

The Forgotten Foreign Fighters: The PKK in Syria

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Executive Summary

- The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) emerged from the radical ferment that swept the Western world in the 1960s. It was founded in 1978 as a Marxist-Leninist organisation infused with Kurdish nationalism and a cult of personality around its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK spent much of this period attacking other Kurdish and left-wing groups, and its own dissidents – hundreds of whom would be killed over the years – in an attempt to monopolise the support base for its ideas.
- The PKK was uprooted from Turkey by the *coup d'état* of 1980 and took shelter in Syria, then-ruled by Hafez al-Assad, father of the current dictator, Bashar. In the early 1980s, the ground was prepared politically for the PKK by the savagery of the junta that took power in Turkey, which mobilised opposition among even apolitical Kurds, and in the terrorist training camps of the Bekaa Valley the PKK was being prepared militarily by the Assad regime, the Soviet Union, and their Palestinian proxies. The PKK launched its war against the Turkish state in 1984, first demanding outright independence and later tempering these separatist demands. The PKK established relations with other governments in the region to help sustain its insurgency in Turkey, notably with the revolutionary Islamist regime in Iran and to a lesser degree Saddam Husayn's Iraq.
- The PKK's war against Turkey proceeded at a relatively low level until 1992. Between that year and 1996, the PKK-Turkey war was at its most intense. The PKK waged a campaign of violence that included both targeted and indiscriminate aspects. Nurses, teachers, civil servants, and other "state agents" were murdered by the PKK, and, as always, a particular example was made of Kurds that opposed it. Turkish cities were attacked by PKK suicide bombers. Collective punishment was inflicted on villages that sided with the state and accepted money to construct militias that tried to keep the PKK out. The PKK's conduct in these years amounted to crimes against humanity, according to human rights groups. The Turkish government responded brutally to the insurgency, displacing hundreds of thousands of people in an effort to separate the population and the insurgents, and engaging in extra-legal killings of journalists, activists, and politicians.
- In the late 1990s, with the Soviet Union gone, the Assad regime forced by Turkey to expel Ocalan, the Turkish government learning from its earlier failed counterinsurgency methods, and the PKK unable to shift tactics because of its autocratic structure, the PKK was struggling. By the end of the decade its first insurgency had been substantially militarily defeated – while being politically entrenched, which allowed a later military revival.

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- The PKK is registered as a terrorist organisation by the European Union, NATO, and most Western governments, including Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. This was not just done in solidarity with NATO ally Turkey, which of course also includes the PKK on its terrorism blacklist. The PKK has killed Western citizens in its attacks on tourist areas in Turkey and has kidnapped Westerners for ransom. More centrally, the PKK has a vast infrastructure in Europe to generate funds and raise support for the PKK, based almost entirely around organised crime. By some estimates, the PKK's European wing brings in nearly £80 million per year by extorting the Kurdish diaspora, laundering money, and trading in narcotics, human beings, illegal weaponry, and more mundane items like cigarettes and tea. This money is not only used to finance terrorism in Turkey, but finances acts of terror by the PKK in Europe itself, against Turkish state property, dissident Kurds, and others people and property deemed hostile by the PKK.
- Beginning in 2002, the PKK began to rebrand itself, both international reasons – to try to avoid the terrorism designation and connotation in the War on Terror era – and for more local reasons relating to its various Kurdish audiences. The PKK adopted a “confederal model”, which meant creating ostensibly-local organisations: in Iraq the PKK the created Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK); in Syria the PKK created the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and an armed wing known as the People's Protection Units (YPG); and in Iran the PKK created the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). The PKK, PCDK, PYD/YPG, and PJAK are all officially parts of a transnational political umbrella, the Kurdistan Communities' Union (KCK). The constituents of the KCK are not “affiliates” or “offshoots” or “sister groups” of the PKK; they are organically integrated components of the same organisation – sharing membership, ideology, and a command structure under the ultimate authority of Abdullah Ocalan and his deputies in the PKK's headquarters in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq.
- When the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011, the PYD attacked demonstrators and retained conciliatory relations with the Assad government. In the summer of 2012, Assad withdrew from the Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria and set conditions – by among other things hosting the PKK for decades, allowing it to dominate the Kurdish political scene so as to divert its energies against Turkey, and physically weakening other Kurdish organisations as it pulled back – that allowed the PYD to seize control of the vacated territory. This created clashes between the PYD and the anti-Assad rebellion, and diverted Turkey, one of the rebels' key backers, into a secondary objective of securing its border against a PKK base. The PYD also ensured that the Western-friendly government of Iraqi Kurdistan had its influence in Syria degraded: the PYD consolidated an authoritarian regime, heavily reliant on the Assad state, that viciously repressed all Kurdish political organisations and activists, including those with links to Erbil.

