the YPJ (Acun and Keskin, 2017).

On the other hand, as discussed in the previous chapter, as part of the US-led global coalition's efforts to combat ISIS, the SDF was created, with the YPG assuming a leading role. The military support received from the US-led anti-ISIS coalition became crucial for the YPG's coercive strategies. The US provided significant assistance to the SDF (and so the YPG), including advanced military equipment, air support, consultancy and intelligence. Additionally, the US Special Forces trained YPG/J fighters on the ground. This substantial support bolstered the YPG's war-making capabilities at the expense of others (Kardaş, 2018, p. 35).

With the backing of the US, the YPG transformed its warfare techniques and incorporated conventional and guerrilla tactics. This transformation allowed the YPG to operate as a more organized and disciplined armed force to combat its adversaries (Pusane, 2018).

The SDF resembles the conventional armies with a central command and various branches covering distinct functions. These branches include education, public relations, women's units, martyrs' affairs, intelligence, surveillance, communication and a military court (Acun and Görücü, 2023, pp. 38-39). The General Command of the SDF consists of 9 to 13 members, with the requirement of including at least one female member. These members are elected by the Military Council. They are responsible for carrying out the orders of the

Council, as well as organizing operations, providing training and commanding the SDF forces (Soner et al., 2017).

While an article in *The Economist* in 2016 approximated that the SDF consisted of around 20,000 YPG fighters and 10,000 Sunni Arabs, Rashid (2018) suggested that the total number of fighters in the SDF, including Christians and Turkmen units, ranged from 60,000 to 70,000.

2. 2. Military Conscription

Finer (1975) clarifies how different patterns of military recruitment paved the way for the formation of modern states. When ISIS attacked Kobane in July 2014, the PYD introduced the "Law on Compulsory Military Service" (KurdWatch, 2015). The law was overseen and enforced by a special committee appointed by the PYD. Given the need for more fighters to combat ISIS and maintain control over the cantons, at least one male member from each family between the ages of 18 and 30 was required to serve in the YPG for a fixed period of 6 months. Exceptions were made for families with only one male child, and Kurdish women were allowed to join the YPJ voluntarily.

Moreover, the PYD introduced new family registers to gather more accurate information about family compositions and implement the recruitment system (KurdWatch, 2015, pp. 9-10). The law on compulsory military service stipulated that those who failed to fulfil their "self-defence" duty would be brought to the nearest recruitment office. In cases of violations or offences during the service, the provisions of "military criminal law" would be applied.

Since the PYD detained many unregistered young Kurds because of compulsory military service, many families fled northeast Syria to evade the conscription of their sons (Acun and

Keskin, 2017, p. 37; McDowall, 2020, p. 691). According to Gutman (2017), at least 200,000 Syrian Kurds fled to Türkiye, and another 300,000 sought refuge in Iraq.

Further, Human Rights Watch (2015) documented the use of child soldiers and called for the demobilization of boys and girls under 18 by the YPG/J. However, as the war persisted, the YPG continued to enforce forced conscription, including the recruitment of children (UN Human Rights Council, 2020).

Although the law on compulsory military service applied to all inhabitants in northeast Syria, the PYD's recruitment efforts primarily focused on the Kurdish population (KurdWatch, 2015). It was cautious about conscripting non-Kurds to avoid potential tensions with Arab tribes and Christians. Non-Kurdish fighters eventually participated in the PYD's security system as independent brigades (*kata'ib mustaqilla*). Yet, they operated under the command of the YPG (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 14). For instance, the *SuToRo*, set up by the Syriac Union Party as a local armed force, aligned itself with the YPG within the SDF (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 44).

2. 3. Asayish

Asayish is responsible for policing in northeast Syria. As stated in Article 15 of the "Rojava Social Contract," Asayish forces are "charged with civil policing functions in the Autonomous Regions." Their foremost task is to monitor the population and "maintain law and order" in the civil space (Dryaz, 2020, p. 112). The primary activities of Asayish include ensuring security at checkpoints, preventing and investigating crimes, regulating traffic, handling cases and referring offenders to courts or judicial councils. Besides, Asayish has a specialized branch, called the "Women's Security Forces Center," which focuses on addressing women's issues, such as gender-based violence and women's rights.

2. 4. Judicial System

The PYD also sets up the People's Tribunals (*mahakim shaabiya*) to implement a justice system within the areas under its control. These tribunals handle personal and communal disputes, conduct investigations and issue arrest warrants. The judicial staff consists of lawyers and practitioners who base their rulings on a hybrid penal code, combining the Syrian legal system and customary law. However, the former is applied when it does not conflict with the PYD's judicial system. On the other hand, there are recurring problems within the judicial system in northeast Syria. First, the legal system is highly centralized, with a High Court consisting of nine judges appointed directly by the PYD, overseeing the tribunals (Baczko et al, 2018, p. 171). This raises concerns about the separation of powers. Second, the Assad regime never officially recognized or accredited the PYD's judicial structures. Third, the judicial system faces challenges related to a lack of qualified personnel, including judges, prosecutors and lawyers since Syrian Kurds were rarely accepted for these positions by the regime (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 14). These problems have a serious impact on the judicial system regarding its independence, impartiality, transparency and effectiveness.

3. Diplomacy

In the contemporary international order, states and international institutions hold legitimate and recognized legal status. They also have the authority to determine whether a new political entity possesses sufficient legitimacy and control over a given territory to be accepted into the existing community of sovereign states (Zadeh, 2011, p. 2). This means that even if VNSAs have *de facto* statehood, they still require *de jure* recognition from the international community. Such recognition is crucial for their sovereign practices (Maoz and Akca, 2012).

VNSAs often employ diplomatic efforts to reach out to states and international institutions (Huang, 2016, p. 90). They invest substantial resources in establishing a presence in third-

party countries. This kind of diplomacy is strategically important to realize their objectives. On the one hand, VNSAs strive for material resources from foreign actors, such as money, food, weapons and training, to advance their war-making efforts (Coggins, 2015). On the other hand, they try to gain more visibility on the international stage, elevating their profile and facilitating participation in negotiations and post-conflict settlements (Huang, 2016, p. 91).

The fate of VNSAs seeking statehood depends on both their own actions and the responses of external international actors. Since the pursuit of international legitimacy and recognition places structural limitations and expectations on VNSAs, they constantly need to frame and justify their struggle to international audiences (Worrall, 2017, p. 715). Seeking a legitimate ground in the international arena is essential to overcome the challenge of being legal or lawful in the long run (Schlichte and Schneckener, 2015). In this regard, complying with international law and norms would be useful for legitimacy-seeking VNSAs (Jo, 2015, p. 238). Accordingly, the PYD engaged in diplomatic activities to achieve international legitimacy and recognition, which is indispensable for its state-making efforts.

3. 1. Struggle for International Legitimacy and Recognition

> Those who think that a society can exist without a state can keep on dreaming. We have to deal with the reality of the international system, which consists of states with borders. We should focus on getting Kurds recognised as an integral component of Syrian society whose rights are protected. It doesn't matter whether we do this via cantons or a federal region or whatever. I don't look at Iraqi Kurdistan as a positive example, but... we should not be pursuing utopia (One Syrian PYD Leader, International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 5).

Although it seems that the PKK/PYD members have ideological reservations about the concept of statehood, they recognize the realities of the current international system and seek to navigate within it (Ahram, 2019, p. 160).

Transnational pro-Kurdish activities challenge the legitimacy of national borders in the Middle East. Thus, they are perceived as a threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the states in the region. The pursuit of Kurdish separatism faces obstacles not only from regional states but also from the international system (Ünver, 2016, pp. 67-70). Since it is structured around the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, separatist activities are deemed illegitimate (Dryaz, 2020, p. 114). This poses a serious challenge to Kurdish aspirations for independence and recognition within the existing international framework.

The PYD's diplomatic activities can be read as an extension of the PKK's longstanding struggle for international legitimacy and recognition. As shown in Chapter Two, in the post-Cold War era, the PKK allegedly shifted its stance on the nation-state and embraced a narrative focusing on democratization, minority rights, women's issues and environmental concerns. By aligning with these principles, the PKK aimed to appeal to democratic norms and values because the commitment to democratization and good governance can create a pathway for VNSAs engaging state-making activities for future membership in the international system (Broers, 2014; Caspersen, 2012; Jo, 2015; Voller, 2015, p. 612). Similarly, the PYD presents itself as a responsible actor committed to democratic principles and good governance because of its desire for international legitimacy and recognition (Özçelik, 2020, pp. 691-693).

The PYD undertakes significant efforts to enhance its international standing and public image. It has official websites in multiple languages including Kurdish, Arabic and English. Moreover, the PYD utilizes the PKK's existing propaganda tools, media institutions and networks (Khalaf, 2016, p. 21; Oktav et al, 2018, p. 6). Additionally, the Kurdish diaspora, particularly in Europe, provides the PYD with a platform to promote itself in Western countries (Öğür and Baykal, 2018, p. 55). Besides, the PYD's "Rojava Model" has been

received positively by the global audience with its appealing discourse centred around universal values such as democracy, secularism and women's rights (Charountaki, 2015).

3. 1. 1. Democracy

The PYD frequently highlights the principles of democratic self-rule, empowerment of local communities and inclusive governance. A former British diplomat said:

> The Kurds are there not only to fight against the Islamic State, but also to defend a precious experiment in direct democracy. In Rojava, the Kurdish name for this region of eastern Syria, a new form of self-government is being built from the ground up (Ross, 2015).

Thus, the PYD gained sympathy in the West, positioning itself as an alternative to authoritarian regimes and Islamist groups in the Middle East.

3. 1. 2. Secularism

The PYD's secularism was another factor contributing to its positive international image. It was regarded as the most effective and legitimate partner on the ground in the fight against ISIS. Meanwhile, the PYD strategically presented itself as a secular force. The battle between the PYD and ISIS was framed as a battle between enlightenment and extremism. This framing was reinforced by the widespread concern about "Islamic terrorism" in the West. For instance, while there was a violent and bloody war on the ground for Kobane, Kurds worldwide used social media platforms to express support for the YPG/J's "secular" militias. Mottoes such as "Kurds defend secular democracy against the Islamic State terror" became prevalent on Facebook and Twitter (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş, 2018, p. 104).

3. 1. 3. Gender Equality

Last but not least, the PYD's female fighters garnered sympathy from Western political and media circles (Oktav et al, 2018, p. 6). They were portrayed as warriors fighting against

misogynistic extremism (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş, 2018, pp. 106-107). In this way, the PYD's struggle was framed as a struggle for gender equality. The romanticization of female fighters served as a discursive tool for the PYD's efforts for international legitimacy and recognition.

To sum up, the PYD's image-making strategies revolved mainly around secularism, democracy and gender equality. Such strategies were crucial for legitimizing its struggle and state-making activities in the international arena. In accordance with this purpose, the PYD formed a global network of foreign relations.

3. 2. Foreign Relations

In this section, I will evaluate the PYD's extensive foreign relations with various international actors, including the US, Russia, and the EU and European countries. These relations provided the PYD with external political, military, financial and logistical support to advance its war-making and state-making activities. The PYD also assumed that strengthening the ties with major international actors could lead to the acquisition of international legitimacy and recognition for its rule in the future.

Throughout the Syrian civil war, the PYD opened representative offices in several countries. The purpose was not only to get material assistance but also to solidify the PYD's international status. As Zuhat Kobane, the PYD's Europe representative, expressed:

> The political offices will carry the diplomatic relations which the PYD has developed so far to a new stage. The aim is not to seek help, but to guarantee and legitimize the status (Taştekin, 2016a).

In addition, the PYD rule in northeast Syria received visits from official and unoffical delegations. These delegations met with the PYD leaders and discussed the issues of the region. Therefore, despite being excluded from formal political processes in Geneva and Astana due to Türkiye's efforts, the PYD continued to conduct *de facto* diplomacy (Pusane, 2018, p. 82).

3. 2. 1. The United States

The US justified its intensive support to the PYD as a proxy in the fight against ISIS. Prominent US officials, including the special envoy to the anti-ISIS international coalition Brett McGurk and Senator John McCain, visited the PYD-controlled areas during various stages of the Syrian civil war (Perry and Mohammed, 2016; Nissenbaum, 2017). These visits showed the importance given by the US to the PYD.

The US support to the PYD consolidated its rule and allowed it to become a *semi-state* in the post-ISIS period (Pusane, 2018, p. 84; Rashid, 2018, pp. 54-58). Moreover, the deployment of US troops to the PYD-occupied territories was intended to safeguard the area from potential Turkish military operations, among other threats (Aktürk, 2019, p. 102). In seeking assistance against Türkiye, the President of the Executive Committee of the SDC, Ilham Ahmed, visited Washington and held meetings with senators in 2019 (Cengiz, 2020, p. 14).

Meanwhile, it should be mentioned that even if the US-PYD relationship was primarily focused on security issues, the PYD tried to diversify this relationship. To illustrate, it brokered an oil deal with the American *Delta Crescent Energy LLC*. This deal ensured the continuation of the US military presence in northeast Syria, which was useful for the survival of the PYD rule (Zaman, 2020).

3. 2. 2. Russia

Russia established close relations with the PYD as well, particularly after the incident of the downing of a Russian SU-24 bomber aircraft (Aktürk, 2019, p. 101). Thereby, Russia aimed to exert pressure against Türkiye. Russia also tried to prevent the PYD from coming under complete US influence (Ergun, 2018, p. 162). In February 2016, the PYD opened a representative office in Moscow. Its leaders held multiple meetings with Russian officials,

including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Additionally, the Kremlin revealed its willingness to involve the PYD in the Geneva peace talks (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023).

The PYD maintained coordination with Russia too in the fight against ISIS. Russia deployed military units and advisors to the PYD-controlled areas and provided air support to the PYD in the operations against ISIS (Ergun, 2018, pp. 160-161; Pusane, 2018, p. 85). Furthermore, Russia facilitated an agreement between the PYD and the Assad regime, enabling them to jointly control specific regions in Aleppo and Raqqa provinces (Kızılkaya et al., 2021, p. 9).

Besides, Russia expressed its commitment to granting autonomy to the PYD (Issaev and Zakharov, 2021, pp. 107-110). Russia's proposal for the establishment of federal regions in Syria was significant for the PYD because of its aspirations for constitutional autonomy.

3. 2. 3. The EU and European Countries

Although the EU designates the PKK as a terrorist organization, the same classification does not apply to the PYD. Despite its organic relations with the PKK, the EU considers the PYD as a separate entity (Ergun et al., 2018). As indicated above, the Kurdish diaspora in Europe underpinned the PYD's international image as a democratic and secular ally in the fight against jihadist groups including ISIS. However, the EU maintained a cautious position on the PYD by emphasizing its commitment to the unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian state (European Council, 2019). For this reason, the EU institutions refrained from officially recognizing the PYD rule in northeast Syria.

The PYD opened representative offices in various European capitals, such as Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Oslo, Stockholm, and Prague. However, the existence of these offices did not mean official recognition from European governments. For example, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified that the PYD office in Stockholm had no diplomatic status (Kart,

2016). Similarly, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that they did not recognize the PYD's representations (Sahin, 2018).

In spite of the lack of official recognition, PYD leaders continued their diplomatic activities in Europe. For instance, the PYD co-chair Asya Abdullah and YPJ Commander Nesrin Abdullah were hosted by French President François Hollande at the Élysée Palace in 2015. In addition, Nesrin Abdullah spoke at the Italian parliament (Cengiz, 2020, p. 13). Besides, numerous conferences, workshops and events were organized by the PYD members and sympathizers in different parts of Europe to promote their political agenda.

Meanwhile, unofficial delegations from certain EU institutions and European countries visited northeast Syria and held several meetings with PYD leaders to discuss regional issues (Kızılkaya et al., 2021). These visits indicated the dialogue between the EU and European countries and the PYD.

Last but not least, the PYD used the presence of foreign ISIS prisoners in northeast Syria as leverage to enhance its position in the pursuit of international legitimacy and recognition. Thousands of ISIS militants from Europe were captured and imprisoned by the PYD. The establishment of an international court was proposed to handle their cases and facilitate their repatriation to their home countries (Wilgenburg, 2019). However, European countries showed reluctance in addressing this issue. Only a few countries, like France, Germany and Finland, accepted the return of women and children (Al-Monitor, 2021). In return, the PYD stated that it could not guarantee the security of the prisons in case of a military operation. Further, it insisted on direct negotiations with European countries to hand over ISIS prisoners and rejected the involvement of third-party mediators (Cengiz, 2020, p. 15).

4. Analysis of the PYD Rule

In this section, I will conduct a critical analysis of the PYD's governance in northeast Syria, shedding light on its quasi-state activities, one-party rule and ethno-nationalism. This analysis demonstrates how the PYD's path toward statehood diverges from its discourse.

Throughout the thesis, as it has been noticed, I used the concepts of "quasi-state" and "state-like" interchangeably to refer to the governance activities of VNSAs and the entities they build to manage public domains of life, including administration, security, legitimization and diplomacy, in certain territories during times of conflicts instead of internationally recognized central governments. Meanwhile, I suggested that ethno-nationalist VNSAs are driven by nationalist ideologies, stressing the importance of ethnic brotherhood. They mostly aim to create an independent nation-state in their imagined homeland.

4. 1. State-like Entity

By rejecting centralized, hierarchical and bureaucratic state structures, the PYD underscored the development of self-governance mechanisms grounded in the "Democratic Autonomy" and "Democratic Confederalism" of Öcalan. In this perspective, the state is reduced to its bureaucratic function. However, as the bellicist tradition emphasized, various bureaucratic institutions oversee administration, security mechanisms, law enforcement and revenue resources (taxes) to solidify the state's authority over the population and territory. On the other hand, as illustrated in this thesis, VNSAs can replicate state mechanisms and practices in many ways. In other words, they challenge the state authority not only by force but also by performing governance activities. Similarly, the PYD held territorial control thanks to its armed power and tried to monopolize the use of violence in northeast Syria. It also provided civilians with stability, goods and public services at a certain level.

The PYD took a firm grip on valuable natural and financial resources in Syria (Acun and Görücü, 2023, pp. 57-64). Particularly northeast Syria is rich in agricultural lands, essential for producing wheat, cotton and livestock. Around 50 per cent of Syria's irrigable land and 70 per cent of its wheat production were under the PYD's control (Tsurkov and Jukhadar, 2021). In addition, the cotton produced in the agricultural lands around the Euphrates River is a significant source of employment and serves as the primary raw material for textile workshops in the country (Kızılkaya et al., 2021, p. 13).

Furthermore, the region is abundant in oil and gas reserves. Following the seizure of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, the PYD gained control over around 70 per cent of Syria's energy resources (Wilgenburg, 2020). Then, it took charge of petrol sales and smuggling. The PYD's territorial consolidation also allowed it to generate electricity via the operation of dams and power plants, like the Tabqa and Tishrin Dams and Rumeilan power plants (Orhan, 2016, p. 12; Khaddour, 2017). These energy resources facilitated electricity and water supply and contributed to rebuilding its infrastructure that had been damaged or collapsed during the war.

As a result, the natural, financial and energy resources of northeast Syria were effectively used by the PYD for the "extraction" to carry out its war-making and state-making activities.

Moreover, the PYD promoted a communal economic model, that is "social economy," through small cooperatives (Harvey, 2016). This model was presented as an example of an "alternative economy" by the PYD and its Western sympathizers (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 120). However, the concept of collective production and consumption units was not new and had historical roots in rural developmental models, such as the Soviet *kolkhoz* and the Israeli *kibbutz* (Ünver, 2017, pp. 62-63). In a similar vein, the PYD abolished the right to large private property and "socialized" around 65 per cent of big properties (Lebsky, 2017). With the land allocation projects, fiefdoms that used to be controlled by the Syrian governments

turned into self-governing farming collectives (Cemgil, 2016). Likewise, private property was limited to personal belongings on the basis of direct use (Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, p. 27). Salaries were distributed based on need, considering the number of dependents. This approach was extended to the way people were given food and aid as well (Solomon, 2014). Besides, banking was restricted to handling savings for communes and cooperatives and financing their projects (Yousef, 2016).

As is known, the civil war deteriorated the Syrian economy drastically. The depreciation of the Syrian lira and the emergence of war-related economic activities, like smuggling, further complicated the situation (Sary, 2016). With a large portion of the Syrian Kurdish people engaged in combat, the PYD had to manage a growing population while also sustaining its war-making efforts, which consumed 70 per cent of its budget (McDowall, 2020, pp. 691-692). This fact necessitated planning to produce essential wartime supplies including fuel, grain, ammunition, maintenance and construction materials (Yousef, 2016). By relying on domestic resources and fostering local interdependence, the PYD aimed to minimize economic dependence on natural resources and external actors.

Finally, the PYD's governance structures in each canton delivered fundamental public services, such as food, water, electricity, fuel, sanitation, healthcare, employment opportunities, education and a judicial system (Boyraz, 2020, pp. 15-16). These services were crucial in terms of meeting the daily needs of local inhabitants and garnering social support for the PYD rule. However, the PYD provided most public services for a fee. In addition, it raised taxes from business revenue, agricultural income, construction permits, border trade and passage of people and goods (Khalaf, 2016, pp. 16-18). The control over the distribution of essential commodities and the provision of public services, along with taxation, allowed the PYD to consolidate its power and function as a quasi-state actor.

To sum up, the PYD's war-making endeavours resulted in building quasi-state administrative, political, military and economic structures. Their establishment meant a state within a state (Podder, 2013). Hence, the PYD rule in northeast Syria can be seen as a state-like entity.

4. 2. One-Party Rule

As the civil war broke out, northeast Syria turned into a battleground for the PKK and the KDP to assert dominance in Kurdish politics. Although tensions did not lead to a violent intra-Kurdish conflict, the PYD resorted to intimidation and policies that targeted its main Kurdish political rival (Gunes and Lowe, 2015, p. 5).

The KNC was established in October 2011 with the support of Masoud Barzani, comprising various Kurdish parties in Syria, mostly originating from the KDP-S (Aiboga et. al., 2016). Its primary objective was to bring the Syrian Kurdish parties together against the regime. The KNC demanded that Kurdish national identity be recognized constitutionally, historical Kurdish land ownership be acknowledged, laws that are discriminatory against Kurds be abolished, and decentralization in Syria be supported (Issaev and Zakharov, 2021, p. 103). Despite sharing common objectives with the KNC, the PYD declined to join it due to long-standing power struggles and ideological conflicts with the KDP. Additionally, they disagreed on matters related to the Syrian regime and opposition (Çifçi, 2018, pp. 315-316).

In spite of their differences, the PYD and the KNC formed the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) in July 2012 to develop a unified Kurdish stance on the Syrian crisis. They agreed to act in coordination with each other and to share power in the context of managing northeast Syria (McDowall, 2020, p. 677). The Erbil I Agreement in December 2012 confirmed this cooperation, emphasizing the involvement of all Syrian components in working towards regime change and the establishment of a democratic Syria that recognizes Kurdish ethno-national rights within the scope of political decentralization (Hewler Declaration, 2012).

However, their strained relationship hindered the implementation of the agreement. Then, two new agreements: Erbil II in December 2013 and Duhok in October 2014 were drafted. The fact that ISIS got stronger and invaded parts of Iraq and Syria brought the PYD and the KNC together temporarily (Rudaw, 2014). According to the Duhok Agreement, the PYD and the KNC agreed to establish a joint political and military administration for the cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane. Nevertheless, these agreements were never put into action because of ongoing tensions between the two sides.

Human rights organizations documented that the PYD suppressed any political movement that could challenge its authority through its military and intelligence units, using tactics like arbitrary detentions, house arrests, kidnappings, torture and assassinations (International Crisis Group, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014). For example, Ibrahim Biro, the leader of the KNC, was abducted in August 2016 and forced into exile in northern Iraq. Also, the KNC offices were raided, its political activities blocked, and several members detained (Allsopp, 2016). Yet, the PYD denied these allegations and stated that those arrested were involved in criminal activities (Özçelik, 2020, p. 699).

The PYD's actions exposed a discrepancy between its discourse and practices. Despite presenting itself as a pluralist and democratic structure, the PYD effectively formed one-party rule in the areas it controls. As one Syrian activist said:

> The PYD operates like a cult; you are either in or out, there is no place for anyone who thinks differently or who would challenge it or try to hold it accountable (Khalaf, 2016, p. 11).

Since there was no alternative political power, the PYD rule was neither transparent nor accountable (Savelsberg, 2014, p. 101).

Moreover, building alternative organizations beyond the commune system carries significant risks due to the PYD's authoritarian behaviour (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 162). In

2014, a law was introduced by the PYD and political parties questioning the DAAs were prohibited. They were considered illegal unless registered by canton officials (Gutman, 2017). So, despite the presence of political parties in northeast Syria except for the PYD-affiliated ones, they were either excluded or given marginal roles (Sary, 2016).

Meanwhile, the civil administrative entities within the commune system were also intricately tied to the PYD (Dryaz, 2020, p. 111). Although they were theoretically designed to enhance the idea of self-rule and direct democracy, these entities had limited power. Their members and leaders were appointed by the PYD (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 13; Baczko et. al., 2018, p. 170; Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 133-136). They served as instruments for the PYD to present a facade of pluralism and participatory democratic governance to both local and international audiences.

Besides, there were reports indicating that those who opposed the PYD faced severe economic consequences. According to an interviewee, "people who go against them [PYD/YPG] do not have work, there are no businesses, life is very difficult" (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 53). This suggested that any dissent to the PYD could result in hardships and social exclusion. Likewise, given the harsh economic circumstances of the civil war, people employed in the PYD-controlled institutions were less likely to challenge its authority as their livelihoods depended on loyalty and compliance with the PYD's ideology and policies.

Regarding the PYD's authoritarianism, Aldar Khalil, a leading figure of TEV-DEM's executive committee, said:

> Yes, we are a de facto authority but at least there are institutions servicing the people; we are trying our best to fill a void in governance with limited resources. This is a war situation. Do we have an alternative? No, we do not have an alternative but to govern ourselves democratically and together protect and serve people's co-existence values? (Khalaf, 2016, p. 12).

As a result, the reality of the "Rojava Laboratory" turned out to resemble a Leninist one-party rule, rather than the envisioned grassroots aspirations and democratic governance (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 678; Baczko et. al., 2018, p. 169; Schmidinger, 2018, p. 135; Boyraz, 2020, p. 16). This is indirectly supported by statements made by the PYD/YPG:

> The PYD is an idea, present on the ground, we have a complete vision. The YPG is there to protect and defend the society. In the YPG there are Arabs, Syriacs and Kurds. It is a gathering from this society. It acted to protect this society. And everything should be in one hand (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 51).

To clarify, the PYD assumed the role of party vanguardism in northeast Syria, attempting to accommodate diverse interests under its singular control. This was reflected in its dominance over administrative, political, security and economic apparatuses, as well as decision-making and representation mechanisms (Özçelik, 2020, pp. 698-699).

4. 3. Ethno-Nationalism

The PYD proclaimed the inclusivity of various ethnic, religious and cultural groups in its governance structures. Yet, as will be expounded in the next chapter, its "Democratic Confederalism" project in northeast Syria was an ethnic hegemonic project, by the Kurds, of the Kurds, and for the Kurds. What Akram Hesso, former prime minister of the Jazira Canton, told in March 2016 verified these allegations:

> All the people of *Rojava*, including Arabs and Assyrians, are represented by the joint democratic autonomous administration *under Kurdish leadership*. So, this is the current situation on the ground in *Rojava*, *Kurdistan*. [. . .] This federal state should be founded on the historical and geographical facts of these people, *especially the Kurds*. [...] [O]ur relationship with Europe and the international coalition is based on mutual interests in establishing a democratic rule in Syria, defeating IS and finally establishing a new order in a new Middle East so that all the people in Syria claim their rights, *especially the Kurdish people* (Dinc, 2020, p. 9).

In other words, Kurds were *primi inter pares* under the PYD rule (Dinc, 2020, p. 8).

Despite the PYD's assertion of extending equal rights to Arabs, Syriac Christians, Turkmens, and other groups in the "self-ruled" region, administrative and political organs frequently served as a means to exert control over their affairs (Joseph and Isaac, 2018). To illustrate, in regions with Arab majorities like Manbij, it was reported that the PYD ensured that only representatives adhering to its guidelines were allowed to govern (Khalaf, 2016, p. 2). Decision-making processes continued with limited consultation involving certain ethno-religious minorities (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, pp. 145-146). In addition, concerns were raised by the Assyrian community as their lands were being confiscated by the PYD and its education system was indoctrinating the nationalistic Kurdish ideals (Duman, 2016, p. 84).

Cemil Bayık, the co-chair of the KCK, gave an interview to ANF in August 2017 and said:

> *There will be the Kurdish autonomous zones now called cantons.* The Kurds will govern themselves in these places with their own identity and culture. The Syriacs will again have influence where they live. The Arabs will live their own autonomy based on local democracy in their regions and will govern themselves. Undoubtedly this self-governance will not be just Arabs or Kurds having power in one place, it will be all the peoples governing themselves. *In the councils, communes and administrations in the cantons, the Kurds will be in majority.* But this majority is not a relationship of hegemony, all will still be equal and free there.

As is seen, he called cantons "Kurdish" and emphasized that the Kurds would be in the majority in administrative bodies while purportedly mentioning "freedom", "equality," "democracy" and "self-rule" in these bodies.

Similar problems were evident in security mechanisms. The PYD took strong measures to prevent the establishment of alternative armed groups representing diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds (Duman, 2016; Taştekin, 2016b). While the SDF presented itself as a diverse coalition, fostering collaboration among Kurds, Arabs, Christians and other ethnic and religious minority groups, critics argued that it was under the influence of the PKK leadership (Baczko et. al., 2018, p. 176; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023, p. 10). To consolidate its control over

the security apparatus, the PYD appointed loyal individuals to pivotal positions within the SDF.

Conclusion

As specified before, the PYD rule in northeast Syria represented the practical application of the "Democratic Autonomy" and "Democratic Confederalism" model. The PYD organized its governance bodies as per Öcalan's teachings. Its ideological basis signified a sharp break from the modern state formation. Moreover, the PYD viewed the nation-state as the foremost cause of authoritarianism, inequality, injustice, gendered oppression and the lack of democracy in the Middle East. Accordingly, it established certain political and administrative organizations to implement radical democracy and self-governance. However, there was a discrepancy between the PYD's discourse and practices. Thus, this chapter critically examined the PYD rule.

The PYD capitalized on the power vacuum following the failure of the Syrian state and monopolized the use of violence in northeast Syria by obstructing the formation of alternative security forces. As will be elaborated in the next chapter, the PYD justified its state-making efforts as being the main "security provider" in the region during the civil war. The PYD also positioned itself as a democratic and secular force that stood against radical Islamist groups and respected women's rights. This framing allowed it to rally domestic and international support.

The PYD's quasi-state activities contained administration, territorial control, monopoly of violence, security, compulsory recruitment, domestic policing, justice, education, health, economy, infrastructure and taxation, and diplomacy. The administrative and political bodies in northeast Syria resembled the modern states' bureaucratic institutions, parliaments, ministries and courts. The "Rojava Social Contract" had the qualities of a constitution.

Furthermore, the PYD was quite reluctant to share power with any other actor, including the Kurdish ones, and repressed dissenting voices harshly through its armed forces. Therefore, despite claiming commitment to democratic values and decision-making mechanisms, it established a monolithic one-party system. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on the Kurdish national identity in the PYD's state-building project in spite of its inclusive rhetoric.

Lastly, the PYD conducted para-diplomatic activities and built a global network of foreign relations to gain international legitimacy and recognition for its rule in the long run. Despite its diplomatic efforts and cooperation with the international community, no foreign country officially recognized the PYD rule. The PYD was viewed as a threat to the territorial integrity of the Syrian state and regional stability.

Chapter 6: The PYD's Legitimization Efforts

Introduction

While the concept of legitimacy does not have an objective definition, it can be defined as the people's acceptance of authority (Sodaro, 2008, p. 103). A rule is not legitimate unless the ruler has the subjects' consent (Locke, 1690). In this sense, people's acceptance is the most important factor of legitimacy (Weber, 1964, p. 382). The ruling authority becomes sustainable only through legitimacy. Besides, it should be emphasized that legitimacy is not something given; rather, it is earned and constructed (Sen, 2019, pp. 42-43).

If the ultimate purpose of a VNSA is to establish a state, administrative and military achievements might not be enough. It needs political legitimacy (Khalaf, 2016; Sen, 2019). In this regard, coercive and non-coercive means should be implemented together to get people's approval. Depending on the population's support is a more reliable power source instead of merely resorting to the use of violence. This is why, VNSAs vying for statehood primarily aim to build social and political legitimacy (Wood, 2009, p. 141).

The legitimacy of a VNSA can be evaluated by its position regarding the state in power. If a state cannot properly meet the requirements of the social contract it has with its people, a VNSA can represent this state as illegitimate and emerge as an alternative to it. When the people's dissatisfaction with the state elevates further, two groups come forward: those who are still loyal to the state and those who support alternative powerholders (Milliken and Krause, 2002). Thus, as explained in the Introduction Chapter, the legitimacy deficit of a state usually paves the way for the rise of VNSAs in the context of state failure.

The failure of a state signifies the loss of the communal identity (Ahram, 2019, p. 6). When the state loses its monopoly over the use of *legitimate* violence and its ability to provide

public services, one can no longer talk about the Weberian notion of state. There comes about a power vacuum, mostly filled by sub-national actors and identities. Then, VNSAs can become contenders to *de jure* governments in the form of *de facto* rulers, as indicated by the rebel governance literature (Arjona, 2014; Kasfir, 2015). Moreover, they come forward with different identity conceptions. This way, a competitive state-making process takes place (Kalyvas, 2006). Accordingly, despite the lack of official legitimacy and recognition possessed by the states, VNSAs could set up their own state-like entity thanks to the social, political, economic and military roles they have (Debiel and Lambach, 2009).

Furthermore, when state institutions facilitated the spread of certain national identity conceptions and authoritatively promoted particular ethnic, sectarian, tribal, or local-regional identities, "other" sections became estranged and politically marginalized. Then, these marginalized groups may resort to non-state actors for representation and protection (Kardaş, 2018, pp. 36-37). Under these circumstances, VNSAs can capitalize on the erosion of the state authority, as reflected in the state failure in Syria that provided an opportunity for the PYD to bring a new identity to the forefront (Ünver, 2018, p. 36).

As clarified in Chapter Four, when the Assad regime withdrew from northeast Syria in July 2012, the PYD filled the power vacuum there. It extended its territorial domination later through the fight against ISIS. In this process, the PYD engaged in various legitimacy-building and nation-making activities, including the provision of security and public services, indoctrination, public diplomacy and image management. By doing these, it aimed to get the approval of both the local and international community and become a "legitimate" power.

According to the PYD discourse, the goal of the so-called "Rojava" project was not to establish a state. Referring to Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism, the PYD delegitimized the nation-state system. Also, it framed the project not in the mantle of *Kurdishness*, but in the

language of equal rights for all. For this reason, in its quest for legitimacy, the PYD was careful about using an inclusive discourse throughout the war. By doing so, the PYD aimed to give the impression that it was not pursuing any separatist agenda. Once the Arab-majority areas were subjugated, Arabs and other ethnic and religious groups living there would not embrace that agenda as well. Besides, the construction of the PYD as the most successful secular and democratic fighter of ISIS by the Western media facilitated its efforts to gain international legitimacy. Concordantly, the PYD depicted itself as caring for certain principles like the brotherhood of the peoples, democratic self-rule, empowerment of local communities, minority protection, inclusive governance and gender equality (International Crisis Group, 2014).

On the other hand, it seems that the PYD did not practice what it preached. It did not want any political competition and tried to monopolize the use of violence in northeast Syria. As part of its state-making activities, the PYD employed brutal methods such as intimidation, repression, arbitrary detention and assassination through its military forces and intelligence units to get rid of any alternative political organization (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Further, the PYD's strict hierarchical organizational structure and Öcalanist cult of personality were at odds with its supposed dedication to democratic governance. Furthermore, education is an instrument for the PYD to indoctrinate the masses and realize the ideals of Öcalan (Özçelik, 2020, p. 698; Netjes and van Veen, 2021, pp. 48-49; Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). Additionally, the PYD aimed to change the demographic formation of northeast Syria to *Kurdify* the area, during which it committed several war crimes. Yet, thanks to the international support it received, the PYD evaded any responsibility for the human rights violations, confiscation of property and demolition, forced deportations and ethnic cleansing (Gutman, 2017; Savelsberg, 2018).

Ultimately, it is safe to say that the PYD engaged in various nation-making activities to increase solidarity and in-group feelings among Syrian Kurds, who were the core constituency of its rule. Öcalanist Kurdish ethno-nationalism has been the main pillar of the PKK-affiliated parties, including the PYD. The *Kurdification* of geopolitical discourse and the use of various symbols of Kurdish nationalism including flags, maps, images, words and slogans in the context of the legitimization efforts prove that the PYD sought to promote the Kurdish identity of its rule.

This chapter will first mention different aspects of the legitimization mechanisms, including the territorialization process, to explain how PYD aimed to render itself a legitimate authority domestically and internationally as part of its state-making activities in northeast Syria. Then, the PYD's rational and symbolic legitimization efforts will be dwelled on. In this regard, Kurdish nationalism and the concept of "Kurdistan" will be elaborated. Later, how the PYD used the Kobane war to gain international legitimacy and attempted to *Kurdify* northeast Syria will be demonstrated. Finally, the role of gender issues in the PYD's legitimization efforts will be discussed.

1. Legitimization Mechanisms

Legitimacy has both rational and symbolic mechanisms that are related to each other. Rational legitimacy is mainly about the provision of security and the effective provision of public goods and social services. Symbolic legitimacy, on the other hand, is mainly about ideas, beliefs, identities, norms, values and social relationships (Sen, 2019, pp. 34-39).

According to the utilitarian school, legitimacy rests upon the utility principle (Peter, 2017). An authority can become legitimate under the condition that it can provide society with the concrete things it needs. In this sense, the concept of legitimacy is transactional and based on

the authority's performance. As underscored in this thesis, when a state cannot function properly, generally VNSAs "perform the state" (Sen, 2019, p. 35). Particularly when there is an existential threat from either the state or a non-state actor, what civilians primarily need is physical security. In such situations, VNSAs can "settle down, wear a crown, and replace anarchy with government" (Olson, 1993, p. 568).

Governance gives control of the territory and the population to VNSAs. Then, they can portray themselves as a legitimate contender for ruling the domestic and international community (Huang, 2012; Malejacq, 2017). If VNSAs satisfy the main needs of the population, such as water, food, shelter, electricity, roads, schools and hospitals, they have a stronger claim of legitimacy (Weigand, 2015; Schlichte and Schneckener, 2015). Besides, VNSAs can recruit more members for their war-making activities with the provision of public services (Olson, 1993; Tilly, 1990; Arjona, 2014). Hence, governance activities accrue militaristic advantages in addition to domestic and international legitimacy claims.

Meanwhile, legitimacy has a symbolic aspect as well. Bourdieu highlighted that "symbolic systems" are "tools for imposing or legitimizing domination" (1977, p. 408). The symbolic aspect of legitimacy involves the right to govern and the consent of the governed at the same time (Locke, 1690). Accordingly, a top-down process whereby a group exerts political authority is not enough on its own for legitimization; a bottom-up process whereby the subjects grant legitimacy is also required. The "rightness" of an authority is determined by norms, values, moral codes and belief systems. Without these, no governance can be sustainable. A community, be it a tribal, ethnic, or another historical or ideological group, views a political entity as legitimate depending on the common identity and affinity (Beetham, 1993; Alagappa, 1995; Weigand, 2015). Thus, identity is a powerful enabler of

governance and control, and intangible "symbolic capital" contributes to the formation of legitimacy.

Discourse, speeches, writings, posters, images and videos are useful for states to form social cohesion and solidarity. VNSAs make use of flags, anthems, rallies and websites with similar purposes (Mampilly, 2015, pp. 77-78). For example, the LTTE built a war memorial in Sri Lanka in memory of the deceased fighters, like national memorials (Sen, 2019, p. 53). These symbolic mechanisms make VNSAs' existence meaningful (Schlichte, 2009, p. 197). They need to form a self-standing identity and explain the war-making objectives (Worrall, 2017, p. 711; Podder, 2017). At the core of the process of becoming legitimate lies *framing* so that the "hearts and minds" will be won amidst an ideological contest (Kalyvas, 2006; Sanin and Wood, 2014).

In short, when there is a gap in the state performance, VNSAs attempt to fill these gaps (Angel, 2007). They make use of narratives emphasizing certain ideologies to create a common identity (McCullough, 2015). Consequently, they can challenge the existing state and consolidate their position with an alternative state-making process.

1. 1. Territorialization and Violent Non-State Actors

As explained in Chapter One, territory is the key component of modern nation-state sovereignty (Brenner, 1999; Krasner, 1999, pp. 9-25). Possessing territory happens through the territorialization process, involving the regulation of a given territory where people and things are kept in or out. It is closely related to the historical state-making process and the establishment of a social order (Sack, 1986; Cox, 2002; Paasi, 2003). With the territorialization process, states have become able to manifest their sovereignty and display that they have a monopoly over using violence inside their borders.

Further, territoriality makes use of the territory to build a specific territorial identity. There are two complementary dimensions to it: the conception of territoriality and tactics of territoriality (Jabareen, 2015). While the former is the meaning ascribed to a particular place, the latter is about political and military methods to keep the conceived territory under control (Elden, 2009; Vollaard, 2009). For this reason, the concept of territoriality is composed of construction, control and order over a population and territory.

Formation of group identity and governmentality requires *othering* mechanisms, which inherently exist in the practice of bordering any territory (Meier, 2018). By bordering, securitization of certain segments of society takes place (Balibar, 1998). Also, in terms of forming ideas about the locations of territories and states, maps are quite important. As they are taken to be objective and scientific, maps render constructed ideas natural (Livingstone et. al., 1996, p. 422). Yet, they are discursive tools, which signify certain perceptions, ideologies and aspirations. As Maier points out, "to map an area is to try to control a portion of the earth's surface" (2006, p. 40). So, maps produce certain geopolitical visions regarding collective identities and mark where belongs to one and where does not (Anderson, 2006, pp. 170-178). Put differently, they serve as a political perspective by which territoriality is seen, understood and interpreted (Kaya, 2020, p. 2).

Meanwhile, when they have areas under their control, ethno-nationalist VNSAs may deem themselves as the sovereign ruler in those areas (Doboš, 2016; Zelin, 2016). They engage in the territorialization process similar to the modern nation-states. Their territorial identity is mainly shaped by how they imagine a certain territory (Storey, 2012). In this process, VNSAs create maps too for their imagined homeland. However, the imagined borders they have in mind and the existing official borders are not the same. So, most of the ethno-nationalist VNSAs believe that they merit sovereignty over their "own" territory because of their

distinctive cultural, ethnic, territorial and linguistic identities. For them, the only way to protect their ethnic identity is to gain autonomy or independence through a state-making process. In this regard, cartographic images can function as political tools for VNSAs, that seek international recognition (Kaya, 2020, pp. 7-9).

In the initial stage, ethno-nationalist VNSAs view the process of territorialization as a process of deterritorialization of the targeted state. Secondly, the process of reterritorialization occurs with a new geopolitical narrative. In other words, the targeted state's conception of territory is deconstructed to replace another conception (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023). The final stage of territorialization is the consolidation of territorial hegemony. At this stage, VNSAs are in control of certain areas and govern those areas (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). If an ethno-nationalist VNSA effectively manages a territory, it not only transforms the allegiances of the local populace in line with its sovereignty discourse but also yields additional material resources and workforce essential for its war-making efforts (Idler and Forest, 2015).

2. The PYD's Rational Legitimization Efforts

The PYD established various administrative, political and military structures in northeast Syria, as shown in the previous chapter. These structures were also built as a result of the PYD's pursuit of acquiring societal legitimacy. So, in this section, I will focus on the rational dimension of the PYD's efforts to legitimize its authority at domestic and international levels within the scope of its state-making process.

The Syrian civil war led to a substantial deterioration in public goods and social services such as food, water, oil, electricity and healthcare. The Assad regime, fearing that an alternative authority could emerge with the provision of public services, systematically targeted relevant facilities in the opposition areas (Vignal, 2021). On the contrary, because of the reasons

discussed in Chapter Four, the PYD-controlled areas were not attacked by the regime. Also, the agricultural areas along the Euphrates hosted most of the wheat and cotton production in Syria (Kızılkaya et. al., 2021, p. 13). Plus, the PYD took Tishreen Dam in hand to supply electricity to the areas under its control (Oktav et. al., 2018, p. 13). Besides, the PYD held 70 per cent of Syria's energy sources following its seizure of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor with the help of the US (Eker, 2015, p. 49). Thanks to these circumstances and resources, the PYD was able to provide essential public services under serious warfare constraints. As one Arab activist said:

> They (the PYD) are authoritarian and do not let anyone else provide these services other than through them. However, I have to admit, they have excelled in the provision of services. In Amuda where I live, you have the main needs like electricity, water, hospitalization, bread, etc.; even mazout (fuel oil) is delivered to your house! (Khalaf, 2016, p. 16).

According to Khalaf, whether in support or opposition to it, the fact that the PYD succeeded in providing public and social services such as security, stability, justice, food, water, sanitation, fuel, electricity, healthcare, job opportunities and education became a determining factor in terms of accepting its authority (2016, pp. 16-21). For instance, the PYD constructed bakeries and mitigated scarcities of gas cylinders and sugar (Narbone et. al., 2016). So, it addressed the absence of some crucial commodities in the market. Additionally, people were able to get jobs in the PYD's governance and security institutions. In this way, people living in northeast Syria were able to meet their basic daily needs to some extent and gave their support to the PYD.

In the meantime, by restricting other groups from providing these services, as part of its state-making activities, the PYD created a dependency upon it. The humanitarian organizations were under the control of the PYD, and they were required to channel aid through the PYD-controlled institutions (Khalaf, 2016, p. 18). The main goal was to portray the PYD as the sole provider of public services, thus increasing its legitimacy.

Moreover, the PYD's role in the battle against ISIS was a vital factor in its legitimization efforts. In a brutal civil war, protection is a scarce commodity. People suffering from the war place immense value on this matter. In northeast Syria, the YPG was the only armed actor that could protect Syrian Kurds, and the religious minorities, from the indiscriminate attacks of Jihadists (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 16; Burchfield, 2017). As a Kobane resident expressed:

> Everyone has to fight here, it is a question of life or death... whether you are for or against the PKK, you have no choice. ISIS attacks don't differentiate (Baczko et. al., 2018, p. 171).

Also, another activist from Manbij testified:

> While we fear the PYD with its brutality and alliance with the regime, with the international coalition's shelling on our area and the hell of ISIS inflicted on us, we did not mind whomever saving us. All of us truly rejoiced when the SDF expelled ISIS; at least we retained some freedoms (Khalaf, 2016, p. 12).

Equivalently, the PYD co-leader Asya Abdulla insisted on this point when asked about their legitimacy and stated: "We are the ones on the ground fighting ISIS and protecting people, we are the legitimate authority" at Chatham House on 15 September 2016.

On the other hand, the PYD used its struggle against ISIS as a pretext for violent and authoritarian actions. For this reason, the PYD gained significant popular support in the immediate proximity to the front lines; however, it faced diminished support and accusations of brutality and authoritarianism in areas farther from the combat zones (Khalaf, 2016, p. 2).

Finally, it should be reminded that the PYD provides most public services for a fee. Providing water and electricity and sales of food and other products generate income for its war-making activities. The PYD also collects taxes for construction permits, land, business revenue, cars, agricultural income, border trade and the passage of people and vehicles (Narbone et. al., 2016). Yet, the lack of transparency and accountability in the allocation of oil, tax, wheat, barley, and other revenues hinders the effective and efficient provision of public services

(Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 54). Besides, in Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqa, the PYD faced a series of protests that stemmed from unpleasant living conditions, elevated poverty rates, poor infrastructure, a shortage of natural resources and other problems. In return, it reacted sternly to the protests (Cengiz, 2020, pp. 16-18).

3. The PYD's Symbolic Legitimization Efforts

We have Kurdish nationalists without Kurdish nationalism-
a historical anomaly which is nevertheless true (Vali, 1998, p. 84).

As Mann underlined (1986, p. 22; 1993, p. 7), ideological power consolidates social power by giving the ruling authority a meaning of existence during its war-making and state-making activities. Accordingly, various symbols of Kurdish nationalism like flags, maps, Newroz, Kawa, Öcalan, images, words and slogans were introduced and reproduced by the PYD in the private and public sphere as part of its legitimization efforts (Dryaz, 2020, pp. 113-114). Therefore, although the PYD rule is generally reflected as a non-nationalist model, it has nationalist characteristics, which prioritize Kurds and their cultural, historical and political identity (Dinc, 2020).

Nationalism and nationalist projects are *discursive formations* that shape the consciousness of people. Symbolism, including 'historical' narratives, heroes, metaphors and social solidarity, profoundly influences them (Calhoun, 2002, p. 3). In such discursive formations, identity-building process can be understood through *ideological square* and analysing the function of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (or misrepresentation) (Van Dijk, 2003, p. 33). In this regard, ISIS both became the constitutive other in the PYD's nation-building process and revived the concept of "Kurdistan" as a single unit among Kurds (Dalay, 2018, pp. 78-82).

3. 1. Kurdish Nationalism and the Concept of Kurdistan

Kurds are popularly defined as "the largest nation without a state."[18] The root of this common idea is spectral imaginings of a state that was "supposed to be" (Klein, 2022).[19] This is why, Kurdish nationalists use specific geographical terminology as in *Bakur* (North) to refer to Southeast Türkiye, *Bashur* (South) to refer to Northern Iraq, *Rojhelat* (East) to refer to Western Iran, and *Rojava* (West) to refer to Northeast Syria, when talking about the Kurdish-majority areas in these countries (Bengio, 2014, pp. 1-15). This terminology signifies the united nature of the so-called "Kurdistan," which was partitioned by colonial powers as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, in their eyes (McDowall, 2021, pp. 131-162).

Moreover, Kurdish nationalist historiography asserts that Kurdish history and territorial ownership date back to 'time immemorial' (approximately dating back to 4,000 BC) (Izady, 1992). Accordingly, it conveys a message that even centuries ago there existed a Kurdish nation. By doing so, Kurdish nationalist historiography connects pre-modern meanings of the concepts, such as "Kurdishness" and "Kurdistan," with the modern uses of national, territorial and political identities (O'Shea, 2004, pp. 2-3). Hence, as in the case of other nationalisms, Kurdish nationalism views its national existence in an 'ahistorical' way.

Historically, the identity of Kurds has been mostly constructed as the *'other'* in different social and political contexts in the Middle East (Yeğen, 1999). The minorities are frequently seen as "ulcers on the body of the motherland" by radical nationalists (Anderson, 2006, p. 103). Similarly, as discussed in Chapter Three, Syrian Kurds experienced severe marginalization and political oppression because of the Ba'ath regime's policies of

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[18] Even with the presence of potentially larger populations without states, like the Tamils, numbering around 70 million across Sri Lanka, Mauritius, India, Malaysia and Singapore (Kaya, 2020, p. 4).

[19] The territory represented by the so-called "Kurdistan" has never attained an official state status. Nevertheless, the concept of "Kurdistan," as a cultural and political abstraction, endures beyond the tangible reality and persists in the minds of Kurdish nationalists (Kaya, 2020, p. 1).

"Arabization." According to the regime, they were not appropriate for the Syrian state's Arabic nature. So, their royalty could not be taken for granted. The implementation of this "othering" mechanism against Syrian Kurds facilitated the firm entrenchment of repression.

However, in the early twenty-first century, there was more transborder collaboration among Kurdish political movements, which paved the way for the rise of pan-Kurdism (Bengio, 2014, p. 273). Then, the idea of "redrawing borders" (Ayoob, 2015) became popular among Kurds to deal with the long-lasting Kurdish problems. In this context, the PYD engaged in its state-making and nation-making activities, causing displeasure among neighbouring countries (Sabio, 2016). In other words, it was not only the Syrian civil war or the Kobane attacks from which the territorial claims of the PYD emerged; rather, these claims surfaced within the trajectories of Kurdish nationalism. This historically crafted geographical narrative extends beyond Syria, encompassing Türkiye, Iraq and Iran (Seevan, 2014).

The map of "Kurdistan" has been quite influential in terms of shaping the Kurdish nationalist discourse based on historical and territorial imaginations (Kaya, 2020). As Anderson (2006, pp. 170-178) underscored, nationalist imaginations highly benefitted from maps. They can be endlessly reproduced in various forms such as posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths and hotel walls. Easily identified, these logo maps make a deep impression on the popular imagination. In a similar vein, the map of "Kurdistan" is often displayed on Kurdish political party flags, and on the walls of homes and offices; its silhouette is featured on accessories like key rings, brooches or necklaces (Kaya, 2020, pp. 1-2). The extensive dissemination and replication of the map fortified the Kurdish nationalist struggle, aiding in rallying support for the cause and enhancing awareness. Consequently, embedded in the Kurdish national consciousness, the map of "Kurdistan" serves as a

pervasive symbol of Kurdish territorial identity and a potent instrument in fostering separatist aspirations.

3. 2. Öcalanist Kurdish Ethno-nationalism

Kurdishness of the PYD rule has been persistently symbolized in various flags (see Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11) over the use of the Kurdish national colours: yellow-red-green (Dinc, 2020, p. 10).

Figure 8: The flag of TEV-DEM

Figure 9: The Flag of PYD

Figure 10: The Flag of YPG

Figure 11: The Flag of YPJ

Furthermore, as explained in Chapter Two, the PKK is a Kurdish ethno-nationalist VNSA with a strong emphasis on the personality cult of Öcalan. He is referred to as though he embodies an institution, the *Leadership*, signifying the apex of the party organization. Similarly, the PYD brought the cult of Öcalan to the regions it controlled (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 2016). So, from a Weberian perspective, it can be said that the PYD tried to build a charismatic authority to legitimize its rule (Weber, 1978, pp. 241-254).

Öcalan's portraits were ubiquitous in northeast Syria, as seen in Figures 12, 13, 14 and 15. Ironically, as prevalent as the obligatory images of Assads were during the Assad regime, so too were those of Öcalan under the PYD rule (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 683). As several activists confirmed, "Bashar Al-Assad's picture was removed to be replaced by Öcalan's" (Khalaf, 2016, p. 22). There is even a slogan above those pictures suggesting: "There's no life without a leader" (McDowall, 2020, p. 691).

Figure 12: Mural of Abdullah Öcalan in the city of Qamishli (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 15)

Figure 13:Roza: The Country of Two Rivers. Rojava/Syria: Rojava Film Commune (Cebe, 2016)

Figure 14:A visual display of YPG-PKK linkages at the Samalka border crossing between Iraq and Syria (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 13)

Figure 15: Kurdish fighters raise flag of PKK leader in centre of Raqqa (Middle East Eye, 20 October 2017)

Besides, the PYD's armed forces, *Asayish* included, swear an oath to Öcalan, as seen in Figures 16 and 17.

Figure 16: The YPG Make Children Militants Swear on Öcalan's Book (1)

Figure 17: The YPG Make Children Militants Swear on Öcalan's Book (2)

Note: Figures 9 and 10 can be found in the report published by Acun and Keskin on the PYD (Acun and Keskin, 2017, p. 39).

Another fundamental pillar in terms of the PYD's strategy on identity construction and legitimacy-building is education. The PYD aims to indoctrinate people via education and form a community abiding by the political philosophy of Öcalan. In other words, education functions as a primary element in the PYD's war-making efforts.

For this purpose, the PYD produced a Kurdish curriculum (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 50). Then, it initially closed several Christian schools which did not adopt its curriculum. However, these schools were later allowed to use the official curriculum of the Syrian government on the condition that they would admit only Christian students (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 51).

The PYD created higher education as well. For example, the *Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy* was founded in 2013 (Khalaf, 2016, p. 17). Also, a college opened in Afrin that taught in Kurdish in 2015. Additionally, *Rojava University* opened in Qamishli in 2016 with colleges of medicine, engineering, petroleum, agricultural studies, communications and

computer sciences in cooperation with the Paris 8 University (Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, p. 25). Lastly, *Kobane University* was inaugurated in 2017 (Medya News, 2022).

According to Espinosa and Ronan (2022, p. 10), the oppression of Kurds and other minorities by the Ba'ath regime was the main reason for the necessity of a new education system in northeast Syria for the participants in their research. So, many Kurdish people were pleased with the fact that Kurdish was being taught along with Arabic, Assyrian and other languages. They indicated that with the implementation of a new curriculum, the Kurdish language would be "liberated from the prison of Arabic once and for all" (Lee, 2020, p. 86).

However, there are serious technical problems in the PYD's education system. For instance, teachers working at schools and universities do not possess the qualifications needed to be employed at such institutions (Khalaf, 2016, p. 18). Moreover, the PYD's curriculum and education system are acknowledged neither at the national nor international level (Medya News, 2022). So, people who graduate from these schools cannot find any jobs except in areas under the PYD's control (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022, p. 13).

On top of these problems, the PYD's education system is highly politicized, and the school curriculum is filled with Öcalanist ideology (Özçelik, 2020, p. 698). In children's school textbooks, there are pictures of Öcalan (Khalaf, 2016, p. 22). There are complaints asserting that: "instead of teaching maths, (they would) explain about (Öcalan) and was afraid of receiving worse grades if they did not 'agree with' Öcalan" (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022, p. 15). The PYD made its education system so that students would grow up to be loyal members of its ideology. Accordingly, it trained school-aged children. Those children are afterwards forcefully enlisted in the YPG (Acun and Görücü, 2023, pp. 73-74).

3. 3. A Perfect Enemy: ISIS and the Kobane War

Ever since the Syrian civil war broke out, Kobane has been covered in the international media as much as no other place. The extensively publicized concern over the potential loss of Kobane was depicted as a defeat for the entire Kurdish nation (Al Jazeera, 2015). As the PKK's Executive Council declared:

> The PKK will continue to defend and to ensure Kurdish unity, and Kurdish interests and gains. We remain determined to defend South Kurdistan against ISIS or any other forces. For the PKK and the KCK, Kirkuk is the same as Amed, and Sinjar the same as Kobane. We have the same sensitivity towards all the provinces and districts of Kurdistan... (Bestanuce, 24 September 2014).

Against this backdrop, the successful defence of Kobane gained a special status in the Kurdish national consciousness (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019, pp. 18-19). It provided Kurdish nationalism with a sentimentally strong narrative (Tezcür and Yıldız, 2021, p. 136) and promoted sentiments of pan-Kurdish solidarity (Gourlay, 2018).

The symbolic value of Kobane was bigger than its strategic value. It functioned as a political capital source for the PYD in its war-making efforts. People who fought in the Kobane war and the "martyrs" were deemed sacred. The PYD made a burial ground, which can be seen in Figure 18, in memory of the "heroes" who were killed in the war (Netjes and van Veen, 2021, p. 28). Funerals spanning borders and transnational mourning became commonplace. Certain areas of Kobane turned into open-air museums for future generations to remember sacrifices made there (ANF, 2015). Therefore, as Anderson (2006) foresaw, the PYD's nation-building process greatly benefited from monuments, graves, ceremonies and museums.

Figure 18: Graves at the burial ground: The deceased fought ISIS.

During this process, ISIS had been the *constitutive other* (Dalay, 2018, p. 82). The fundamentalist ideology of ISIS stood in sharp opposition to the PYD's allegedly democratic, secular and gender-equal vision (Gunes, 2019, p. 67). Hence, the representation of "secular-civilized Kurds" versus the "religious barbarism of ISIS" contributed the political campaign of the PYD (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş, 2018, p. 110). The PYD consequently labelled itself as a "counterterrorism" force and attracted worldwide attention.

Finally, serving as a pivotal juncture, the Kobane war brought the Kurdish geopolitical discourse to the forefront and facilitated the reconstruction of historical Kurdish territorial claims in northeast Syria (Gunes and Lowe, 2015). Put differently, it served as a narrative that strengthened the *Kurdishness* of the territory in line with the PYD's state-making activities (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023, p. 9). The utilization of the Kobane war as a meaning-making strategy considerably contributed to extending the Kurdish identity to the regional and international levels. By being identified as an inseparable component of it, Kobane revived the concept of "Kurdistan" as a unified entity among the Kurdish people and became a significant symbol in the Kurdish geopolitical imagination.

3. 4. The PYD's Territorialization of Northeast Syria

According to Tejel, "Rojava is a *space* to be shaped by the PYD's political project, not a place" (2020, p. 262). As mentioned above, the concept of "Rojava" finds its roots in the realm of Kurdish nationalism. However, prior to the Syrian civil war, it was rarely known beyond Kurdish circles (McGee, 2022, p. 387). In this sense, the PYD presents a remarkable case of how a VNSA constructs a distinct conception of territoriality and geopolitical discourse. This process of *Kurdification* underlines a specific conceptualization of territoriality, articulated around the "Rojava" narrative.

On the one hand, the Western media made the "Rojava" narrative popular over its progressive elements such as revolution, bottom-up governance, women's liberation, ecology and so on (McGee, 2022). On the other hand, the PYD consolidated its territorial control through a combination of political and military methods to make a *living space* for Syrian Kurds under its ideological framework (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023, p. 8). The achievement of territorial hegemony marked a pivotal step for the PYD in its internal and external sovereignty claims during its state-making process (Oktav et. al., 2018, p. 10).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the PYD constantly gave new names to its rule, following a pragmatic strategy. It eventually took out the concept of "Rojava" from the project title. The PYD's goal in doing this was to show the inclusive and pluralist texture of its project. Nonetheless, the concept of "Rojava" became widely prevalent in international media and found common usage in everyday Kurdish conversations in northeast Syria (McGee, 2022). Hence, it left a powerful imprint on the Kurdish national consciousness.

The employment of symbolic politics and metaphors by the PYD was beneficial in the reconstruction of Kurdish identity and the reshaping of geopolitical imagination (Kardaş and

Yeşiltaş, 2018, p. 99). Among them, as emphasized before, the map of "Kurdistan" was the most prominent expression of the Kurdish national discourse (Tejel, 2020, p. 251). For example, in the school textbooks taught in the Jazira Canton in the 2015-2016 academic year, official international borders were ignored, and the so-called "Kurdistan" was portrayed to be an ancient country and nation, as seen in Map 3 (Tejel, 2020, pp. 261-262).[20] Textbooks are often thought of as a reflection of recognized and selected knowledge that everyone in a given society is expected to know. Thus, they were valuable devices for the PYD in disseminating the concept of "Kurdistan" among the inhabitants of northeast Syria.

Map 3: 'Cîranên me' (Our neighbours)

In the meantime, the PYD actively pursued a policy of *Kurdification* in the region. To illustrate, certain toponymic changes were put into effect via the replacement of Arabic names of some cities, villages and streets with Kurdish ones in response to the Ba'ath regime's Arabization policies (Tomar, 2019; Boyraz, 2020, p. 15).

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[20] This map is very similar to the KCK's Alleged Map of "Kurdistan," which is seen in Map 1.

The PYD also forced many Arabs and Turkmen to immigrate, claiming that it was the regime that settled them in northeast Syria (Özdemir, 2016). In 2015, *Amnesty International* reported the "deliberate displacement of thousands of civilians and the razing of entire villages in areas under the control of the (PYD) Autonomous Administration, often in retaliation for residents' perceived sympathies with, or ties to, members of ISIS or other armed groups" (Amnesty International, 2015). In February 2016, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights declared that the YPG demolished the homes of dozens of Arab civilians in Tal Tamer, accusing the owners of supporting ISIS (Amnesty International, 2016/2017). Besides, while permitting the return of Kurdish refugees, the PYD impeded the return of a substantial number of Arab refugees who had fled their homes due to the ISIS threat (Balanche, 2016). With these policies, the PYD aimed to create a more homogeneous demographic structure in the areas under its control in line with its identity-building strategies (Demirel, 2017).

3. 5. Gender

The promotion of women's rights symbolically played a crucial role in the PYD's domestic and international legitimization efforts. It regularly signified the importance of gender equality in social and political spheres as per the teachings of Öcalan (Sary, 2016, pp. 11-12; Şimşek and Jongerden, 2018). According to the Rojava Social Contract, it was a must that women's organizations and institutions, such as women's houses, women's committees on the economy, women's courts, women's police and women's academies, be established separately in order to handle gender issues (Roelofs, 2018, p. 130). The Contract also envisioned a struggle against polygamy, sexual harassment, forced marriage and violence in the household.

Further, women assumed positions in the armed forces. There is a separate military organization for women, the YPJ. And, some of the commanders of the YPG are women.

Furthermore, at least 40 per cent of all administrative bodies under the PYD rule must be held by women in line with the equal gender representation principle. The co-chair system was carried out with this principle so that elected positions would be shared by a man and woman (Dirik, 2015).

In addition, gender issues, i.e., *Jineology*, were a critical component in the PYD's education and training system (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022, pp. 10-11). In this way, the PYD claimed to work towards raising awareness among the population in terms of gender issues and improving women's position in society (Dirik, 2018).

Meanwhile, the positive representation of female Kurdish warriors in the Western media was a useful tool for the PYD. These female militants were depicted as "heroic" and "exceptional" since they resisted the gendered state oppression in the Middle East (Toivanen and Baser, 2016; Tank, 2017). Various media outlets had interviews with them (Gatehouse, 2014; Çiviroğlu, 2015; Ross, 2015). For instance, as illustrated in Figure 19, a female militant who stated that she "joined the PKK to defend human values, to fight for women's equality" was photographed by BBC (20 August 2015), with the caption reading 'Ruken...getting ready to be deployed (to fight ISIS).' Accordingly, the *beautification* of the female Kurdish warriors as opposed to the bearded male ISIS "terrorists" made the PYD sympathetic to the Western audience (Leezenberg, 2016, pp. 682-683; Kardaş and Yeşiltaş, 2018, pp. 106-108; Dean, 2019).

Figure 19: In Pictures: PKK fighters prepare for battle with IS.

For the three decades, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been fighting the Turkish government. The PKK is considered a terrorist organisation by the Turkish authorities and several Western states, but it is now a key player in the battle against the jihadist group Islamic State (IS). BBC Persian's Jiyar Gol was granted rare access to a PKK training camp in northern Iraq.

Ruken, a 21-year-old ethnic Turkmen, has been in the mountains for eight months and is getting ready to be deployed. "I joined the PKK to defend human values, to fight for women's equality," she says.

On the other hand, some feminists expressed disapproval of Öcalan's essentialist idealization of women because it collectively treated women and undermined their individualities (McDowall, 2020, p. 693). In fact, the PYD would allow public space for women so long as they did not seek autonomous agendas (Özçelik, 2020, p. 691). Additionally, the level of female participation in the communes remained notably limited all along (Selo, 2018). Besides, introducing gender equality into a profoundly patriarchal society where every aspect of life is dominated by men posed a formidable challenge. Not only did the men in northeast Syria think that conventional authority dynamics would disappear but also quite a few women viewed the PYD's gender project as a threat to the existing social norms (McDowall, 2020, p. 693).

Conclusion

Ethno-nationalist VNSAs seeking statehood need to gain domestic and international legitimacy. For this purpose, a combination of coercive and non-coercive strategies should be used concurrently. If a state fails, VNSAs may fill the power vacuum and engage in a competitive state-making process. In this regard, this chapter examined the legitimization endeavours undertaken by the PYD in the domestic and international spheres. By doing so, it intended to elucidate a notable case of how an ethno-nationalist VNSA possessed a certain territory and constructed a distinct territorial identity through the territorialization process in the context of a state failure.

As a VNSA with territorial aspirations, the PYD employed various legitimacy-building activities, including security provision and social and public services, to consolidate its authority. With these activities, the PYD asserted that its rule was acknowledged by the populace and presented itself as a neutral representative of different societal interests with the right to use legitimate violence in the region.

Irrespective of supportive or opposing perspectives, the pivotal factor determining the acceptance of the PYD's authority lies in its successful provision of public and social services. Among them, the PYD's war-making capabilities in the battle against ISIS emerged as a crucial factor. In the context of a civil war, where protection is a scarce commodity, individuals affected by the conflict highly valued this aspect.

Also, in its quest for legitimization, the PYD emphasized democratic and universal values under the banner of the so-called "Rojava" project. Furthermore, the advocacy of women's rights played a key role in the PYD's endeavours for both domestic and international legitimacy. The favourable portrayal of female Kurdish militants in Western media served as

a strategic tool for the PYD in this sense. They symbolized resistance against the misogynist ideology of ISIS.

On the other hand, the PYD knew ideological power was a facilitator of effective governance and control. In this manner, the PYD rule displays nationalist elements. Even if the PYD projected an inclusive and pluralist discourse, Kurds assumed a *primus inter pares* status under its governance. In this way, the PYD sought to enhance solidarity and foster in-group sentiments among Syrian Kurds. The promotion of Kurdish nationalism was also evident in the *Kurdification* of geopolitical discourse, mapping strategies and the utilization of diverse symbols in private and public realms. In addition, the PYD used education as an instrument for mass indoctrination, aiming to cultivate the Kurdish identity and build a community aligned with the political philosophy of Öcalan. Besides, the PYD attempted to change the demographic composition of northeast Syria, committing war crimes and human rights violations. Therefore, the performative sources of legitimacy do not negate the PYD's authoritarian and nationalist tendencies within its state-making process.

Conclusion

1. Summary of the Research

This thesis provides a critical examination of the PYD's state-building activities in northeast Syria between 2012 and 2019. Building on the bellicist tradition and Tilly's theory of war-making and state-making, I empirically analysed how a VNSA seeking statehood engages in state-making activities in the context of state failure. In this way, I revealed the emergence and evolution of a state-like entity as a by-product of warfare. In doing so, I tried to take both the *agency* of the actor and the systemic factors into account in a comprehensive manner. Additionally, I pointed out the discrepancies between the PYD's discourse and actions and underlined the quasi-state aspects of its rule. With this research, I intended to go beyond the descriptive nature of the current PYD literature.

The establishment of a *de facto* autonomous entity was unanticipated for Syrian Kurds. Their history of nationalist mobilization was far less active compared to their counterparts in Iran, Iraq and Türkiye. Yet, after decades of marginalization and political repression, their situation changed dramatically following the withdrawal of Assad regime forces in July 2012. In other words, the Syrian civil war made the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish administration in the country possible. This autonomous administration was equally important for the PKK, from which the PYD received ideological, organizational and military backing. Historically unprecedented, the PKK, via its Syrian branch, gained territorial control and a chance to realize Öcalan's vision. Therefore, after a long period of violent struggle against Türkiye, the PKK made its political vision come true, albeit in Syria. For this reason, I emphasized how important it is to acknowledge the PYD's connection to Öcalan and the PKK to fully make sense of its activities and goals.

The PYD advocates for a political discourse of "Democratic Autonomy" and/or "Democratic Confederalism" rooted in Öcalan's teachings. The literature predominantly characterizes this model as a "stateless" form of governance, consistent with the PYD's discourse. In contrast, this research shows that the PYD employs modern state-making mechanisms and reproduces the Westphalian concept of sovereign statehood in northeast Syria, rather than deconstructing it. The PYD's state-making activities involve governing, monopolizing violence, exerting territorial control through armed forces, providing 'protection' and 'security' to its population, enforcing military conscription, maintaining public services such as food, water, electricity, healthcare, infrastructure, education, economy, judiciary, legitimizing its political authority, introducing a 'constitutional' draft, forming 'diplomatic' relations, and establishing a 'taxation' system to finance these activities. In addition, the PYD is playing by the rules of the modern international order which does not tolerate the separatist activities of VNSAs. Accordingly, it aspires to establish a legitimate framework for its existence and ontological status within the current order that prioritizes the norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Moreover, as an ethno-nationalist VNSA, the PYD engages in various identity-building strategies to consolidate its authority. Öcalanist Kurdish ethno-nationalism has been the core ideology of PKK-affiliated parties, including the PYD. Following the imposition of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in the Middle East after World War I, Kurdish nationalist movements have contested the official boundaries and national identities of the regional states, advocating for self-determination. Although the concept of "Kurdistan" as a state that is 'supposed to be' does not have concrete geographic and political form, it has been a powerful force in terms of shaping the territorial imaginations of Kurdish nationalist movements. In spite of its abstract nature, the idea of "Kurdistan" provides a sense of national identity for many Kurds. Nonetheless, due to the PYD's inclusive and pluralistic rhetoric, the literature typically

presents its rule as a post-national model prioritizing ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, and safeguarding minority rights. On the contrary, I maintained that the PYD's state-making project heavily emphasizes Kurdish national identity. It exhibits nationalist characteristics prioritizing Kurdish social, cultural, historical and political identity. The PYD benefits from symbols of Kurdish nationalism, such as flags, maps, heroes, images, words, slogans and social events, as part of its identity-building strategies. Thus, it aims to promote a strong sense of solidarity and belonging primarily among Syrian Kurds.

The *Kurdification of* geopolitical discourse, an example of which is the concept of "Rojava" and the canonization of "Kobane" as a nationalist symbol, also highlights that the PYD pursues Kurdish nationalism. The PYD's territoriality is embedded in the historical Kurdish demands for an imagined territory, called "Kurdistan." It reflects a robust relationship between the Kurdish community and territory. Additionally, the PYD has several times attempted to reshape the demographic nature of northeast Syria and *Kurdify* it. In this regard, this study empirically displays how an ethno-nationalist VNSA with territorial ambitions took control of a territory and promoted a specific territorial identity through the *territorialization* process in the context of a state failure. *Stateless nationalism* has been the cornerstone of the PYD's identity-building endeavours.

The PYD's war-making efforts against ISIS furthered its legitimacy claims in domestic, regional, and international contexts. Domestically, the provision of security against the ISIS threat has been crucial. The Kurdish nationalist project in Syria progressed thanks to it as well. ISIS functioned as the *constitutive other* in this project. Similarly, the successful defence of Kobane has become a significant symbol of the Kurdish national consciousness and promoted regional pan-Kurdish sentiments. In the international arena, while ISIS connotated concepts such as authoritarianism, extremism and terrorism, the PYD signified the upcoming "revolution" in the Middle East. Its progressive, democratic, secular, gender-equal and eco-

friendly vision stood in stark contrast to ISIS's fundamentalist ideology. Besides, the Western media's depiction of "secular-civilized Kurds" in contrast to the "religious barbarism of ISIS" made a substantial contribution to the PYD's international campaign. Then, the PYD branded itself as a reliable "counterterrorism" force.

On the other hand, the literature frequently portrays the PYD's governance model as a bottom-up, radical democratic and egalitarian model that empowers citizens through direct participation in the decision-making process via communes and local councils. Similarly, the PYD asserts that its political power comes from the people's recognition and the "self-administration" rules on behalf of the "people." However, numerous allegations have been made against the PYD for human rights abuses, war crimes, political oppression and establishing a one-party rule based on Öcalan's cult of personality. In addition, the PYD uses education to indoctrinate the masses and build a society that adopts Öcalan's political philosophy. The wartime realities cannot explain alone the discrepancies between the discourse and practices of the PYD. A democratic rhetoric is indeed utilized by the PYD to attain domestic and international legitimacy and survive in a hostile geopolitical environment. Yet, the contradictions cannot be understood without referring to the PYD's organizational and ideological ties to the PKK. The PKK's strict authoritarian hierarchical vanguardist party structure is reproduced by the PYD. Furthermore, Öcalan does not present a clear stance on the leader's role, the party and the armed resistance. For this reason, comprehending the PYD's connection to the PKK and Öcalan is critical in figuring out both the intellectual sources of the PYD rule and the contradictions between its discourse and practices.

As for the Syrian civil war's contribution to the PYD's state-making efforts, it is safe to say that the Kurdish state-like entity in northeast Syria did not emerge precisely following the pattern put forward by Tilly. However, undoubtedly, the PYD capitalized on the war to carry out state-making activities as warfare paves the way for the process of state formation.

Inspired by Öcalan's perspective on violence, the PYD regarded the conflict and war as an instrument to achieve its goals. Well-prepared organizationally, militarily and ideologically, it was ready to fight when the chaos unleashed by the Syrian Uprisings turned into a brutal civil war. Hence, the war-making capabilities were essential in the PYD's ability to build a state-like entity.

The PYD's institutional readiness has been a major factor in the emergence of the Kurdish state-like entity in northeast Syria. The pre-existing Öcalanist, KCK-affiliated institutions provided the foundation for the PYD's administrative structures. Put differently, the PYD's governance model did not emerge spontaneously from the power vacuum created by the regime's withdrawal. Equally important was the PYD's coercive power. Among Syrian Kurdish groups, only the PYD, backed by experienced PKK cadres, had the military capability to seize, hold and defend territory. Through its ability to monopolize the means of violence, the PYD effectively prevented other groups from having a competitive political and military presence in the region. In addition to its organizational and military strength, the PYD's ideological power, based on radical leftist feminist Öcalanist Kurdish nationalism, played a pivotal role. It was useful in attracting a diverse range of supporters and mobilizing them to participate in the fight. In this way, the PYD, as a VNSA with a long-term horizon, managed to render itself a 'war machine.' Besides, the war was a substantial concept in the PYD's ideology to create a "revolutionary" political community.

On the other hand, the PYD's success in establishing a Kurdish state-like entity in northeast Syria cannot be solely attributed to its own capabilities. Its pragmatism in forming alliances with domestic and foreign actors during different phases of the Syrian civil war was another major contributing factor.

Thanks to the mutual convenience relationship between the PYD and the Assad regime, the PYD was able to seize control of the Kurdish-majority areas in northeast Syria after the regime's retreat. On the one hand, the regime has historically denied the existence of Kurds in the country and stripped them of all their human and legal rights. On the other hand, it has provided sanctuary to the PKK within Syrian borders and used it against Türkiye. In return, the PKK ignored Kurdish problems in Syria and created various military structures within the country to fight against Türkiye. When the Syrian Uprisings erupted, the regime allowed PKK cadres to return to Syria under the guise of the PYD in exchange for suppressing protests in Kurdish-majority areas. Then, it ceded the Kurdish enclaves of Afrin, Kobane and Qamishli to the PYD. The regime consistently aided the PYD throughout the war and avoided airstrikes on PYD-held territories. Consequently, the PYD exploited the war circumstances to advance its own agenda, by purportedly adopting a "third road" position and tacitly cooperating with the regime based on shared interests. This way, it took advantage of the power vacuum created by the war to establish an autonomous administration.

Meanwhile, with the emergence of ISIS, there occurred a military alliance between the PYD and the US. Subsequent to the Kobane war in late 2014, the PYD emerged as the ground ally of the US-led global coalition combating ISIS, under the SDF banner. This international support enabled the PYD to unite its cantons and capture extensive Arab-majority areas in Syria. After the decisive Raqqa operation in 2017, the PYD seized control of a considerable portion of Syrian territory. This territory contains most of Syria's oil, gas, water resources and dams. Having expanded its power and acquired Syria's vital economic resources with the US backing, the PYD further developed and institutionalized its state-like entity, the AANES, with an assembly, ministries, bureaucracy and security forces.

The PYD viewed its relationship with the US as evidence of international legitimacy. It skilfully utilized 'diplomacy' to improve the relations with major international powers and established representative offices in the EU countries and Russia. The PYD's sophisticated global network of relationships is what makes it different from other VNSAs involved in the Syrian civil war. However, in spite of extensive collaboration attempts with the international community, the PYD rule lacks formal recognition and authority *de jure*. In fact, as a VNSA, it has been perceived as a danger to regional states' sovereignty and territorial integrity. Accordingly, the PYD was barred from participating in both the Geneva and Astana diplomatic negotiations. Furthermore, Türkiye's longstanding concerns about Kurdish separatism intensified due to the PYD's state-making activities along its southern frontier, given the PYD's intrinsic connection to the PKK. In fact, the PKK attempted to build "Democratic Autonomy" in Türkiye in 2015-2016 after the end of the peace process between Türkiye and the PKK. Then, to thwart the PYD's aspirations of creating a fully independent statelet, Türkiye launched major military campaigns across northern Syria.

Without a comprehensive political resolution to the Syrian crisis, the scope and status of the PYD rule remain vulnerable and disputed. To force concessions from the Assad regime and contain Iranian power in the region, the US is likely to maintain its presence in Syria for the foreseeable future. Additionally, the US offered a certain amount of protection to the PYD from Turkish threats even if its historical alliance with Türkiye constrained the extent of the US-PYD relationship. On the other hand, Russia seeks to prevent the PYD from becoming entirely dominated by American influence. It also worked to facilitate dialogue between Ankara and Damascus. Besides, even though the regime tacitly cooperated with the PYD to suppress the opposition and limit Turkish influence, it did not grant the PYD administration any official status. For this reason, it is not easy to know whether the PYD rule will remain in the long term as it is bound to face major challenges.

2. Findings and Contribution

The PYD presents a rich case study of the transformation of a VNSA into a quasi-state actor in the context of a state failure. Numerous studies reveal that the absence of a state monopoly over the use of violence creates opportunities for the rise of VNSAs. They exploit the conditions in failing or failed states as a springboard for their governance activities. VNSAs can become powerful contenders that drastically affect security issues. Furthermore, they can engage in competitive state-making processes. That is to say, VNSAs contest state power not only on the battlefield but also through alternative governance practices. As such, studies of violent non-state actors and rebel governance have provided valuable insights into the forms of alternative political orders that develop in case of state failures. Yet, whilst it is generally accepted in academic works that a link exists between state failure and the rise of VNSAs, *how* these actors make state-like entities remains largely unexplored.

Moreover, Middle Eastern studies lack sufficient analysis of the interplay between warfare and state-making, despite the prevalence of conflict in the region's political landscape. Existing studies that examine the link between war preparation and state formation do not focus on the rise of new states or state-like entities as a consequence of warfare, but rather on the way preparations for warfare influence the state capacity of already established countries.

Meanwhile, several Middle Eastern states, such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, have undergone a state failure process, resulting in the loss of their exclusive authority over the use of violence in their territories. The Syrian civil war, in particular, created an ideal setting for diverse warring factions to form and operate state-like structures. Some VNSAs even claimed sovereignty over territories they controlled. Therefore, it is crucial to contemplate whether VNSAs can be considered today's wielders of coercion in the contemporary Middle East

when they control territory, exercise a monopoly on violence and establish a functioning governing apparatus in the absence of central authority.

With a thorough analysis of the PYD case, this thesis aims to contribute to the study of violent non-state actors and rebel governance in the Middle Eastern context. Reassessment of the bellicist tradition and Tilly's work of war-making and state-making in a different context leads to the conclusion that Tilly and other bellicist scholars provided us with a still useful paradigm about state formation and its relationship to warfare. They offered the necessary conceptual and analytical lenses. The preparation for warfare has proven to be a crucial state-making activity since it promotes greater centralization of power and institutionalization. The conduct of warfare persists as a key factor in the emergence and consolidation of states and state-like entities. Nevertheless, to fully grasp the ongoing state-making endeavours of VNSAs amidst state failure, Tilly's theory of war-making and state-making requires some amendments.

Initially, it should be underscored that the established norm of territorial integrity currently acts as an impediment to the redrawing of borders. Modern international order mandates the preservation of official territorial boundaries even though they may be breached from time to time in practice. This is the essence of what Krasner (1999) calls sovereignty's "organized hypocrisy." Thus, even if VNSAs, particularly separatist ones, can monopolize the use of violence in a given territory and create state-like structures through their war-making capabilities, they still need to await a Wilsonian opportunity for major geopolitical change to pursue self-determination.

What is more, war does not automatically lead to the establishment of states or state-like structures. In any situation or environment, actors can have a wide range of options and responses to external pressure, based on their objectives. For example, clans, tribes, religious

communities and trading networks do not prioritize the monopolization of violence or demand exclusive allegiance even though they frequently contribute to security, promote economic growth and act as sources of identity. It is therefore necessary to understand the micro-level mechanisms that allow any actor seeking statehood to aggregate power and create state-like entities. This would also help explain the economic strategies used by VNSAs to maintain their finances and support their coercive activities. As a result, a more precise definition of the objectives of political violence and micro-level mechanisms stemming from the decisions of actors responding to the imperatives of warfare will reveal that war generates state-like entities only under specific conditions.

There is no doubt that overcoming rivals and seizing the monopoly of violence in a given territory requires a significant level of coercive power. However, the continuation of the control over a territory and population needs more than it. For any authority to be sustainable, it definitely must have social and political legitimacy. The right to rule ultimately comes from the consent of the governed. Accordingly, when they attempt to build a state-like entity, VNSAs often integrate both coercive and non-coercive measures. Nonetheless, winning hearts and minds does not only depend on material benefits but also ideational factors. In this manner, domination is embedded in the sense of belonging and identity of a political community.

In times of civil wars, sub-national ethnic identities become increasingly important. For this reason, depending on the extent to which their ideology permeates society and their capacity to foster networks of solidarity, ethno-nationalist VNSAs leverage nationalism to gain social and political legitimacy. It is common for them to come up with new forms of political subjectivity. This way, they endeavour to have their societies participate in and financially support their war-making efforts. Consequently, VNSAs can organize sub-national groups during civil to legitimize their governance practices.

In addition, modern conflicts are characterized by a particular configuration of territoriality. The process of state formation incorporates both control and reorganization of physical space for strategic purposes and the construction of meaning associated with that space. The abstraction of state power has historically contributed to the development of distinct territorial identities. In return, this enabled the definition of modern state, and other social and political relations, within the architecture of sovereign territoriality. As those in power sought to monopolize violence, bordering and mapping projects became crucial to the territorialization of state authority. In this regard, VNSAs may also engage in the process of territorialization to construct new territorial identities during civil wars, potentially replacing existing state sovereignty.

To sum up, the bellicist paradigm and Tilly's theory of war-making and state-making have been highly valuable and insightful in terms of explaining the complex relationship between warfare and state formation in the Middle East. In this study, I have built upon Tilly's well-known statement "War made the state, and the state made war" and applied it to the PYD case with a more comprehensive and constructivist approach. This empirical application presents a more sophisticated view of Tilly's work. By analysing the impact of a civil war on the formation of a state-like entity, I underlined that a general and structuralist perspective cannot adequately encompass the historical and contextual nuances. Further, taking the agency of actors into account would provide a more detailed explanation of micro-level mechanisms. Besides, an overemphasis on material factors, coupled with a disregard for the importance of ideational factors such as legitimacy and ideology, would lead to an incomplete understanding of how VNSAs leverage civil wars to carry out state-making activities. In this manner, this thesis offers empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of conflict and security studies within IR. The PYD operates within a failed state context as an ethno-nationalist VNSA with separatist and territorial ambitions. It engages in various governance activities similar to

modern states and constructs a distinct territorial identity and geopolitical discourse. Additionally, the PYD pursues domestic and international legitimacy for its activities. Accordingly, this research demonstrates how *stateless* or *state-seeking* nationalism can mould the governance practices, identity construction, community development and legitimization strategies of a VNSA in the context of state failure.

3. Future Research

Although this case study focuses on the PYD, its findings may have broader implications. It employs a nuanced conceptual and theoretical framework grounded in the bellicist tradition and the works of Tilly, which can be used for understanding how contemporary civil wars facilitate the rise of VNSAs and the emergence of state-like entities.

International developments since the end of the Cold War highlight the need for conflict and security studies in IR to pay greater attention to VNSAs and the challenges they pose to sovereign states, especially in the Middle Eastern context. However, the IR discipline continues to be predominantly state-centric. A narrow state-centric perspective presents a barrier to the analysis of VNSAs and their activities. As a result, a less state-centric lens appears vital for appropriately placing them within the discipline and pursuing new research directions on the subject.

To fully understand the proliferation of VNSAs, their role in current conflicts or "new wars," and the threats they pose, it is necessary to consider not only the actors themselves but also the historical and geopolitical contexts in which they operate. Actors do not act in isolation with no external influences. They interact with other domestic, regional and global actors in line with their own agenda, bearing structural factors in mind. Hence, any subsequent research on VNSAs must adopt a holistic approach to make more sense of the mechanisms through which VNSAs leverage contemporary civil wars to establish state-like entities.

The nexus between state failures and VNSAs can cover a wide range of subjects, ranging from modes of governance to ideological foundations, operational codes, financial means, recruitment and propaganda tools. The spread of VNSAs in the context of state failures is not uniform. Different characteristics, objectives, strategies and activities are at stake. Therefore, comparative analyses can explore what distinguishes their future aspirations and why some seek to topple a certain regime while others aim for separatism or secession.

Future research should also identify the precise conditions under which war-making and state-making activities of VNSAs become mutually reinforcing. War does not have a formative effect in terms of the construction of state-like entities if there is a lack of institutionalization. While some VNSAs end up turning into states within states during conflicts and assert sovereignty over a specific territory, others stay as armed militias that spread terror and fear rather than form proto-state structures. So, future research can elaborate on the reasons for variations in the activities of VNSAs in diverse contexts.

Regarding the mode of extraction, Tilly differentiates the coercion-intensive, capital-intensive and capitalized coercion paths of state formation in Europe. Contingent upon the local circumstances of socio-economic development and availability of resources, VNSAs utilize various economic reproduction mechanisms. This would affect the specific course of their state-making activities. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that, in contrast to the wielders of coercion of Tilly, present VNSAs can develop worldwide economic networks to obtain resources. Additionally, they can access substantial rents from natural resources. In this regard, it is vital to understand why some VNSAs choose the difficult strategy of direct resource extraction, which demands a high level of organizational capacity and a complex system for collecting taxes, while others depend on international sponsors and natural resources. Adopting a political-economic perspective would enhance our understanding of the

link between resource extraction modes and the war-making and state-making activities of VNSAs.

On the other hand, employing anthropological, cultural, and sociological lenses can provide a more nuanced understanding of how VNSAs seek to legitimize their actions. A thorough examination is needed of how they frame their existence and mobilize different segments of society in their fight. As highlighted in this thesis, VNSAs could make use of the legitimacy gap left by failing or failed states and social grievances. Then, they come up with alternative identities to generate consent for their authority in the areas where states are weakened.

Meanwhile, some VNSAs place greater emphasis on cultivating international support than others. They pursue international recognition and legitimacy. For example, having been confronted with existential challenges from other non-state competitors and regional states, the PYD exerted the utmost effort to get the support of the international community to survive. With its focus on global values such as freedom, democracy, egalitarianism, secularism, and minority and women's rights, the PYD attempted to gain an international appreciation. Especially female fighters of the YPG/J contributed to the PYD's international legitimacy-seeking efforts in the feminist sense of equality, respect and liberation. Accordingly, future research can investigate the domestic and international dimensions of legitimacy for VNSAs. It would be more beneficial to display the role of ideational factors, along with material factors, in their legitimacy-seeking endeavours.

Lastly, as underscored earlier, the nature and objectives of VNSAs shape their governance practices at both domestic and international levels. While ethno-nationalist VNSAs possess strong nationalistic territorial imaginations, religious actors generally take an apocalyptic imagination where borders are less strictly defined. So, they perceive territory with a peculiar logic depending on their territorial aspirations. Therefore, further research on the politics of

territoriality in the context of VNSAs and innovative linkages between political geography, territorial identities and critical geopolitics will help us better understand these complex dynamics. Moreover, separatist VNSAs may portray themselves as viable candidates for admission into the community of nation-states since they pursue international recognition and frequently assert their right to self-determination. They also count on the possibility that cooperating with the great powers and abiding by international norms could "earn" them sovereignty and recognition eventually. Analysing the 'foreign policy' of VNSAs in this sense would be very useful.

All in all, we should have a deeper understanding of the contemporary domestic and international quasi-state activities of VNSAs aspiring for statehood by conducting more meticulous empirical, conceptual and theoretical studies. This way, we can demonstrate how these actors mimic and reproduce the modern state-making mechanisms in the context of state failures through their war-making capabilities.

4. Recent Developments in Northeast Syria

From 2019 to the present, the PYD has managed to maintain the status quo to a great extent. However, with the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the equation in Syria has changed drastically. Therefore, recent developments have brought new uncertainties for the PYD. These developments have also had regional and global repercussions.

After decades of Assads' dictatorship, the interim government of Ahmed al-Sharaa has embarked on a new state-building process. The new government in Damascus has frequently stated that Syria will not be allowed to fragment around ethnic and sectarian identities and that the territorial integrity of the country will be preserved at all costs (Salık, 2025). This process has led to the repositioning of both local and international actors. One of these actors is the PYD, which had been in direct and indirect cooperation with the Assad regime. It

claimed to adopt a "third road" position. Yet, the regime ceded control of northern Syria to the PYD and a tacit relationship existed between them throughout the war. As a result, it is still unclear what kind of relationship the PYD will have with the new Damascus administration.

The new government in Damascus is trying to consolidate its military and political power in the west of the country while seeking international recognition and lifting the sanctions imposed on Syria. Aware of the strategic importance of northeast Syria, this government prioritizes centralization and opposes demands for federalism or autonomy (Görücü, 2025). Indeed, the areas under the control of the PYD are home to Syria's largest natural resources. These resources including water, oil and gas are vital for ensuring the economic independence of the country and attracting international investment. Considering this fact, the new Damascus administration has pursued a policy that prioritizes negotiations in the first phase against the PYD and has avoided a military confrontation.

Following intensive negotiations between the new government in Damascus and the PYD, an eight-point agreement was signed on 10 March 2025 (International Crisis Group, 2025; Wilgenburg, 2025). It was agreed to integrate the military and civilian institutions under the control of the PYD into the central government. It was also agreed that border crossings, airports, and oil and gas fields in northeast Syria would be transferred to the central government. Meanwhile, the Kurdish community was recognized as an essential element of the Syrian state and assured that its constitutional rights, including citizenship rights, would be guaranteed. The agreement committed to protecting the right of all Syrians, regardless of their religious and ethnic origin, to representation and participation in state institutions in the future political process. In this regard, calls for separatism and hate speech that would foment divisions in society were explicitly rejected in the agreement. Moreover, it was emphasized that the remnants of the Assad regime and any threat to the security and territorial integrity of

the country would be confronted. Finally, it was agreed to establish executive committees to have implemented the agreement by the end of 2025.

Despite the consensus on general principles, there has been no consensus on the procedures of the process and how the agreement will be conducted. The ambiguity in the agreement goes beyond technical details and has more to do with the parties' position on the future of Syria (Wilgenburg, 2025). The new Damascus administration aims for a more centralized structure to restore the country's political unity. In contrast, the PYD envisions a more decentralized model for the whole of Syria while seeking to achieve officially recognized autonomy in northeast Syria.

The 10 March Agreement did not refer to any form of autonomy, federation or self-rule, suggesting that the PYD has given up its claims, at least on a rhetorical level. However, it has not yet taken any concrete steps to fulfil the requirements of the agreement (Salık, 2025). For instance, the PYD is dragging its feet on the transfer of oil and gas fields to the control of the central government. Likewise, the process of transferring the Tishrin Dam has been stalled. Furthermore, the PYD insists on the autonomous existence of its military units and Asayish forces. Therefore, the PYD has not given up its capacity for war-making and continues to gather the necessary sources to wage war.

The Kurdish Unity Conference, held on 26 April 2025 in Qamishli, has further strained relations between the new Damascus administration and the PYD. This conference, led by the PYD and the KNC, demanded federalism for a "just solution" to the Kurdish issue in Syria (Al Jazeera, 2025; Reuters, 2025). It was stated that the administrative, political, military and cultural autonomy of each region in Syria should be constitutionally guaranteed. It was also stressed that ethnic and religious diversity in the country could only be preserved through a pluralistic and democratic system. The aim of the conference was to develop a joint vision for

the future of Syria among different Kurdish groups and to take a common political position (Rojava Information Center, 2025). The PYD sought to gain an advantage in the negotiations with the new Damascus administration by building national unity and solidarity among Kurds. Within this framework, the conference adopted a pan-Kurdish discourse and talked about the so-called Rojava's right to self-determination (Salık, 2025).

In addition, the PYD has tried to garner international support for this initiative. By positioning itself alongside other minority groups in Syria and referring to its role in the fight against ISIS, the PYD has aimed to regain the support of the US and Western countries. It also wants to use the sanctions against Syria as leverage in the negotiations with the new Damascus administration. The PYD seems to have been encouraged by the American and French officials' intense efforts to convene the Kurdish Unity Conference and their participation in it (Salık, 2025).

On the other hand, the new Damascus administration reacted to the conference and opposed the PYD's demand for federalism. The administration stressed that Syria's territorial integrity is a red line for them (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025). It opposed the establishment of separate cantons under the name of self-rule without a national consensus. The administration also stated that the PYD's calls for federalism and its recent activities aiming to create a separate structure on the ground violated the 10 March Agreement. It underlined that such actions threatened the unity and territorial integrity of the country. Additionally, the PYD's demographic change attempts in some regions were described as alarming. Besides, the new Damascus administration warned that practices such as blocking the activities of public institutions and using national resources outside the state's control would threaten national sovereignty. As a result, it can be said that if the PYD's demands for federalism and separatist activities continue, Syria is likely to enter a spiral of conflict again. In such a case, as highlighted in the

bellicist tradition, whichever side has the capacity to fight better will be decisive in the final scenario.

As mentioned above, the toppling of the Assad regime and the subsequent developments have had regional and global repercussions. Moreover, as underscored in this study, the Kurdish issue is essentially a transnational problem, and the Kurdish issue in Syria and the Kurdish issue in Turkey are historically linked and intertwined. For this reason, the Turkish government's perspective on the current developments in Syria should also be examined. Turkey is cautiously optimistic about the 10 March Agreement. As is well known, one of Turkey's main priorities in Syria is to fight the PYD. In the meantime, as a result of the recent talks between the Turkish authorities and Öcalan, the PKK seems to have entered a process of disarmament, although it remains unclear for now. Turkey expresses that this process should include all armed branches of the PKK, including the YPG. It also expects the PKK presence in Syria to end (International Crisis Group, 2025). This is because the PKK could turn northeast Syria into a safe haven and use its natural resources to continue its attacks against Turkey. In fact, the PYD-controlled autonomous structure in Syria is likely to lead to similar demands within Turkey's borders. For these reasons, Turkey emphasizes the importance of Syria's territorial integrity and opposes any possible federal system (Görücü, 2025). Ultimately, it advocates the integration of the PYD with its civilian and military components into the Syrian state in accordance with the 10 March Agreement.

The PYD welcomed Öcalan's call to lay down arms but claimed that only the PKK was bound by it. It also said that they are not interested in the current developments in Turkey. In addition, the PYD stated that due to the special circumstances in Syria, it is not considering laying down arms at the moment. If the PYD's demands for federalism and armed struggle continue, military conflicts may resume. However, the PYD is unlikely to resist Turkey militarily. Meanwhile, the new Trump administration wants to reduce the American presence

in Syria, and Turkish President Erdoğan wants to use his close relations with President Trump to cooperate in a possible withdrawal process (International Crisis Group, 2025).

The US has been supporting the PYD, which has been under the guise of the SDF, for more than a decade, ignoring its organic ties with the PKK. The PYD, on the other hand, has assumed the role of the US proxy in Syria and expanded its area of dominance in northeast Syria thanks to US support. It exercises power over the workforce, fertile agricultural lands, water resources, and oil and gas reserves in the region, and uses these resources to engage in quasi-state activities.

However, with the fall of the Assad regime and Trump's re-inauguration, the US policy towards Syria seems to have changed. The US currently has around 2,000 troops in Syria, most of which are deployed in northeast Syria to fight ISIS (International Crisis Group, 2025). Although the Islamist origins of the new Damascus government disturb the US, the Trump administration does not want to directly intervene in the Syrian crisis and the post-Assad transition. In this context, Trump wants to withdraw American troops from Syria. While the withdrawal process remains uncertain, the US is exerting pressure on the PYD to reconcile with the new Damascus administration (Wilgenburg, 2025). In case of the withdrawal of American troops from Syria, the PYD is likely to be cornered against both the new Damascus administration and Turkey. It is not possible for the PYD to engage in combat on two fronts. Therefore, the new Trump administration policy towards Syria will directly affect the PYD's future position.

List of Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
ARGK	Kurdistan Peoples' Liberation Army
DAA	Democratic Autonomous Administration
DFNS	Democratic Federation of Northern Syria
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERNK	Kurdistan National Liberation Front
ETA	Basque Homeland and Liberty
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HPG	People's Defence Forces
HRK	Kurdistan Liberation Forces
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al- Sham
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
KADEK	Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress
KCK	Union of Communities in Kurdistan
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KNK	Kurdistan National Congress
KONGRA-GEL	Kurdistan People's Assembly
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
PCDK	Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party
PCWK	People's Council of West Kurdistan
PJAK	Kurdistan Free Life Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party

PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SCP	Syrian Communist Party
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SKC	Supreme Kurdish Committee
SNC	Syrian National Council
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society
UAR	United Arab Republic
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VNSA	Violent Non-State Actor
YPG	People's Self-Defence Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

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