

## Peoples Protection Unit (YPG) and the Kurdish Movement:

By

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### Abstract:

*Non- state actors have significantly gained momentum after the late twentieth century especially in Asia and more precisely in Middle East. Their importance can be estimated by the fact that super powers of the world rely on them instead of state actors for their respective agendas in the region. YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel or simply Peoples Protection Unit) is one of those non-state actors operating in Syria driven by the ideology of autonomy for Kurdish ethnic minority. This paper will try to cover comprehensive profile of YPG and the part that this group is playing in Syrian Crises.*

**Keywords:** YPG, Movement, Kurdish etc.

### Introduction:

With the emergence of Westphalian nation-state system all the people who were by any definition a Nation sooner or later achieved their own nation state except the few, Kurds are one of them. Kurds - one of the earliest inhabitants of Fertile Crescent are still struggling to achieve an independent state in the heart of Middle East (Estes, 2016; Akturk, 2016). After WWI, allied forces promised Kurds a separate nation state referred to as Kurdistan comprising of Kurdish majority areas with in the territory that was formerly under Ottoman Empire in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 (Biger, 2016). However, the Kurdish hopes were dashed three years later, when the Treaty of Lausanne was signed by Allied powers and Ottoman Empire which set the Turkish borders and made no provision for a Kurdish state. This demarcation left Kurds with minority status in their respective states - majority of them have been living in western Iran, northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey and northern Syria. In the second half of the twentieth century, Kurds became an integral part of domestic politics and promoted their goal of autonomy and self-governance for Kurdish majority areas of the respective countries. Some of the political parties were The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Iraq, Kurdistan Workers party (PKK) of Turkey

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and Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Syria. Many scholars claim that People's protection Unit is militant wing of Democratic Union Party (Namo, 2016; El-Kirim, 2016; Romano, 2015).

Syrian Kurds make up seven to ten percent of the total Syrian population. Prior to the Arab spring and Syrian Crises, majority of them were settled in cities of Damascus and Aleppo, and in three cantons Afrin, Jazira and Kobani along Turkish Syrian Borders. Syrian Kurds have history of suppression and discrimination as old as the state of Syria itself. They were not considered citizens of Syria in 1960s census, some three lac Kurds were deprived of citizenship and were labeled as foreigners. Their territory was redistributed among Arabs displacing them from their homes to create Arab buffer zone between Kurds of Syria and Turkey living at the borders of both countries (Gunter, 2014). Understanding the changing political situation, Partiya Yakitiya Demokrat or Democratic Union Party was founded in 2003 by Kurdish Activists in northern Syria in order to foster a political struggle for the rights of Kurd nation.

It is a leftist party and one of the founding members of National Coordination Body for Democratic Change and is also considered as most significant opposition party in Syrian politics. Moreover, It is also operating as the leading party in the self-claimed federal autonomic region with majority Kurdish population in northern Syria known as Rojava. According to PYDs official website its ideology is all about Social equality, justice and freedom of belief, feminism is also one of the vital ideological factors in PYD as for every designation in the party on hierarchical level there is a co seat acquired by a female party member. Likewise, the party is chaired and co-chaired by Saleh Muslim and Asiyah Abdullah respectively who were elected by the other members; this clearly illustrates the democratic approach of the party. PYD has also some political reservations with other Kurdish groups of Syria like the bulk of Kurdish opposition parties that formed the Kurdish National Council. Furthermore, the party had suffered years of violent suppression by Syrian Regime. Turkey has also played the role of major antagonist throughout the journey of PYD as she believes that PYD is the Syrian affiliate of outlawed PKK operating in Turkey. Turkish claim is not a mere statement because PYD was linked with PKK at the time of its creation and its basic ideology is also borrowed from PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan but now PYD has declared itself as an independent entity and has denied all the accusations regarding foreign affiliation.

Peoples Protection Unit was initially created after Qimshili riots in 2004 in which nearly one hundred Kurds were killed, after the massacre by the Syrian Regime Democratic Union Party felt the need of home forces for protection in Kurdish majority areas. The group did not officially announce its existence till the 2012 when it started its first combat operation in Syrian Crises. Men-force that constitutes the Peoples Protection units comprises from 30,000 to 50,000 soldiers from the age of 18 to 50. Sepan Hemo is the General Commander of YPG and all of its sub factions. The major income source of the group is refining and selling oil that is in its possession, Resources from US lead Syrian Democratic

forces are also part of YPGs economy and the third fraction in the economy is contributed by trade with other Kurdish Groups. YPG is mostly reported lightly armed relatively. Some observations suggest that the YPGs guerrilla-style battle field tactics rely on significant operational flexibility and a high tempo based on the use of foot soldiers, snipers, machine guns, self-produced mortars and explosives. YPG arm sources include black market purchases, caches seized from the Islamic state and other adversaries and its involvement in weapon trade with Iraqi Kurdish Groups and Turkish-originated Kurdistan Workers Party is widely believed but YPG have always denied it. Cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani in the west of river Tigris along the Turkish borders make the de facto autonomous state of Rojava that is under YPG. It is also trying to include strategically important Azaz in its de facto state. Women's Protection Unit or YJP is setup as the female equivalent of Peoples Protection Unit. YJPs arm force is about 7000 female soldiers and it is commanded by Nessrin Abdullah. Female force is equally skilled like that of male force and had participated in many battles against ISIS that resulted as decisive victories for YPG and YJP.

### **Role in Syrian Crises:**

Syrian conflict started in 2011 with the Arab Spring at Deraa, a city of Syria when state forces opened fire on peaceful protesters who were demanding justice for the teenagers arrested and tortured by the national armed forces for painting anti Assad slogans. The incident triggered nationwide protests demanding President Assad's resignation that the state tried to crush brutally. Hence, worsening the situation that then turned into a civil war. The crises incited four parallel conflicts which got overlapped and sucked in major foreign powers including United States of America. The first conflict is between the Assad regime and the rebels on whether Assad should stay or leave which further created the second conflict involving Kurds who found the circumstances as an opportunity and carved out the de facto mini-state of Rojava in northern Syria along the Turkish border. Assad who was formerly suppressing Kurds forcefully for their separatist motives did not pay much attention on their recent activities as he was busy in tackling the rebels. The Chaos helped the emergence of ISIS out of infighting among jihadist groups in Syria. In 2014, ISIS succeeded in capturing large part of Syria and Iraq and declared that territory as Islamic State under caliphate rule. The fourth and most complex conflict is among foreign powers that are fighting to secure their own interest with in the region without giving a second thought about the devastating effect the crises has brought upon the civilians.

### **Control of Kurdish Areas:**

With the outbreak of nationwide uprisings and formation of Free Syrian Army Assad regime diverted its focus from adopting harsh policies towards Kurds to ruthlessly crushing the rebellion. In July 2012, PYD used this as an opportunity for demanding control over Kobani, Amuda and Afrin. After effective negotiations government forces withdrew from the areas as regime could not afford further uprisings and riots.

### **Battle of Rasa-al-Ayn: Official entry of YPG in Syrian Conflict:**

Initially YPG was a neutral group neither supporting regime nor the rebels. In 2012 free Syrian Forces (rebel group created by defected Army generals who were against Assad regime) entered the city of Rasa-al-Ayn in order to evacuate the town from Syrian Armed forces or the state army. YPG at first conquered the nearby areas from Syrian forces in order to prevent FSA from gaining more power as rebels clearly declared that they will not allow separatists to hold such a mineral and agricultural rich province of Hasakah that is now part of Jazira canton of Rojava. As Ras-al-Ayn was strategically important for Kurds and PYD and if FSA would have gained its control it would secure a vital supply line from turkey which could strengthen the rebels to seize control of greater parts of east Syria and fall of the city would also isolate Kurds in Aleppo province from the main areas of Hasakah province. Kurdish fighters got the actual global fame when jihadist and fundamentalist entered the town through Turkish border as anti-regime rebels but off course with their own motives and ideology different from free Syrian Army even FSA was disillusioned by the stance of the jihadist groups like Al-Nusra (Syrian based Al-Qaida affiliate). YPG successfully expelled these fundamentalist fractions (Ghuraba al-sham and Al-Nusra front) out of the city.

#### **Syrian Democratic Forces:**

Syrian crises became more devastating and complex when ISIS started entering Syria through Syria-Iraq border captured large areas of Syrian territory and declared caliphate. ISIS was a global threat, its former affiliation with Al-Qaida, its notorious war tactics, ethnic cleansings, suicide bombings throughout Europe; in short it was the nightmare for everyone. YPG proved to be most the effective against ISIS. On the other hand, at first United States of America aided the FSA to combat against ISIS but it failed due to lack of organization, coordination and skill. However, the battles between FSA and ISIS lead to normalization of relations between FSA and YPG.

In Siege of Kobani, United States provided close air support to YPG, United States new strategy of supporting YPG established basis of military cooperation between YPG and FSA. The US led coalition fought against ISIS in Tel Abyad. Hence, it was clear that if YPG wants to operate outside Rojava territory it has to work as a part of broader army which consists of all other factions' i.e. like Arabs, besides the Kurds. The coalition further resulted in an official US lead army referred as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) established in October, 2015 against ISIS. SDF succeeded decisively against ISIS in almost every battle and weakened it day by day. Its success includes Al-Hawl offensive and Tishrin dam offensive in 2015, then in 2016 Al-Shaddadi offensive, Manbij offensive and the Raqqa offensive. All these victories of SDF increased the territory under SDF as it captured all the seized areas by ISIS while the hydroelectric dam has strengthened the economy of Rojava.

#### **Allies and Antagonists of YPG:**

Syrian crises have been turned into a web of foreign interventions and proxies. As far as the role of YPG is concerned before establishment of SDF, YPG did not have such wide support that it is enjoying today. ISIS had no ally that simply means every actor is on the side that is fighting against it. Iran had a history of hostile relations with Syrian Kurdish

groups because of the Kurdish separatist movements in its home territory. There was a time when Iran and Turkey were on the same front against Kurdish groups but now Iran has changed its stance because of the ISIS. Iran perceives ISIS as a threat and believes that if she will not support the groups fighting ISIS on Iraqi and Syrian soil soon she had to directly fight the group on Iranian territory. United States is the obvious supporter of YPG along with United Nations and NATO while Russia who was on Assads side and always against United States has also compromised its many interests and reservations and has joined the US in supporting SDF. On contrast Saudi Arabia and Turkey are the only countries that are supporting ISIS. Saudi Arabia has the agenda that is regardless of opposing of weakening Kurds; to install Saudi friendly government in Syria while Turkey has purely anti-YPG incentives as she believed that PKK is the parent organization of YPG. Turkey has faced huge criticism on all diplomatic forums but it failed to stop her from aiding ISIS and Turkey continuously has targeted YPG from its borders. The relations of YPG with Assad regime were relaxed with the start of rebel uprising but have become tensed again with the declaration of YPG of an autonomous state within Syria in March 2015. Stories have hit the broadcasting media about confrontations between YPG and Syrian government after the declaration of Rojava.

### **Regional Impact:**

The rise of ISIS has bought Kurdish politics in spotlight which is largely dominated by YPG (KURDISH PEOPLES PROTECTION UNIT) \_ a militia and PYD (Democratic Union Party) \_ a political wing of YPG. It has become internationalized war by intervention of foreign factors. Each country is fighting its own contrasting interest that has exacerbated the situation. The most problematic region of Middle East has implicated unprecedented levels of effects on politics internationally. The lack of consensus and cooperation within the Kurdish communities lead to the weakened front against ISIS offensive and also suffers Kurdish struggle for autonomy. Regional politics plays highly influential role is deciding the fate of Syrian crisis\_Kurddish autonomy. Web of relations between Kurdish political movements and regional powers Turkey role in Syrian Kurdish Politics and YPG effect: Turkey play an important role in Syrian Kurdish politics. It shares 900 km long border with Syria. Kobane\_one of the canton of Rojava-Kurdish defacto autonomous administrative unit, got international attention when it was taken back from ISIS control in 2014-15 offensive, borders with Turkey. Many people flee from Kobani to Turkey that inflicted refugee crisis in Turkey. The rise of PYD and effectiveness of Syrian military\_YPG is interpreted as threat to Turkey national security. The ideological affiliation between PKK (Kurdish Workers Party)- Turkey based and PYD empowers Kurds minority in Turkey explicitly exert pressure on turkey government to grant political rights to Kurds minority in turkey. Turkey is accused of providing financial and military support to jihadists, ISIS against YGP. Turkey adopted all means to suppress Syrian Kurds. Turkish government has threatened to attack Syria if Kurdish autonomy was established. Military and financial support by US to YPG during its fight against ISIS increased

political legitimacy of YPG. This does not lead to any change in Turkey attitude. The economic ties between KRG (Kurdish regional government) in Iraq also influenced Kurdish struggle of identity and state in Syria. Turkey also widened gaps between different factions of Kurds. KRG don't want to lose its economic partner- turkey at expense of support for PYG. Turkey and US relations have witnessed several ups and downs due to civil wars in Syria and Iraq. Bilateral relations are strained by on-going conflicts in Middle Eastern region. The difference of opinion between two is the source of conflict. Instances of conflict between two include disagreements during Iraq war 2000, US brokered Iran nuclear program deal and most currently during civil war in Syria. At the beginning both agreed on toppling of Assad regime and transfer of power to transitional administration, but in the later phase there have been disagreements. Divergences emerged with in the context of YPG (Kurdish People's Protection Unit). During annual SETA Conference it was concluded that YPG plays decisive role in the bilateral relations. US financial and military backing to YPG in its fight against IS troubled Turkey. YPG is perceived as threat by turkey. Us support has challenged the relations. Discords between two has intensified the tensions prevailing in Middle East and dragged the issue into unsolved political issue in the pre text of YPG. Friction between NATO and Russia has vested interests in Syria that could be attained only under Assad regime. It fought along Assad to suppress rebels and defend his rule. Russia wants to increase its ambit of power in world from Syria. His power struggle is halted by US intervention. It is clear that US want to defeat Russia at Syrian territory at all costs. Proxy wars between two is incremental to Syrian crisis. This amounts for new Cold War or undeclared war where east and wheat are once again in global confrontation. Russia role in Syria also deteriorated its ties with turkey. They have contrasting interests in Syria. YPG played an indispensable role in fight against ISIS which contends Assad regime about YPG existence. Syrian crisis initiated tug of war between us and NATO for power and influence. US is battling for regime change and attainment of strategic advantage against Moscow. Rift created between NATO allied countries, turkey and Russia on the basis of difference of stance in Syrian crisis has thwarted stability in Syria. Iran role in Syrian Crisis The other major Kurdish population of the Middle East lives in Iran. Numbering approximately 7 million, this minority has a long and restive history of relations with successive Iranian regimes, which have generally made few concessions to it. Kurds who have protested against the Iranian authorities have often faced imprisonment or execution. The Iranian Kurdish political movement is venerable but fragmented. Many parties and political leaders operate from exile. The Kurdish question in Iran is more static than in the other three states. The Kurds in Iran, like those in Syria until recently, are not free to express their views and receive scant international attention. The Syrian war has had less direct impact on Iran's Kurds than on the region's other Kurdish populations, but Iranian Kurds none the less have followed and celebrated the Rojava project and the lifting of the siege in Kobane. Iran is supporting Hezbollah through Syrian route. Iran is also providing subsidized weapons and military advisors to Assad regime or Alawite dominated government.

**Conclusion:**

Syrian conflict is impossible to comprehend without considering YPGs role in it. Being the most dominating faction of SDF and before the formation of SDF single handedly it has won the war against ISIS that was between the world and Islamic state. It has also lot to offer in future in the context of Syrian conflict regarding the matter of autonomy of Rojava.

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