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- In 2014, the PYD/YPG acquired support from the U.S.-led Coalition against the Islamic State (IS) after the iconic battle at Kobani, where the Coalition's airstrikes ensured the YPG-held town did not fall to IS. The Coalition then continued to provide air support, money, weapons, and intelligence to displace IS even in Arab-majority zones, enabling a rapid expansion of the YPG statelet in Syria.
- Since 2014, there has been a flow of people from outside the Kurdish areas to join the YPG in Syria. Of these several hundred foreign fighters, 29 have been killed. They are all profiled in this report. Some YPG foreign fighters who have been engaged in legal processes in their home countries are also profiled here, along with a sample of those who have fought, or continue to fight, with the YPG. There are 60 profiles in total from 12 countries.
- The breakdown by national origin of the slain YPG foreign fighters is: 10 from the United States, 4 each from Britain and Germany, 3 from Australia, 2 from Canada, and 1 each from Iran, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, and Sweden.
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- While comprehensive conclusions are not possible, certain trends emerge from this data sample. People from the Anglosphere have been the most visible and are perhaps the most individually numerous component of the foreign fighters within the YPG. Most fighters are young. More than 60% of the YPG foreign volunteers were under 30 and 80% were under 40. There was no noticeable pattern in the employment category of the YPG foreign fighters, with the exception of the military and students. The foreign YPG fighters are overwhelmingly male. Hardly any of them have ethnic Kurdish background, and very few of them show any prior links to the PKK – or indeed any form of militancy.
- The motives for the YPG fighters profiled here were multiple, varied, and overlapping within individuals. There were, however, broad themes that could be disaggregated into four categories.
- Military veterans were a significant category unto themselves: they formed a clear majority of the recruits in 2014, though that number has declined every year since as the YPG has altered its outreach strategy, focusing on the political far-left. Ex-military personnel overlapped with other categories in so far as they were motivated by, for example, humanitarian concerns. But there were unique motivational factors for former soldiers. Some soldiers missed the military life, the camaraderie and the

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combat; some had difficulty adapting to civilian life. Other former soldiers who had served in the post-9/11 wars, specifically Iraq, felt a responsibility to “finish the job” and/or not to let the sacrifices made go to waste. Still others, who had retired before 9/11, felt guilty about having missed out on the military engagement with Islamist terrorism and saw in the YPG a chance to recuperate this perceived obligation.

- Another category of volunteers, especially in the chaotic first wave before the YPG established a systematic screening process, were motivated by self-serving considerations, notably avarice – sometimes directly pecuniary and sometimes in terms of reputation or fame (designed to lead to monetary gain over time). There were also those seeking to satisfy an impulse to kill. Most of the people in this category have now been combed out of the YPG’s ranks.
- Self-centred motives of a less dark kind continue to feature in the YPG’s foreign volunteers. Adventure is a significant factor in those who have come to Rojava, as is self-actualisation, with an emphasis on redemption. A number of petty criminals and drug addicts have joined the YPG as a way out of this life pattern.
- Finally, there are the ideologues who have joined the YPG – communists, anarchists, and other hard-left militants – who mean to create a revolutionary society in Syria. Among these volunteers, some are fully aware that the YPG is the PKK, specifically the Turkish leftists who are long-time allies of the PKK’s insurgency inside Turkey and the Greek and other southern Europeans who emanate from left-wing terrorist groups, which have journeyed to YPG-held areas for shelter and experience. There are those who are unaware of the nature of the organisation they have joined beyond its media output.
- This movement of foreign fighters to the YPG poses a series of questions – moral, legal, political and diplomatic – for Western governments, starting with if and how to prevent people joining the YPG/PKK and how to handle those who return after having joined this organisation.
- Allowing British citizens to go abroad to join a violent non-state actor with a record of war crimes is morally dubious, displacing onto foreign populations the risks of their misconduct, to say nothing of the danger these individuals expose themselves to, which the government should try to prevent. Beyond these moral considerations are the security threats from returnees. One risk is that they contribute to the PKK’s criminal-terrorist activities. Allowing European left-wing terrorist organisations to acquire training and experience in urban warfare from the PKK, as well as to forge transnational connections and to recruit among YPG volunteers, is deeply undesirable. The potential for such recruits to be drawn into lone-actor terrorism, whether individual or directed by a foreign terrorist organization, has to be taken seriously.

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- The Foreign Enlistment Act aims to prevent British citizens joining wars abroad. It had rarely been enforced since its passage during the American civil war and its application to the YPG in its current form is doubtful. An updated and amended law could be an instrument to prevent British subjects being recruited by the YPG. The removal of passports, which are issued entirely at the discretion of the Home Secretary, is also an option for those cases where an intention to join the YPG is detected, and can certainly be applied to returnees. Returnees should be screened to assess if they require any further state attention, either from the criminal justice system or social services. And the PKK's deceptive propaganda on the nature of its project in Syria and its ability to recruit through its media platforms – whether television or social media – should be counteracted.

Introduction

The issue of foreign fighters has become a central security and political question in the West since the rise of the Islamic State (IS).¹ As IS's governance structures matured at the centre in Iraq and Syria, it escalated a campaign of external attacks against Western targets.² Some of the most devastating of IS's foreign attacks – such as the November 2015 massacre in Paris – were conducted by returning foreign fighters who had been trained in IS-held areas. About 850 British citizens have gone to Syria to fight with jihadi-salafist groups, mostly IS, and about 400 of these people have returned.³ In the first half of 2017, Britain was attacked three times by IS-linked individuals. One of the attackers had travelled in Libya and Syria, where he had contact with IS operatives that was maintained after he returned to Britain.⁴

IS's open calls for attacks on Western states and for recruitment have focused much attention on the foreign fighters phenomenon. However, there are other foreign fighter streams into the Syria–Iraq theatre, which have drawn far less attention.⁵ The most under-emphasised of these has been the flow of international recruits to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), operating under the name of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Syria.

Historically, the PKK has been seen as an ethnically and territorially isolated group. However, the group has always attracted a small number of non-Kurdish volunteers,⁶ and since 2014 the organisation has attracted several hundred non-Kurdish foreign fighters,⁷ 29 of whom have been killed. Many others have returned to their countries of origin, including Britain.

¹ Reed, A. and J. Pohl, 'Tackling the surge of returning foreign fighters', NATO Review, 14 July 2017, available at: www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/Also-in-2017/daesh-tackling-surge-returning-foreign-fighters-prevention-denmark-rehabilitation-programmes/EN/index.htm, last visited: 2 August 2017; Wintour, P., 'Islamic State fighters returning to UK "pose huge challenge"', *The Guardian*, 9 March 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/09/islamic-state-fighters-returning-to-uk-pose-huge-challenge>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

² Orton, K., 'Foreign Terrorist Attacks By The Islamic State, 2002–2016', *The Henry Jackson Society*, 24 March 2017, available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FINAL-Foreign-Terrorist-Attacks-Paper.pdf>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³ 'Who are Britain's jihadists?', BBC News, 5 July 2017, available at: www.bbc.com/news/uk-32026985, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁴ Callimachi, R. and E. Schmitt, 'Manchester Bomber Met With ISIS Unit in Libya, Officials Say', *The New York Times*, 3 June 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/world/middleeast/manchester-bombing-salman-abedi-islamic-state-libya.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁵ One such flow is the movement by the Iranian government of Shi'a jihadists from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond into Syria to defend Bashar al-Assad's regime. For a comprehensive overview see: Smyth, P., 'The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2015, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁶ The PKK always had support from communist and other left-wing extremists, especially in Germany, Greece, Italy and Turkey, and it was usually citizens of these countries who showed up in the PKK's ranks. Two German women are among the best-known cases: Eva Juhnke, who was arrested by the Turkish government in southeast Turkey in October 1997, and Andrea Wolf (Sehit Ronahi), a former Baader-Meinhof terrorist, who was killed in Turkey while fighting for the PKK near-exactly a year later.

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Though the YPG has been lionised in much of the Western press and political discourse since it became the West’s primary ground force against IS, there are important questions – moral, legal, political and diplomatic – about how the YPG/PKK fighters are handled by Western governments. There is also an acute security question. In prior conflicts that have attracted Western foreign fighters, between 5% and 10% of the returnees went on to be directly involved in terrorism, and a larger circle of around 20% remained loyal to the cause,⁸ serving as facilitators, fundraisers and propagandist-recruiters.⁹

The potential use of these individuals in the PKK’s vast criminal-terrorist apparatus in Europe is a serious cause for concern, as is the potential that these individuals will engage in lone-actor terrorism, whether, for example, on an individual level – perhaps caught up in the contagion effect identified by the British government during this year’s wave of attacks¹⁰ – or as guided operatives of a foreign terrorist organisation.¹¹ Understanding this flow of foreign fighters and finding ways to prevent it are therefore important components of wider efforts to prevent domestic terrorism

This paper provides background to the PKK, its evolution and how it came to play a significant role in the Syrian conflict. It provides details of the PKK’s foreign fighters, both those who have been killed and a number of those who remain alive. In doing so, it provides an insight into the motivations of those who choose to wage war on the PKK’s behalf, analyses commonalities, and proposes suitable recommendations that decision-makers may wish to consider.

⁷ One PKK operative estimated the number of YPG foreign fighters at between 800 and 900. See: ‘Deniz Sipan trains the foreign YPG volunteers’, *YouTube*, 30 June 2016, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=appF_hCMxmU, last visited: 2 August 2017. A senior PYD official said the total was 400 in the summer of 2016; regional diplomats, intelligence officials and analysts, while stressing their uncertainty, roughly agree with this and note the number has been rising over the last year. Author interviews, May–June 2017.

⁸ Author interview with a former counter-intelligence official, July 2017.

⁹ I am grateful to Jade Parker, a Senior Research Associate at TAPSTRI, for the term “propagandist-recruiter”. For more on the essential lack of distinction between the media and recruitment operations of terrorist organisations, see: Whiteside, C., ‘Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), November 2016, available at: <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Whiteside-Lighting-the-Path-the-Evolution-of-the-Islamic-State-Media-Enterprise-2003-2016-Nov2016.pdf>, last visited: 8 August 2017.

¹⁰ ‘Theresa May: UK is in grip of copycat terror attacks’, *The Irish Independent*, 4 June 2017, available at: www.independent.ie/world-news/europe/britain/theresa-may-uk-is-in-grip-of-copycat-terror-attacks-35786541.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹ Callimachi, R., ‘Not “Lone Wolves” After All: How ISIS Guides World’s Terror Plots From Afar’, *The New York Times*, 4 February 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

1. Background to the PKK

1.1 *The Origins of the PKK*

The radical movements that swept the West in the late 1960s, particularly those popular among students, had a deep impact on Turkey. There, predominantly left-wing street movements crossed into terrorism and criminality, and were in turn matched by perpetrators of ultra-nationalist and Islamist violence. In March 1971, the Turkish armed forces stepped in with a “coup by memorandum”, dissolving the government and installing a technocratic administration, which rewrote the constitution to limit the freedoms of press and political activities that were believed to have allowed the chaos to take root. Elections in October 1973 returned full civilian government to Turkey, but turmoil soon returned as well, partly because the transition to civilian rule was accompanied by an amnesty that freed political activists who had become more extreme and better networked as a result of their time in prison. The amnesty also allowed Turkish radicals to return from Europe, where they had been in contact with Soviet-aligned terrorists like the Red Army Faction (or “Baader-Meinhof Gang”), accruing further skills and contacts, and even members.¹²

It was in this atmosphere that the PKK was born. In 1971, Abdullah Ocalan, then a 21-year-old clerk at the land registry office in Istanbul preparing for his university entrance exams, turned to political activism. Ocalan was arrested in March 1972 at a rally and imprisoned for seven months. Upon release, Ocalan formed the “Kurdistan Revolutionaries”, a group dedicated to advancing Kurdish nationalism, a process that sometimes involved convincing Kurds they were Kurds, undoing the state’s assimilationist policies, before indoctrination and recruitment could even begin. Ocalan’s group had one unique selling point among frustrated, ostracised, twenty-something Kurds. While most left-wing groups retained some distance from Kurdish nationalism and both leftist and Kurdish groups were mired in ideological and pragmatic internal disputes about when it would be appropriate to use violence, Ocalan urged immediate revolution. He denounced all other Kurdish representatives as sell-outs and collaborators with the state, and maintained that all prior Kurdish nationalist leaders – including the legendary Mullah Mustafa Barzani – were not true Kurdish revolutionaries. This simple ideological framework helped answer the question for new recruits of why Kurdish revolt would work this time, when it had failed so often before.¹³

Ocalan went on to found the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, in Diyarbakir in November 1978. Its ideology combined Marxist–Leninism and Kurdish nationalism – initially in the form of outright separatism, later transmuted into a demand for autonomy

¹² See the case of Andrea Wolf: Zaman, A., ‘How a German doctor became a PKK hero’, *Al-Monitor*, 17 November 2014.

¹³ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 23-32.

– and a cult of personality around Ocalan. As the political and security situation in Turkey deteriorated, the PKK spent its energy fighting other leftist and Kurdish groups, trying to monopolise the support base for its ideas.¹⁴

1.2 The PKK Establishment of Relationships and Preparation for War in Turkey

A spiralling political crisis in Turkey triggered a violent military coup in September 1980. The extensive repression that followed the installation of the junta laid waste to the PKK's infrastructure in Turkey and drove its remnants from the country. Most relocated to Syria, where Ocalan had been present since 7 June 1979.

The PKK received considerable support from both the regime of Hafez-al Assad and the Soviet Union in constructing a force to challenge Turkey. Assad saw the PKK as a useful geopolitical weapon to pressure the Turks over water flows from the Euphrates Dam and to further Assad's irredentist claims to the Hatay Province.¹⁵ The Soviets saw the PKK as a means of destabilising the most strategically positioned front line NATO state.

The Hafez regime was notorious for its sponsorship of international terrorism,¹⁶ and has the unusual distinction of having utilized terrorism against every state with which it shares a border – Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey – and the regime. To give the regime some deniability in the case of Turkey, the PKK was housed at terrorist training camps in the Bekaa Valley, a Syrian-occupied area of Lebanon where Hizballah, the Iranian proxy militia that was also supported by Assad, was born at exactly the same time. Assad closely oversaw the PKK camps.¹⁷

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Cagaptay, S., 'Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 April 2012, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶ Thatcher, M., *The Downing Street Years*, (Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 510; 823.

¹⁷ The relationship between the Assad regime and the PKK was handled early on by Jamil al-Assad, Hafez's brother, who even visited the Helwe Camp. Jamil had no official portfolio but he was a significant power-wielder behind-the-scenes in Syria, especially in the coastal area of Latakia, where he founded the original *Shabiha*, the criminal networks that, in exchange for official patronage and protection for their interests—profiting off the Lebanese civil war by smuggling, primarily—upheld the regime's rule. (The word *Shabiha* later became a catch-all term for the paramilitary death squads, usually staffed by civilians who had been armed and led by the regime's intelligence services, mobilized against the nascent uprising in 2011.) Jamil was the point-man for the Assad regime's dealings with other terrorists, too, such as Mihrac Ural (Ali Kayyali), a Turkish Alawite, in charge of "The Syrian Resistance". Ural had been weaponized by the Assad regime to challenge Turkey over the Hatay Province that the Syrian regime claims belongs to it. After the civil war began, Ural would become best-known as the orchestrator of the anti-Sunni pogrom in Bayda and Baniyas in 2013. Liaising with terrorist groups was often a role played by members of the "inner circle" in the Assad regime. Another notable case is Assef Shawkat, Hafez's son-in-law, who interfaced with Hizballah and the IS movement. See: Lund, A., 'Chasing Ghosts: The *Shabiha* Phenomenon' chapter 10 in Kerr, M. and Larkin, C. (eds.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith, and Politics in the Levant*, (Hurst, 2015), pp. 207-224; Al-Tamimi, A., 'A Case Study of "The Syrian Resistance," a Pro-Assad Militia Force', *Syria Comment*, 22 September 2013, available at: www.joshualandis.com/blog/aymenn-al-tamimi-speaks-to-ali-kayyali-and-profiles-the-syrian-resistance-a-pro-assad-militia-force/, last visited: 11 July 2017; Joscelyn, T., 'Slain Syrian official supported al Qaeda in Iraq', *The Long War Journal*, 24 July 2012, available at: www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/07/slain_syrian_official.php, last visited: 11 July 2017.

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The PKK received training from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Like the PLO, the PKK believed Israel was illegitimate. For the PKK, “American imperialism” was its primary enemy, and Kemalism, Zionism,¹⁸ and (strangely) Islamism were merely local manifestations of Western colonialism, upholding an exploitative order the PKK was determined to overthrow. Israel and Turkey’s then-close relationship buttressed this worldview.¹⁹ Anti-Americanism remains a staple of the “ideology lessons” given to Western and other PKK recruits in Syria.²⁰ The component of the PLO that trained the PKK was Nayef Hawatma’s Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a fellow Marxist-Leninist outfit. The DFLP had done other arm’s length work for the Soviets, training the Nicaraguan Sandinistas,²¹ Moscow’s second most successful project in the Western Hemisphere after the Cuban revolution.²² The PKK trained in the Helwe camp, which they were subsequently given full control over by Assad in 1985 as relations between the PKK and the Assad regime deepened.²³

Assad also weaponised the PKK for his domestic policy, allowing the PKK to disseminate its ideology and recruit freely among Syrian Kurds. Ocalan denied “the existence of Kurdistan in Syria and the existence of a Kurdish problem in Syria,” contending that “most Syrian Kurds are immigrants” from Turkey, and the PKK’s path was to “return them to their original homeland”.²⁴ This matched the imperatives of Syria’s Arabizing government, which had stripped more than 100,000 Kurds of citizenship, claiming they were “alien infiltrators” from Turkey.²⁵ The Assad regime was content for the PKK to channel the discontents Syria’s marginalized Kurdish population away from demands for national rights or prosperity within Syria, and redirect their energies against Turkey. As other Kurdish groups were not allowed to operate, Assad enabled the PKK to co-opt much of the political space among Syria’s Kurds. As a result, the PKK recruited very widely in Syria.²⁶ To this day, senior posts in the organization are held by Kurds of Syrian origin.

¹⁸ Ibrahim, F. and Gurbey, G. (editors), *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 106.

¹⁹ Balci, A., *The PKK-Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s Regional Politics: During and After the Cold War*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 92-95.

²⁰ ‘Episode 82 - War Is Heck feat. @PissPigGranddad’ (40:40-41:50), *Chapo Trap House*, 13 February 2017, available at: <https://soundcloud.com/chapo-trap-house/episode-82-war-is-heck-feat-pisspiggranddad-21317>, last visited: 29 June 2017. See also: ‘Revolutionaries! Join the resistance of Bakûr!’, *YouTube*, 23 January 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5jA7EiXQsc>, last visited: 30 June 2017. Between 1:00 and 2:30, the Western YPG fighter explains that the structures of global capitalism—which America leads—are the overall enemy, and the Turkish government is merely an “occupying” power for this system of exploitation and repression.

²¹ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 55-6.

²² Andrew, C. and Mitrokhin, V., *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 115-135.

²³ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), p. 99.

²⁴ Ose, H., ‘The PKK-Assad regime story: harmony, discord and Ocalan’, *NOW Lebanon*, 10 April 2015, available at: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565108-the-pkk-assad-regime-story-harmony-discord-and-ocalan>, last visited: 10 July 2017.

²⁵ ‘Syria: The Silenced Kurds’, Human Rights Watch, 1996, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1996/Syria.htm>, last visited: 1 August 2017.

²⁶ Allsopp, H., *The Kurds of Syria*, (I.B. Taurus, 2014), pp. 39-40

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Though the degree of material support the PKK received from the Soviet Union is contested,²⁷ the political support was entirely public. Inside the party, the works of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin were the “main, if not the only, ideological sources of the PKK’s assumptions, beliefs, and values”, as channelled through Ocalan.²⁸ Moscow’s support to the PKK clearly reduced once the Soviet Empire collapsed, especially rhetorically, but elements of the new Russian state are believed to have supplied weapons to the PKK through the 1990s,²⁹ and even some training in various weapons systems.³⁰

The PKK also strengthened ties with a range of other actors. It established a “live-and-let-live” relationship with Saddam Husayn, and its then good relations with the Iraqi Kurdish factions enabled it to establish bases in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq in 1982,³¹ the first at Lolan.³² It was from these bases in August 1984 that the PKK launched its war against Turkey.

Saddam saw the PKK as a useful buffer on a border he struggled to defend and as a means of fomenting intra-Kurdish tensions to weaken the Iraqi Kurdish groups, who were in revolt against Baghdad and often worked side by side with Iran during the long war Saddam had started. Saddam’s strategy paid off. Relations between the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds collapsed in May 1987 when the PKK continued its habit of attacking Kurdish rivals. Shortly after, Saddam escalated his campaign against the Iraqi Kurds, gassing and displacing them at Halabja and elsewhere; the PKK capitalised, seizing the Kurds’ vacated territory and bases. Saddam pushed north in 1988 and formal relations with the PKK were established, though they remained limited and transactional. Saddam’s regime did not hinder the PKK’s activities; in exchange, the PKK supplied information about Turkish military positions and especially about the Iraqi Kurds that Saddam could then use to target the Kurds. Saddam provided the PKK with logistical support and almost certainly with weapons at various stages, though nothing, in either quality or quantity, the PKK could not have acquired on the open market.³³

²⁷ An example of an assessment that sees Soviet support for the PKK as extensive: Cagaptay, S., ‘Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension’, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 April 2012. An assessment concluding the reverse: Balci, A., *The PKK-Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s Regional Politics: During and After the Cold War*, pp. 112-113.

²⁸ Balci, A., *The PKK-Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s Regional Politics: During and After the Cold War*, p. 112.

²⁹ A WikiLeaks cable dated February 2010 recorded a briefing from Jose “Pepe” Grinda, a Spanish prosecutor with extensive experience of dealing with the mafia and organised criminality in Europe. Grinda was speaking about a recently concluded case involving an organised crime network led by Zahkar Kalashov, a Georgian-born Russian citizen. Speaking of Belarus, Chechnya and Russia, Grinda said that “one cannot differentiate between the activities of the government and OC [organised crime] groups”. Grinda said that a decade and more of intelligence that had crossed his path had convinced him that the Russian special services had annexed and instrumentalised the Russian organised crime scene “to do whatever the GOR [government of Russia] cannot acceptably do as a government”. Grinda added that an example of this was “Kalashov, whom [Grinda] said worked for Russian military intelligence [GRU] to sell weapons to the Kurds [i.e. the PKK] to destabilize Turkey”. See the full cable at: ‘US embassy cables: Russia is virtual “mafia state”, says Spanish investigator’, *The Guardian*, 2 December 2010, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/247712>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 188-189.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 101-106.

³² Orhan, M., ‘Transborder violence: the PKK in Turkey, Syria and Iraq’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 16 May 2014, 2 August 2017.

³³ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 103, 122-124.

Simultaneously, the PKK established relations with the revolutionary government in Iran, receiving permission to establish bases on its territory in 1987. For the PKK, this was a most advantageous relationship, handled by the leader's brother, Osman Ocalan (Ferhat). Iran was a more secure safe haven than Iraq, a fact reflected by the movement of senior PKK operatives into Iran. The Iranian theocracy was in full control of its Kurdish zone, which meant that it was in a position to deter Turkish cross-border raids aimed at the PKK in a manner Saddam was not, and Tehran's grave suspicion of the Turkish government because of its pro-Western orientation meant it had not only the capacity but the will to prevent Ankara disrupting the PKK's operations on Iranian soil. Iran also gave the PKK easier access than the mountains of northern Iraq did to areas of eastern Turkey. The various intelligence-terrorist elements of the Iranian state, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Ministry of Intelligence (VEVAK), actively assisted the PKK's transit.³⁴ The Islamist regime cultivated assets among the PKK. Cemil Bayik (Cuma), one of the most powerful PKK operatives since the group's founding and its leader after 2013, was one such asset.³⁵ The PKK did recruit among Iranian Kurds, though it is not clear if the authorities knew about this. The PKK's side of the bargain involved not staging attacks on Turkey from the Iranian side of the border, providing the biographies of its own operatives, and sharing extensive details of U.S. and Turkish military positions in Turkey.³⁶

These regional ties helped the PKK to sustain military operations against Turkey, which it undertook with a new intensity in the post-Cold War period.

1.3 Insurgency and Terror

While the PKK's military infrastructure inside Turkey was devastated by the 1980 coup, the savagery of the military government, particularly at Diyarbakir Military Prison No. 5, helped crystallise the political base for the PKK in two important ways. First, the systematic torture and brutality towards prisoners, and the attempted forced "Turkification" of captives, created a widespread perception among even de-politicized Kurds, that the Turkish state was predatory towards them solely because of their ethnic identity.³⁷ Second, the cruelty as a background to an overcrowded detention facility provided an ideal recruiting and indoctrination centre for the PKK's cadres.³⁸ The ease of conditions in 1984 was too little, too late, to undo the political effects of the "period of barbarity", and the releases in some of the amnesties that followed provided footsoldiers to the PKK.

³⁴ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 103; 120-22.

³⁵ Cagaptay, S. and Unal, C., 'Leadership reshuffle - PKK makes changes in its ranks', *IHS Janes*, 26 February 2014, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Cagaptay20140226-Janes.pdf>, last visited: 8 July 2017.

³⁶ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 103; 120-22.

³⁷ Zeydanlioglu, W., 'Torture and Turkification in the Diyarbakir Military Prison', a chapter in Zeydanlioglu, W. and Parry, J.T. (eds.), *Rights, Citizenship, and Torture: Perspectives on Evil, Law and the State*, Welat Zeydanlioglu and John T. Parry, (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009), pp.73-92, available at: <https://welatzeydanlioglu.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/torture-and-turkification-in-the-diyarbakir-military-prison.pdf>, last visited: 1 August 2017.

³⁸ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 103; 112.

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Ankara moved to counter the PKK by reactivating the “temporary” village guard system in the Kurdish areas in March 1985, arming civilians to defend themselves from insurgents, which complicated the PKK’s political strategy by making its claim to represent all Kurds visibly false.³⁹ Ocalan’s decision in 1986 to introduce conscription and “taxation”, experienced as extortion by many, in areas the PKK captured, helped push some Kurds into the pro-state camp.

The war had proceeded at a relatively low level between 1984 and 1990, and in the early 1990s several developments seemed to indicate a weakening of the insurgency. In September 1991, attacks into Turkey brought a damaging round of retribution on the PKK’s bases in northern Iraq, and the PKK was nearly driven out of Iraq completely after going to war with the Iraqi Kurdish factions a month later. Under pressure from Turkey, Assad’s Syria had finally closed the Helwe camp in September 1992, making the PKK even more reliant on Qandil. Meanwhile, in April 1991, the total ban on the Kurdish language in Turkey was lifted, though many restrictions remained in place until 2003, theoretically undercutting some of the PKK’s appeal. But the security and human rights situation had been deteriorating,⁴⁰ and the PKK was gaining strength.

The PKK had largely relied local villagers to provide food, shelter, and other key elements of its insurgency. This ability to rely on ad-hoc support is suggestive of the degree of popular support – active and passive – the PKK could draw on. By 1992, however, this strategy reached its limits: the PKK had become so large it had to engage in large-scale purchases.⁴¹

The junta had formally withdrawn from office in 1983, though it left in place a stiflingly authoritarian and self-serving constitution that hampered civilian governance.⁴² Still, there was relief in much of the country. The adoption of the State of Emergency Rule (SER) provision beginning in 1987 covering eleven provinces in the southeast effectively reimposed military rule on the Kurdish areas to battle a raging insurgency.⁴³

³⁹ Gurcan, M., ‘Arming civilians as a counterterror strategy: The case of the village guard system in Turkey’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 19 August 2014, available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17467586.2014.948026?journalCode=rdac20, last visited: 9 July 2017.

⁴⁰ ‘Human Rights Developments: Turkey’, *Human Rights Watch*, 1992, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/WR92/HSW-06.htm>, last visited: 1 August 2017.

⁴¹ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press: New York, 2007), p. 185.

⁴² