

# DEAD MAN TELL NO LIES: USING KILLED-IN-ACTION (KIA) DATA TO EXPOSE THE PKK'S REGIONAL SHELL GAME\*

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Utilizing over 2,500 individual reports of PKK, PJAK, and YPG terrorist deaths, this article examines the relationship between the PKK and its affiliates, and how these groups interact across time and organizational levels. The first analysis of its kind, it provides a qualitative and quantitative assessment of PKK-affiliate relationships and illustrates a cross-organizational deployment of personnel to match strategic and operational level needs in the different theaters in which the PKK and its affiliates operate. It provides evidence of an intimate and mutually supportive relationship between the PKK and its regional affiliates, challenging the very construct of the PKK as a distinctively different group from its affiliates. Rather, it asserts that HPG, YPG, and YRK armed wings should be analyzed as integrally connected groups fighting in a unified regional strategy for Ocalanian Kurdish-autonomy.

Keywords: PKK, PYD, PJAK, Terrorism, Kurdish

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## Introduction

The Syrian conflict and the need to combat the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL/DAESH) has led the US to reassess its Middle East strategy and increase cooperation with non-state militant actors in the region. In this effort, the US has overtly and covertly increased cooperation with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. Such support for the PYD and YPG has caused worry among regional allies, namely Turkey, and national security observers alike, given the group's accused association with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and its militant wing the People's Protection Forces (HPG). The US, EU, and Turkey officially recognize the PKK and HPG as terrorist organizations for the decades-long insurgency waged against the Turkish state. Turkey insists that the PKK, PYD, and an Iranian affiliate, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) and its East Kurdistan Defense Units (YRK) military wing, are one and the same, claiming differences in names are a semantical attempt to obscure the PKK's role in Syria and Iran. Conversely, US officials acknowledge the historical ties but claim that the PYD and YPG are different under US law and thus, fair-game for military cooperation,<sup>1</sup> even though they designate the PJAK as a terrorist organization for being 'controlled' by the PKK.<sup>2</sup>

Given this point of contention, as well as the relevance and controversy it represents to US strategy, it is thus necessary to understand the relationship between the PKK and its regional affiliate groups. Utilizing statistical data derived from HPG, YPG, and YRK 'killed in action' (KIA) announcements, news reports, battle assessments, and organization research, this article analyzes the nature of the relationship between the HPG, YPG, YRK to identify the

levels at which they cooperate and how this relationship has evolved over time. It will illustrate that the PJAK and PYD were political creations of the PKK following the latter's expulsion from Syria in 1998. Significant changes in KIA data correlate to the creation of PJAK and the beginning of the PJAK-Iran conflict, increased violence in Turkey, the Syrian conflict, and the Turkey-PKK ceasefire. As will be shown, the changes suggest the relationship between the PKK and its affiliates is one of strategic and operational unity albeit with some level of tactical level autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

The KIA data, along with supporting evidence, indicates that distinctions between PKK and affiliate personnel are largely superficial with individual fighters repeatedly being shifted between units and fronts to meet strategic organizational needs. The PKK's relationship with its affiliates is not only one of a sponsor giving birth to regional sister organizations, but also one of an inseparable strategic leadership body exercising direct command and control over only nominally distinguishable units. Rather than being separate conflicts, the Syrian and Iranian conflicts represent different military fronts in a unified regional campaign for Kurdish autonomy in which the PKK is overtly involved. Like a shell game, the PKK leadership in Kandil<sup>4</sup> shifts personnel between its affiliates and fronts, attempting to obscure the true nature of the organization and circumvent international terrorist labels. In this sense, the PKK has no true affiliates, but rather three fronts and three names corresponding to those fronts, consisting of the same personalities, leadership, ideology, and history of terrorism.

Similar to the greater Kurdish movement, the PKK is not a monolithic organization. Since Abdallah Ocalan's imprisonment in 1999, some observers have suggested that two competing centers of gravity have emerged between Ocalan

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on one hand, and the rest of the PKK's leadership based in Kandil, Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Ocalan's peculiar status as *de jure* leader, despite his continued incarceration, is the subject of debate and deserving of research in its own regard. This article is similarly ambivalent about his direct leadership role after 1999. Even within the leadership in Kandil, there are competing voices and personalities between different generations and commanders. Thus, the personal politics of the PKK are beyond the scope of this article. Research also does not mean to suggest that the PJAK, PYD, and PKK are one monolithic top-to-bottom organization. Instead, the authors aim to construct a functional understanding of the PKK's organization and affiliate relationships, showing how these groups interact and their unity across different levels. This article argues that the leadership between the organizations is interconnected by shared leadership body in Kandil. The scope of this analysis is largely driven by the KIA data, but corroborated by the US Treasury Department's analysis of the PJAK, the International Crisis Group's study of the YPG, interviews with the senior Turkish military officials, ground reporting from reporters and researchers who traveled to Kandil, as well as other evidence referenced throughout the paper.

### **Terms and Usage**

The PKK's continuous effort to escape its terrorist designation as well as the international and multilingual nature of the conflict has created numerous acronyms that can be confusing, particularly because terms vary significantly between and among countries and there is no consensus on specific definitions and usage. This article will make the following distinctions: For the sake of familiarity, the term PKK will

be used although the group has officially changed its name. ‘PKK’ will refer to the outlawed Ocalanian Kurdish organization in Turkey to which military, student, and political entities belong. ‘HPG’ refers specifically to those military units of the PKK focused on operations in Turkey. ‘PJAK’ refers to the greater organization fighting against the Iranian state to which the ‘YRK’ military wing belongs. ‘PYD’ refers to the Kurdish political organization in Syria. ‘YPG’ refers specifically to the military units of the PYD in Syria, including the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). ‘KCK’ will be used to describe the umbrella organization to which the PYD, PJAK, PKK and their respective military wings belong. The acronyms and their translations are listed below:

PKK: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (The Kurdistan Workers’ Party)

HPG: Hêzên Parastina Gel (The People’s Defense Forces)

KCK: Koma Civakên Kurdistan (Group of Communities in Kurdistan)

PJAK: Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan)

YRK: Yekîneyên Parastina Rojhilatê Kurdistan (East Kurdistan Defense Units)

PYD: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (The Democratic Union Party)

YPG: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (The People’s Protections Units)

KNC: Kurdish National Council (Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistanê)

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## Methodology and Data

This article applies a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodological approach. A body of interviews with senior

military officials and experts in academia as well as a close monitoring of regional events forms the baseline of this paper's understanding of the PKK and its affiliates. A qualitative approach is then used to test the two main theories of affiliation in regards to the PJAK and PYD against a large body of data on HPG, PJAK, and YPG deaths.

Interviews were conducted with senior Turkish military officers, security officials, Kurdish regional experts, and insurgency functional experts in English and Turkish in Washington, DC, Ankara, and Istanbul between December 2014 and April 2015. Every available KIA announcement published in Turkish on the HPG's official website from 2001 to April 2015, totaling 2,096 individuals was collected and analyzed (see appendix I for sample KIA announcements). These announcements were then cross-referenced against incident reports with references to PKK deaths or military clashes in any Turkish language newspaper in an attempt to fill holes in incomplete KIA announcements and verify the accuracy of the HPG's data. For example, if the official data gave only name, code name, date of death, and place of death, Turkish newspaper reports were searched to retrieve information on that individual's place of birth in an effort to compile a more complete and comprehensive data set. Additionally, the data set was compared to Turkish military projections of PKK losses and the only other comparative KIA data set, the 2012 TEPAV report.<sup>6</sup> Compared to the TEPAV report, this data set includes the most recent four years, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 and 734 more HPG deaths. This data set contains 2,096 individuals, 2,084 places of birth and places of death, and 740 places of recruitment. After comparative analysis, the size and completeness of this data set suggests that it is the most comprehensive set of HPG

combat-dead data. The authors are confident that this paper utilizes the best data set available and that the data represents every official HPG combat death.

The authors then attempted to collect a data set representing YPG deaths in Syria. There were 664 distinct YPG KIA announcements from November 2013-February 2015 collected. These announcements were all published on the YPG's official site in Arabic. English and Kurdish platforms were also available, but were found to contain fewer KIA announcements. The authors then cross-referenced all names and data across language platforms to ensure that there was no double counting. The YPG only began publishing announcements in November 2013, after the PYD declared the autonomous administration of Syrian Kurdish areas known as 'Rojava.' The YPG backfilled some combat deaths for 2013, but claimed at the end of the year that it had 379 KIA in 2013, but only published 25 announcements for the year. No comprehensive data is available on the YPG combat deaths for 2012. The accuracy of the YPG's claims was compared to Syrian activists reporting, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and the authors believe the data for 2014 and beyond is accurate and nearly complete. The information provided for some YPG combat deaths is less detailed than the HPG, and for roughly 15 percent of the YPG combat deaths, only the code name and date of death were provided. However, the authors are confident that the sample size is large enough to draw conclusions about the data and to demonstrate a relationship with the HPG data set.

Although complete PJAK KIA announcements were unavailable via web access, 20 web archived PJAK KIA announcements were found in Farsi and reports in the Turkish

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press. This data should not be considered representative of all PJAK deaths, but rather specific examples of certain demographics playing a role in the organization and evidence of the involvement of key personalities.

## Background

Abdullah Ocalan founded the PKK in 1978 near Diyarbakir, Turkey as a Marxist-Leninist organization devoted to the establishment of a Kurdish state. While Kurdish national movements and insurrections were not a new phenomenon in Turkey, the PKK represented a fundamentally new political and militant entity.<sup>7</sup> By 1980, the nascent insurgency's PKK leadership was driven out of Turkey, finding refuge in Turkey's regional and Cold War rival, Syria. In return for safe haven and material support, the PKK provided the Syrian state leverage against Turkey in outstanding water and territorial disputes associated with the Euphrates River and Hatay Province, respectively. While the Syrian state officially denied supporting the PKK, the PKK was allowed to operate freely in Syria and to establish training camps in the Syrian-controlled Beqaa Valley of Lebanon. Despite the government labeling of the PKK as an outlawed organization in 1992, substantial support to the organization continued and, by the mid-1990s, the insurgency reached its peak.<sup>8</sup> Cooperation with Damascus continued until October 1998 when the Turkish government applied enough military pressure to force the Syrian regime to expel the PKK. Ocalan fled and was eventually arrested in Kenya in February 1999, at which point the PKK migrated to the Kandil Mountains of Northern Iraq.<sup>9</sup> By the end of the PKK's tenure in Syria, the insurgency caused 30,000 casualties in Turkey and



cemented its place as Turkey's main foreign and domestic policy issue.<sup>10</sup>

By the time of the group's expulsion from Syria, the PKK brand was toxic. International pressure associated with the so-called 'War on Terror' after 2001 restricted the PKK's operations internationally. Similarly, among much of the Kurdish population outside of Turkey, the PKK was seen as sacrificing the political aspirations of Kurds in Syria and Iran in favor of those in Turkey. In an effort to escape their international terrorist designation and address local objectives in Iran and Syria associated with Ocalan's concept of Democratic Confederalism, the PKK founded PJAK and then the PYD, beginning what can be called a 'franchise era.'

### **Beginning of the PJAK and PKK Franchise Era**

In 2004 the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) was founded and began its armed struggle against the Islamic Republic of Iran aimed at achieving the same Ocalanian brand of Kurdish nationalism that the PKK aspired to in Turkey. Organizational, ideological, and rhetorical similarities to the PKK led government officials in both Turkey and Iran to immediately claim the unity of the two groups and their shared terrorist nature. As Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay put it, "the PJAK and PKK are one group with two names."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in conversations with the Turkish military, officers were adamant about the unity of the organization but reluctant to provide any evidence that could draw more than a dotted-line between organizations after its initial inception.<sup>12</sup> There are reasons for Turkey's claims. Both the PKK and PJAK are declared members of the KCK umbrella organization and share a similar espoused

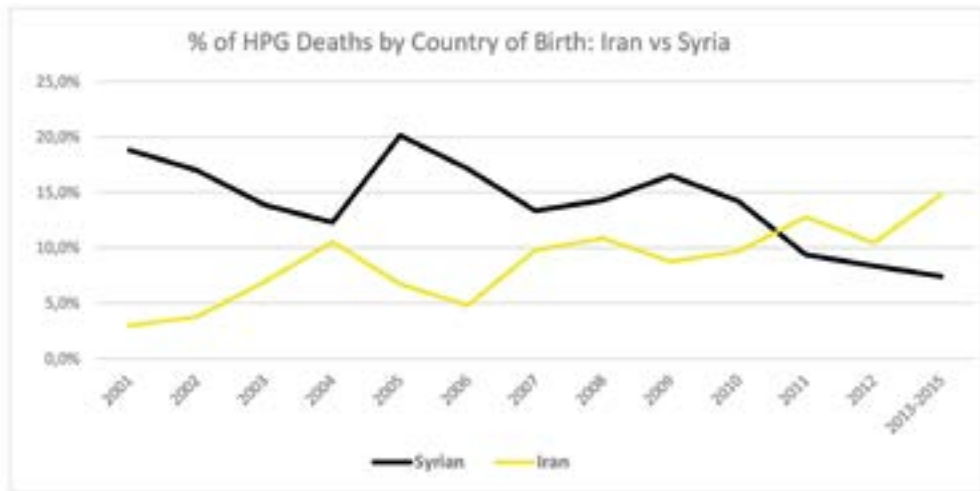
The PKK's relationship with its affiliates is not only one of a sponsor giving birth to regional sister organizations, but also one of an inseparable strategic leadership body exercising direct command and control over only nominally distinguishable units.

ideology. The US Treasury Department reported PKK leadership controls and allocates personnel to the PJAK and the YRK.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, PJAK has repeatedly declared their independence from the PKK and claim to have strategic, operational, and tactical level autonomy.<sup>14</sup> These comments reflect a desire amongst PJAK and PKK to draw a distinction between the groups, because of both international legal and political implications associated with the PKK's terrorist label and for the PJAK to be seen as a local organization with local objectives separate from the PKK's fight against Turkey. Given contradictory claims by the Kurdish militants, the Turkish, American and Iranian governments, and their mutual interest in distorting the truth, ambiguity still exists regarding the nature of the PKK-PJAK relationship across organizational levels.

PJAK and PKK KIA data tell an interesting story of the PKK's history in Iran, its role in PJAK's formation, and the continued strategic- and operational-level cooperation between groups throughout the last decade. Prior to 2004, the PKK's armed wing, the HPG, was no stranger to the Iranian theater of operations. After being driven out of Syria in 1998, bases in Iraq and Iran became of increasing strategic importance to the PKK. Geographically, the strategic terrain of the Zagros Mountains constituting the border with Iraq, Iran, and Turkey contained the main movement corridors that enabled HPG combat, sustainment, and regress operations. Additionally, the Kelaresh and Piran camps in western Iran long served as a base of operations for attacks in eastern Turkey. Demographically, Iranian born and recruited Kurds comprised a small minority of HPG fighters, comprising an average of six percent of HPG fighter deaths between 2001 and 2003.

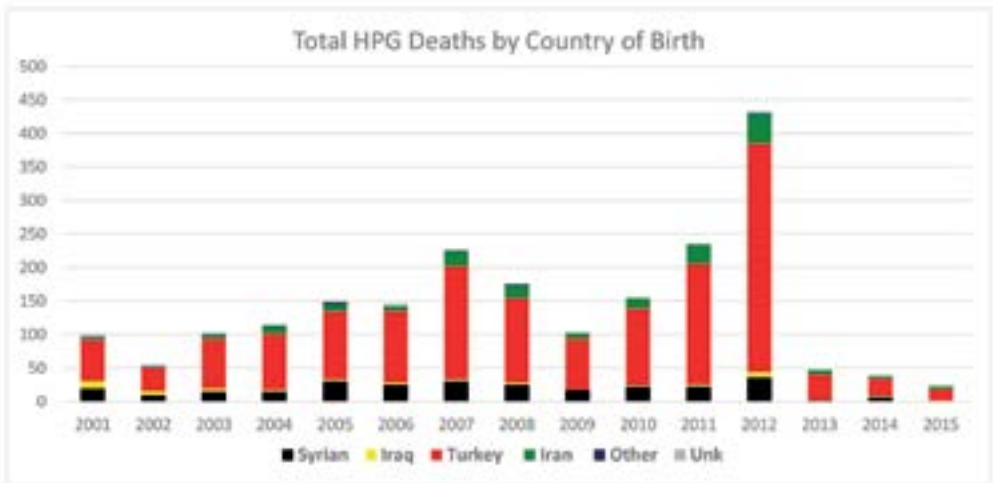
In the founding of the PJAK, one sees an organizational model later emulated in the establishment of the YPG in Syria in which a cadre of locally-born HPG fighters are transferred under the banner of the PJAK in order to form the core of the organization. One of the few analyses that deals explicitly with the connection between PJAK and the PKK claims that PJAK initially received an influx of HPG fighters of Iranian origin.<sup>15</sup> It suggests that these Iranian HPG fighters were simply reconstituted into the sister organization to fight against the Iranian Government rather than Turkey. However, the true composition of the PJAK imports from the HPG and the nature of the relationship between the two groups is more nuanced.

An influx of HPG Iranian nationals is indeed observable in the KIA data. From 2001-2004, one sees the Iranian demographic steadily climbing to a peak of ten percent in 2004 as the PKK reportedly increased recruitment activity in Iran. From 2004-2006, deaths of HPG fighters of Iranian more than halves (Graph-1). After transferring a percentage of



Graph-1- Source: “Imprint of the Martyrs” [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).

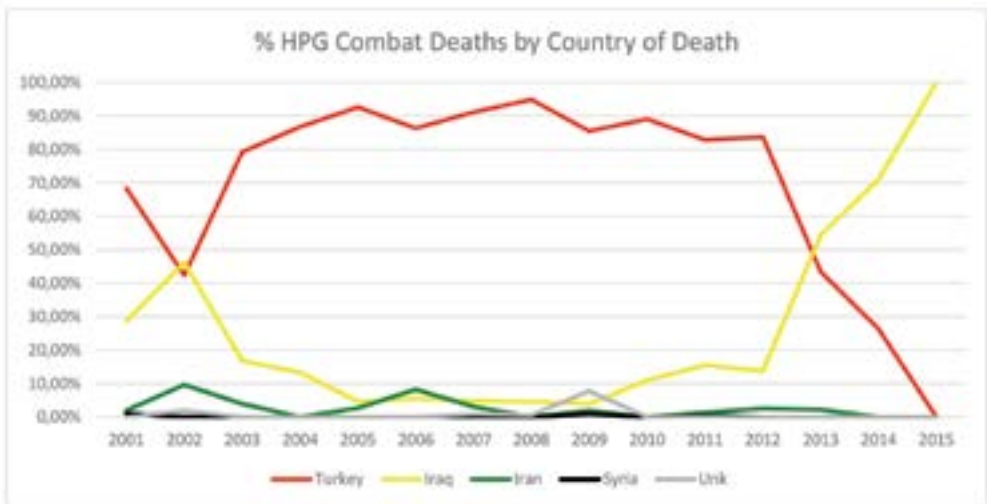
Iranian fighters to form PJAK, Iranians were less represented in HPG ranks, and in turn, in HPG casualties. However, the data also suggests the delineation between the HPG and PJAK is not as simple as country of origin. Iranian, Turkish, and Syrian nationals of the HPG alike who had enlisted in the PKK prior to the creation of the PJAK in 2004 were incorporated into the ranks of the PJAK as part of the founding cadre. According to Soner Cagaptay, “the PKK split its members among Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran with the intention of spreading its forces, those who dispersed to Iran formed the Iranian affiliate of the PKK, now known as PJAK.”<sup>16</sup> Missing from this analysis is that the inverse is also true with regards to Iranian fighters in the HPG. From 2004-2015, after the founding of the PJAK, 185 Iranian Kurds, both born and recruited in Iran, died fighting in HPG units (Graph-2).



Graph-2-Source: “Imprint of the Martyrs” [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).

The data suggests that HPG support for PJAK is mutual. After a drop of five percent correlating to the founding of PJAK, Iranian dead within the HPG return to 2004 pre-PJAK levels by 2007. This correlates to a peak in overall HPG deaths (Graph-2). This suggests that, facing mounting pressure on the Turkish front, the PKK made the strategic decision to bring back Iranian-dominated YRK units and reflag them as HPG, or at least report their dead as such.

The relationship between YRK and HPG units is one of sister units fighting against distinct targets but in overlapping theaters of operation. After the founding of PJAK and the conflict with Iran, the HPG increased operations in Iran. In the three years prior to the founding of the PJAK, five percent of HPG combat dead were killed on the Iranian side of the border. In 2004, HPG combat deaths in Iran more than doubled to ten and half percent, showing that even after the founding of the PJAK, Iran continued to be an important theater of operations for explicitly HPG-flagged units (Graph-3). However, analysis of the specific incidents of



Graph-3-Source:“Imprint of the Martyrs” [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).

death shows that the majority occurred in what can be seen as shared sustainment areas between the YRK and HPG, with over 90% of HPG deaths in Iran occurring within ten kilometers of the Turkish border with Turkey and Iran. Rather than being combat areas, these areas were instead support zones, so the HPG fighters that died there did not die in offensive operations, but instead were attacked in their known sustainment camps in support roles (Figure-1).



Figure-1: Map of HPG Combat Deaths in Iran Small Circle: 1-5 Deaths Large Circle: 20+ Deaths  
Source: "Imprint of the Martyrs" [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).

Despite the blurry lines between HPG and PJAK demographics, objectives, and geography, the groups maintain a high level of control of their personnel at the tactical level.

In over 2,000 instances of reported deaths, not once did PJAK or the HPG share an individual KIA. In other words, if a fighter died while fighting under the HPG banner, he was claimed as such, despite geographic place of death, nationality, or recruitment location. The same is observable with PJAK KIA. The reason for this may be of a political rather than military nature. By 2004, the PKK brand was in crisis and its brand unpopular; Turkish political pressure succeeded in having the PKK labeled as a terrorist group by the United States and European Union, a designation that carried extensive weight in the wake of the Global War on Terror. The lack of ‘double-reporting’ of KIA can be seen as a conscious effort to obscure connections between affiliates and the PKK proper.

However, despite this tactical level distinction, at the strategic and operational level there is little difference between a PJAK or HPG fighter. If a Syrian born fighter is recruited in Iran, he may end up fighting and dying in Iraq under a PJAK banner. This was the case of Miriam Waliku, born in 1985 in Aleppo, Syria. She joined the HPG in 2000 in Gara, Iran, four years prior to the founding of the PJAK, and was killed in 2011 in Kandil, Iraq, claimed as a PJAK KIA (see Appendix I). Compare this to the case of Muharrem Omoyimilan, born in Showt, Iran in 1989, recruited presumably by PJAK in Showt in 2006, two years after the PJAK was founded. He was killed by the Turkish military in Çukurca, Hakarri in 2012 and claimed as an HPG KIA.

The relationship outlined between the PKK and PJAK serves as a model for affiliate relationships that one again sees in the case of the PYD (Figure-2). At the strategic level, the relationship between the HPG and YRK is one of sister units with shared strategic goals. At the operational

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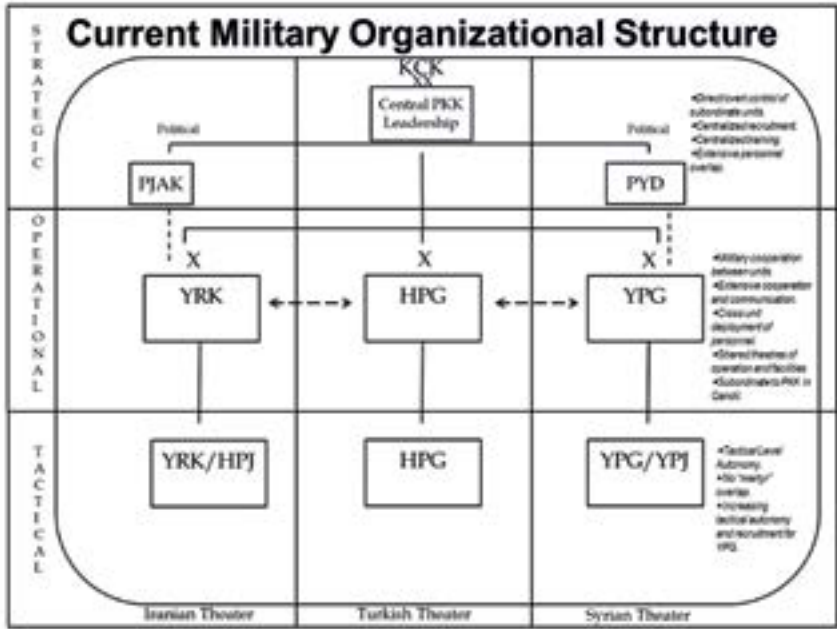


Figure-2- PKK Military Organizational Structure Chart

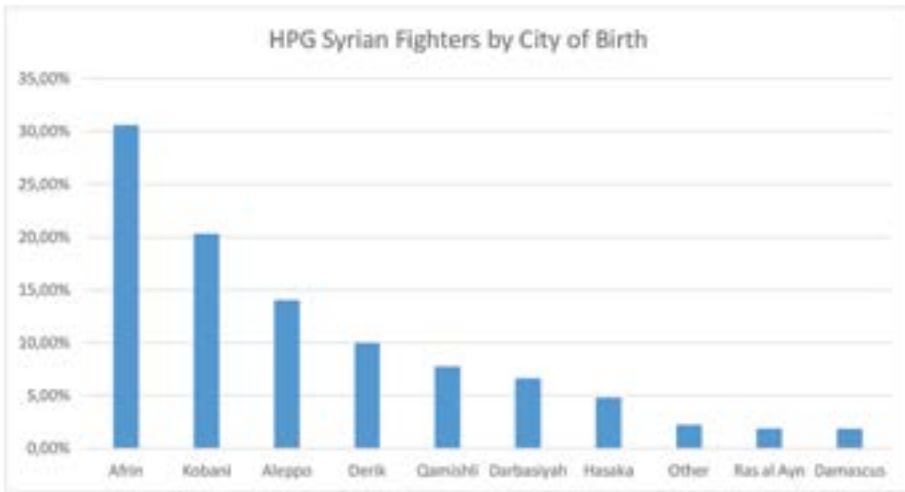
level, the relationship is one of personnel management and resource allocation between groups, with individual fighters transferred across organizations to fill operational needs. Cross-organizational deployment of fighters is observable, not only at times of transition, such as the standing up of PJAK, but also in response to political and strategic necessity as will be seen in the case of the YPG in Syria. Additionally, theaters of operation generally follow organizational lines, but battle lines are often intersecting and mutually supporting, suggesting a high level of coordination between groups.

### The PKK in Syria

During the PKK's decade and a half in Syria, it established itself as the dominant Kurdish political party and established networks and relationships that allowed for the creation of the PYD in 2003. During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK was



the only organization able to become a “veritable popular” Kurdish political party in Syria, and it was the only party allowed to do so by the regime. By 1987, the PKK had opened political offices in Damascus, Qamishli, Darbasiyah, Derik, Ras al Ayn, Afrin, Aleppo, Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), and Hasaka.<sup>17</sup> The PKK filled a void in the Afrin, Ayn al-Arab, and Jarablus regions left by the traditional Syrian Kurdish political parties which had historically operated in the Jazira and Hasaka regions.<sup>18</sup> Taking up arms offered poorer Kurds, particularly those in Ayn al-Arab and Darbasiyah, a chance of social and political advancement.<sup>19</sup> The HPG’s KIA data supports Tejel’s argument on the regional distribution of the PKK’s influence in Syria, as less than 15 percent of Syrian-born KIA were born in Hasaka and Qamishli, compared to over half in Afrin and Ayn al-Arab (Graph-4).



Graph-4- Source: “Imprint of the Martyrs” [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).

Harriet Allsopp asserts that during the 1980s, the PKK supplanted Barzani’s KDP as the most powerful and popular Kurdish group in Syria. The PKK’s rise to prominence was no doubt aided by the fact that it was the only Kurdish party

allowed to openly operate in Syria, but perhaps equally as important, the modern Marxist-Leninist rhetoric it brought to Syria was attractive to young Syrian Kurds disillusioned with the tribal hierarchy that had previously dominated Kurdish society in Syria and was maintained by those loyal to the KDP.<sup>20</sup> David McDowell gives a similar historical account and suggests that the PKK enjoyed “almost unanimous sympathy within the Kurdish community in Syria, and was able to recruit young Syrian Kurds with little difficulty.”<sup>21</sup> Syrian Kurds that joined the ranks of the PKK were given exemption from mandatory service in the Syrian military, enhancing the PKKs ability to recruit.<sup>22</sup> McDowell asserts that 7,000 Syrian Kurds recruited by the PKK in the 1980s ‘disappeared’ and were presumed dead.<sup>23</sup> Harriet Allsopp estimated between 7,000 to 10,000 Syrian Kurds who joined the PKK in 1980s were killed or missing.<sup>24</sup>

The cooperation between the PKK and the Syrian regime was pivotal for the PKK, but also in stark contrast to the status of Syrian Kurds who were themselves severely disenfranchised and persecuted by the Arabization policies of the Syrian government. While the PKK received support from the Syrian regime, the same regime was actively denying Kurds Syrian citizenship and seizing Kurdish property for reallocation to Arab peasants.<sup>25</sup> Other than the PKK, all other Kurdish groups were banned and their leadership persecuted by the regime. It appears that during this time of cooperation between the PKK and Syria, the PKK made no effort to target the Syrian state or mobilize its own Kurdish population against it. Similar to the KDP in Iraq, the PKK concentrated its efforts on the Kurdish movement in Turkey so as not to agitate their benefactor in Damascus.<sup>26</sup>

Over time, the PKK’s hyperfocus on achieving Kurdish objectives in Turkey and cooperation with the Syrian

regime, eventually led some Kurds to distrust the PKK as a representative of Syrian Kurdish demands.<sup>27</sup> In the early 1990s, criticism of the PKK's strategy, ideology, and cooperation with the Assad regime grew. The dynamics that fed its popularity eventually cultivated disillusionment, as Syrian Kurds once again felt their own grievances were subservient to those of Kurds elsewhere in the region. The low point came in 1996, when Ocalan claimed in an interview, likely under pressure from the Assad regime, that Syrian Kurds were actually refugees from Turkey and called on Syrian Kurds to join the PKK's fight in Turkey, essentially dismissing the grievances of Syrian Kurds.<sup>28</sup>

### **The PYD and Syrian Kurds 2003-2011**

After the Assad regime expelled Ocalan and the PKK from Syria in 1998, the regime cracked down on the remaining PKK networks in Syria, ending a tenuous era of cooperation between the Syrian state and the PKK that had characterized the previous decade. Although Syrian Kurdish support for the PKK waned in the 1990s, there was still a reservoir of support for the PKK in Syria. In an attempt to rejuvenate local support and escape Assad's new oppression of the PKK, remnants of the organization in Syria founded the PYD in 2003, resuming PKK activities under this new banner. During the PKK's period in Syria, it established recruiting, training, financial, and smuggling networks that were almost certainly transferred to the PYD. However, the PYD denied, and continues to deny, any organizational connections to the PKK. The PYD is an explicit member of the KCK, the umbrella organization created by Ocalan and led by senior HPG officials, but the PYD claims it only shares Ocalan's ideological vision. The PYD also mirrors the PKK

The KIA data illustrates a high level of military coordination between the HPG, PJAK, and YPG military units across organizational levels, coordination that could not have been achieved without unity of command.

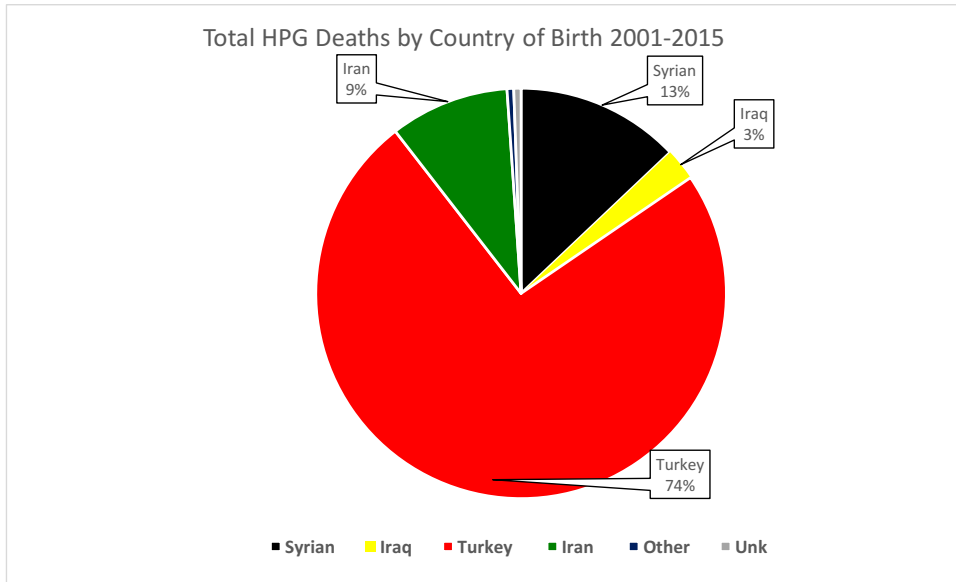
in its ideology, rhetoric, symbolism, strategy, and organizational structure.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, according to Tejel, “Syrian PKK militants” created the PYD for two reasons, “escaping state repression and maintaining the support of the PKK’s thousands of members and sympathizers.”<sup>30</sup>

Because the PKK was outlawed, the PYD was established covertly, and much of its leadership is shrouded in organizational secrecy and government misinformation. The current PYD party co-chair, Salih Muslim, was a founding member of the PYD. He is the most well-known of the PYD’s leadership, and was arrested by the Assad regime several times and served time in jail for illegal political activity, like many other PYD members.<sup>31</sup> His connections to the PKK came later in his political career, as he originally supported Mustafa Barzani’s movement in Iraq, before becoming disillusioned with Barzani’s lack of attention given to the Syrian Kurdish cause.<sup>32</sup> In 2010, he was elected PYD chairman and was exiled from Syria, where he relocated to the PKK’s base in Qandil, joining the majority of the PYD leadership there.<sup>33</sup> Little information is known about Muslim’s PYD co-chair, Aysa Abdullah, but another senior PYD official, Aldar Xelil, reportedly lost a hand fighting with the PKK.<sup>34</sup>

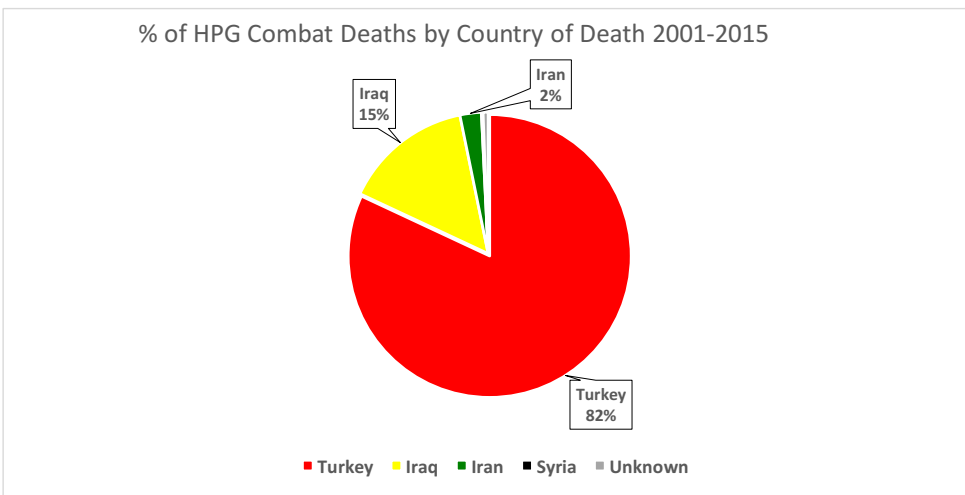
### *The Numbers*

After the founding of the PYD, Syrian Kurds continued to join and fight for the PKK, although to a lesser degree. Writing in 2012, Tejel claimed, “[e]ven today, by some estimates, Syrian Kurds account for up to 25 percent of the PKK’s guerrilla fighters.”<sup>35</sup> The ICG also reported in 2012 that one-third of “rank and file” PKK fighters are of Syrian origin.<sup>36</sup> James Brandon, an analyst who visited the PKK’s camp in Qandil in 2006, suggested some 20 percent of the PKK’s fighters are Syrian.<sup>37</sup> The HPG’s KIA data shows those recent estimates may be erroneously inflated, at least among Syrians

in combat roles. From 2001 to 2015, Syrian HPG fighters comprised an average of only 13 percent of combat deaths (Graph-5-6), a figure substantiated by other similar studies



Graph-5-Source: "Imprint of the Martyrs" [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 1, 2015).



Graph-6-Source: "Imprint of the Martyrs" [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).

such as TEPAV's in 2012.<sup>38</sup> When looking at pre-Syrian Civil War trends, Syrian KIA reached a high point of 20 percent in 2005, and an average high of 16 percent between 2001 and 2010 (Graph-1).

Although Syrians continued to fight in the PKK, the PKK's departure from Syria appears to have affected the recruitment of Syrian Kurdish fighters. The year of Ocalan's arrest, 1999, was a major recruitment for the HPG as a whole, and some thirty percent of all Syrian HPG combat deaths were recruited in that year alone. But in the years after the immediate spike, very few Syrians were recruited. Only six percent of the Syrian KIA joined in 2003 or later (although, 15 percent are unknown), compared with one-third of Iranians (23 percent unknown) and one-quarter of Turkish KIA (39 percent unknown). Almost all the unidentified recruitment years came from fighters killed after 2011, and even if the majority of those likely joined after 2003, Syrian recruitment still dropped significantly compared with the 1980s and 1990s, and compared with fighters of other nationalities.

## **The Syrian Civil War**

The start of the Syrian Civil War and the responses by the PKK, PYD, and the PJAK, offer the best evidence in support of the theory that all three organizations are run out of Kandil and are strategically indistinguishable from the PKK. After protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, by April, Saleh Muslim had returned to Syria from exile in Kandil. Muslim quickly began organizing political and military activities.<sup>39</sup> Multiple sources agree that around the same time the PKK sent one thousand militants, possibly two thousand, to Syria to establish the PYD's armed wing, the People's Protection

Units (YPG).<sup>40</sup> One such individual was Khebat Derik, the founding commander of the YPG. He was a founding member of the PKK and senior PKK commander before forming the YPG.<sup>41</sup> Although the PYD denied the PKK transferred militants from Qandil to Syria, two major indicators in the trends in KIA data show that they did in fact send a number of militants into Syria. Similar to the establishment of the PJAK, the percentage of Syrian KIA as a percentage of HPG losses experienced its sharpest decline in a decade, dropping from 14 percent in 2010 to nine in 2011, and the pre-uprising average of 16 percent was nearly halved to nine percent over the duration of 2011 to 2015 (Graph-1). At the same time, the PJAK called for a ceasefire on the Iranian front and the percentage of Iranian HPG KIA increased four percent, as the total number of Iranian KIA from 2011 to 2015 almost matched the entire 2001 to 2010 total. These figures support reports that the PKK deployed some of its Syrian militants into Syria to form a core cadre of the YPG. Facing a need for personnel on the new Syrian front, the PKK followed the same model evident in the creation of PJAK, sending a core cadre of primarily Syrians to stand up the new YPG units. While at the same time, facing fierce fighting on the Turkish front, the PKK redeployed previous YRK units back to Turkey where one sees their deaths reported under the HPG. To what extent this statistical increase is the result of fewer Syrian nationals or more Iranian nations is unclear and is likely the result of both. Nonetheless, raw numbers of dead Iranians increase and Syrians decrease.

The YPG was initially formed after the 2004 Qamishli riots as the PYD's armed units, but activated itself and stood up the first formal units in 2011 after the uprising, and only then announced itself in July 2012 as the YPG after

Theaters of operation generally follow organizational lines, but battle lines are often intersecting and mutually supporting, suggesting a high level of coordination between groups.

regime forces withdrew from many of the Kurdish-dominated areas.<sup>42</sup> The YPG proclaims independence from any Syrian political party and denies any coordination with the PKK.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the YPG asserts itself to be the national defense force for all the people of Rojova, regardless of nationality, religion, or other differences. Despite this, the YPG “retained their connection to the PYD and facilitated YPD activities and policies.”<sup>44</sup> For instance, the YPG continued to fly PYD flags at checkpoints.<sup>45</sup> The ICG argues that the PKK’s leadership in Kandil has authority over the YPG, and that the YPG’s “senior ranks consist of PKK fighters with Syrian nationality who trained in [K]andil, fought in Turkey, and in some cases speak Turkish.”<sup>46</sup> The ICG also reported that as the YPG expanded and increasingly clashed with other groups, Iranian and Turkish PKK fighters later came to Syria, often in command positions. As will be shown, an analysis of the HPG and YPG combat death trends supports these theories and exposes the PKK’s shell game.

The PYD established local defense and municipal councils, and originally had its strongest popular backing in areas around Ayn al-Arab, Aleppo, Afrin, and Derik, the same areas the KIA data shows the majority of Syrian HPG fighters came from (Graph-4). The PYD employed a similar strategy as the PKK by avoiding clashes with the Assad regime, with the exception of a few instances of clashes between the YPG and regime forces over the course of the war. The PYD’s first goal was to establish dominance over other Kurdish parties, particularly the KDP-backed KNC. The PYD/YPG filled the void left by the Syrian state after regime security forces withdrew from Kurdish areas in July 2012, and then proclaimed the establishment of Rojova (Western Kurdistan) in November 2013, a self-governing administrative body consisting of three non-contiguous areas of Afrin, Ayn al-Arab,



and Jazira. The Assad regime has acquiesced to each of the PYD's more assertive steps: the return to Syria in 2011, the takeover of Kurdish areas in 2012, and the announcement of Rojova in 2013. Some observers have suggested a tentative agreement and level of cooperation, as the regime benefits by not having to defend or govern Kurdish areas, saving much needed manpower, while the PYD is allowed to rule and expand.<sup>47</sup>

The PYD and YPG have gone to great lengths to downplay their connections to the PKK. They have done so for two reasons: first, in hopes of securing international and regional support. Secondly, in order to maintain a Syrian identity to increase the PYD/YPG's and Rojova's support beyond just PKK supporters. Because the PKK's reputation was damaged in the 1990s, the PYD desires to present itself as a truly Syrian Kurdish party. The YPG needs large numbers of recruits, and the support of the vast majority of the population under the territory it controls in order to defend against other Syrian militant groups.

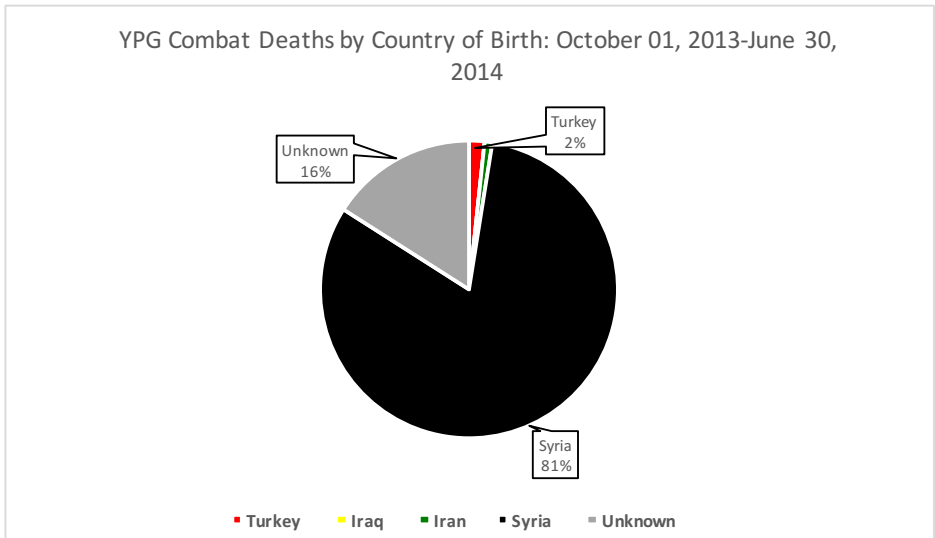
### **New Opportunities: ISIL/DAESH, Ayn al-Arab, and Sinjar**

The PYD and the YPG mutually gained international recognition during the Syrian Civil War. The YPG mainly clashed with other Syrian insurgent groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jabhat al Nusra, and the ISIS/DAESH, but also on occasion with regime forces. Not coincidentally, the YPG spread from the historical PKK strongholds in Ayn al-Arab, Aleppo, and Afrin, into the Kurdish heartland in the Hasaka province. As the YPG successfully defended the three Rojova cantons from increasing attacks, the YPG's popularity rose, and the PYD's along with it.<sup>48</sup> The YPG

The PYD is an explicit member of the KCK, the umbrella organization created by Ocalan and led by senior HPG officials. The PYD also mirrors the PKK in its ideology, rhetoric, symbolism, strategy, and organizational structure.

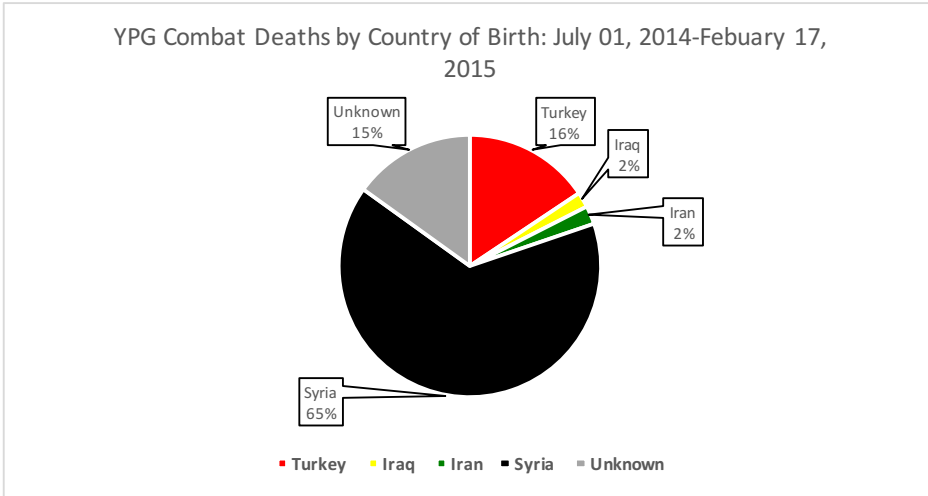
came to be seen as sole protector of Syrian Kurds, even by those that disagreed with the PYD's political program.<sup>49</sup>

After ISIL/DAESH swept across northern Iraq in June 2014, it began attacking the YPG in the Ayn al-Arab region by the first week of July, and July 2014 marks an observable shift in the YPG KIA data. Although, ISIL/DAESH only made initial forays into the territory around Ayn al-Arab in July before launching a full-scale offensive in September. From October 2013 until July 2014, less than three percent of the YPG's combat deaths were non-Syrian, with over 80 percent known to be Syrian and 16 percent unidentified (Graph-7). In the period from July 2014 to February 2015,



Graph-7-Source: "Martyrs" [Arabic], YPG Rojava, at <http://ypgrojava.com/ar/index.php/sport> (accessed May 01, 2015).

roughly 16 percent of combat deaths were Turkish-born fighters and another four percent were Iraqi or Iranian, while only 65 percent of the deaths were known to be Syrian and another 15 percent unidentified (Graph-8). September 2014 is also important, as the PKK overtly deployed some 400



Graph-8-Source: “Martyrs” [Arabic], YPG Rojava, at <http://ypgrojava.com/ar/index.php/sport> (accessed May 01, 2015).

fighters that month, reportedly from Kandil, to reinforce the YPG in Ayn al-Arab.<sup>50</sup> In addition, dozens of Turkish Kurds, possibly even hundreds, are believed to have crossed the border to support the YPG in Ayn al-Arab after the YPG called upon all Kurds for assistance.<sup>51</sup> However, despite the PKK openly sending hundreds of fighters to Ayn al-Arab, the HPG did not announce a single combat death from Ayn al-Arab. Rather, the YPG announced all the KIA” from Ayn al-Arab. Moreover, the PKK did not acknowledge sending fighters to Syria until September, but almost twenty percent of the non-Syrian combat deaths occurred in July and August. This indicates the PKK did in fact have non-Syrian fighters in Syria before the siege of Ayn al-Arab, despite the PYD’s insistence otherwise. This is yet another example of the PKK’s conscious effort to obscure its role in outside of Turkey and its intrinsic connection to the PYD and YPG.

The case of Arzu Adiguzel exemplifies the PKK’s involvement in Syria and its attempt to hide that fact. Adiguzel, code name Yivan Amed, was a female YPG fighter born

in Diyarbakir, Turkey.<sup>52</sup> She died on August 14, 2014 and was claimed exclusively as an YPG KIA. According to the YPG's announcement, she joined the YPG in Diyarbakir on February 17, 2011, several months before the PYD returned to Syria and formerly stood up the first YPG units. Local Diyarbakir media reports provide a picture of her to go along with the story of her death. The picture shows Adiguzel dressed in the typical HPG uniform alongside a picture of Ocalan and an HPG flag, not the in the YPG/YPJ style of uniforms or with the Rojova/YPG flags. She is not the only YPG fighter to either have joined in Turkish cities, despite there are no known YPG recruiting offices in Turkey, or that joined in the years before the YPG was publicly formed. In fact, according to their KIA announcements, one Syrian YPG fighter joined in 1994 and another joined in 1995, before the PYD was even established.<sup>53</sup> There would be no reason for Syrian or Turkish Kurds to join the YPG before the PYD returned to Syria, because there was no formal YPG to join. The likely scenario is that fighters such as Adiguzel joined the HPG, but were sent by the leadership in Kandil to fight in the YPG flagged units in the Syrian theater. This directly contradicts the PYD and YPG's claims of autonomy from the PKK.

Similar to the example of the HPG-YRK relationship, rarely do fighters die on the wrong side of the border, suggesting that the concept of regional theaters of operation is at play in the Syrian case. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, not one HPG fighter was reported to have died in Syria. Similarly, only 21 out of an estimated one thousand YPG combat deaths reported occurred in Iraq. In press statements and KIA announcements, the YPG acknowledged fighting around two main fronts in Iraq, one near Mount

Sinjar, particularly in the village of Snuny on the north side of the mountain not far from the border, and the other near the town of Rabia, an official border crossing and on the highway to Mosul, near Sinjar.<sup>54</sup> These are the only known instance of YPG fighters engaging in combat outside of Syria, all of which occurred under the exceptional circumstances of ISIL/DAESH's siege of Sinjar and just across the Syrian border.

The YPG claimed to cooperate and fight alongside with the HPG around Sinjar, although evidence suggests the YPG and HPG maintained operational strategy in conjunction with the concept of clearly defined theaters of operation along international borders. In fact, in an examination of the battle of Sinjar, many HPG fighters are documented to have died on the opposite side of Mount Sinjar just days before their YPG counterparts. The proximity in location and time suggests close coordination between units resulting from a unified PKK command structure based in Qandil. At the same time, the distinct difference in location of deaths and reporting of death suggests some tangible distinction between units at the tactical level as no claimed HPG and YPG combat deaths near Sinjar occurred on the same day. Both YPG and HPG flagged units did operate near Mount Sinjar, but in different locations around Sinjar in order to maintain the tactical autonomy of the units, while under operational command from Qandil.<sup>55</sup> In Iraq outside Sinjar, YPG units focused around Rabia, while the HPG operated mainly in Makhmour and Kirkuk.<sup>56</sup> The locations of the deaths suggest that the YPG units came from Hasaka while HPG units came from Qandil. Although some media reports from Sinjar at the time were murky and occasionally inaccurate in the

Equally as important, and yet almost entirely overlooked, is the PKK's history of bringing these sister units back into the fold to fight in HPG units against the Turkish state. ...If the US is to cooperate militarily with the PYD in Syria, it should be cognizant about what it is doing: supporting a group which it has consistently labeled as a terrorist organization-- the PKK.

usage of PKK versus YPG labels, this analysis is substantiated by ground reporting.<sup>57</sup>

The sieges of Ayn al-Arab and Sinjar, the US-led international fight against ISIS/DAESH, along the broader Syrian Civil War, provided the PKK with new opportunities. The PKK's success against ISIS/DAESH, through the YPG in Syria and the HPG in Iraq, has provided PKK with a taste of what its rival the KDP achieved, but what it never did: territorial control and international legitimacy. In Ayn al-Arab, the US not only provided close airport for YPG fighters, but also dropped weapons and ammunition to the YPG by air.<sup>58</sup> The PYD gave the US a "guarantee" that the weapons would not be given to the PKK or used against Turkey, which is interesting given that at least 15 percent of YPG combat deaths in Ayn al-Arab were Turkish Kurds.<sup>59</sup> After the YPG's success in Ayn al-Arab, the US provided air support for YPG forces in the Hasaka province as well.<sup>60</sup>

Prior to Ayn al-Arab, the US only engaged with the PYD through "indirect talks" and back-channels,<sup>61</sup> while denying PYD requests for formal meetings. Yet, in October 2014, US officials held formal meetings for the first time with PYD officials in Paris, France and Dohuk, Iraq.<sup>62</sup> In February 2015, French President Francois Hollande held a much publicized meeting in Paris with PYD co-chair Aysa Abdullah, YPJ/YPG commander Nesrin Abdullah, and another PYD representative.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, in March 2015, Sinem Muhammed, the PYD's representative to the EU was received in Washington, D.C. by State Department officials,<sup>64</sup> while Aysa Abdullah reportedly plans to visit Washington soon.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Salih Muslim also led a PYD-delegation to the first and second rounds of the Syrian peace talks in January and April of 2015 in Moscow. The PYD was also invited to

the UN-sponsored Geneva III Syria peace conference to be held in the summer of 2015, after it was spurned invitations to the first two conferences.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the PYD gained political recognition in addition to international military support.

These cases illustrate the success of the PKK's shell game, as the nature of the PYD did not change after Ayn al-Arab, but the illusion of an independent PYD/YPG allowed the international community to support it in the fight against ISIS/DAESH. A similar scenario occurred in Iraq, where the US indirectly provided airport for the HPG fighters battling ISIL/DAESH during the siege of Sinjar.<sup>67</sup> Although the air support for the HPG was more indirect than support for the YPG, where the YPG called in requests for airstrike, US military and intelligence officials also meet with HPG representatives on several occasions in Iraq for "informal" meetings.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

While the PKK's history of establishing regional affiliates is no secret, KIA data shows that this franchising included an initial shift of personnel along demographic lines. Equally as important, and yet almost entirely overlooked, is the PKK's history of bringing these sister units back into the fold to fight in HPG units against the Turkish state. In this context, the recent growth of the numbers and capabilities of the YPG gives credence to Turkish fears that these units represent a strengthening of the PKK that will likely later be directed again in Turkey and that the 2012 ceasefire has only served as an opportunity for the PKK to focus on the Syrian front free of Turkish military pressure. The KIA data illustrates a high level of military coordination between the HPG, PJAK, and YPG military units across organizational

The start of the Syrian Civil War and the responses by the PKK, PYD, and the PJAK, offer the best evidence in support of the theory that all three organizations are run out of Kandil and are strategically indistinguishable from the PKK.

levels, coordination that could not have been achieved without unity of command.

Far from just being a PKK offshoot or affiliate, PJAK and the PYD are part and parcel of the organization. KIA data exposes the PKK's effort to franchise and rebrand to be a shell game played with personnel and shows the strategic and operational unity of the PKK. The American desperation for a strategic partner in the battle against ISIS/DAESH and the Syrian regime has led it to cooperate with a dangerous bedfellow. The US recognizes PJAK as an entity under the control of the PKK and sanctions the group for it, but it insists the PYD is distinct and offers it military support. To what extent the US is aware of the true nature of the PYD or is content to embrace semantic ambiguity is unclear. What is clear is that the PKK is intimately involved in Syria. Whether the strategic decision to cooperate with the PKK is in the best interest of the United States is a decision for policymakers beyond the scope of this article. However, if the US is to cooperate militarily with the PYD in Syria, it should be cognizant about what it is doing: supporting a group which it has consistently labeled as a terrorist organization--the PKK.



## Appendix I- Sample KIA Announcements



Adı Soyadı: Nebahat Demir  
Kod Adı: Mahabat Penaber  
Doğum Yılı ve Yeri: 1985/Silopi, Şırnak  
Katılım Yılı ve Yeri: 1999 - Mahmur  
Şahadet Yılı ve Yeri: / 13 - 15 Şubat 2012 / Besta, Şırnak

### HPG

Source: “Imprint of the Martyrs” [Turkish], HPG Sehit, at [http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111](http://www.hpg-sehit.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=3&Itemid=111) (accessed May 01, 2015).



“ئام و ئام خاتونگی: مریم وانیکو  
کە سازمانی: اویندار گار  
تاریخ و محل تولد: 1985 – حلب شەرب کوردستان  
تاریخ و محل بیوسنتن: 2000 گازە  
تاریخ و محل شەهانت: 2011/07/17 فەندیل”

### PJAK / YRK



فوسەر ئەمال : الحەرقەي الاسەم  
چەنگو سەيەر ئەمال : الحەرقەي الاسەم  
بەري سەي : ئام اسەم  
زەنجەران : ئام اسەم  
تەبە قەزەل – مەردەين : الولا ئەمالە مەجان

### YPG

Source: “Joined the Convoy of Martyrs” [Arabic], YPG Rojava, (April 16, 2015), <http://ypgrojava.com/ar/index.php/sport/1749-2015-04-16-13-39-50> (accessed May 01, 2015).

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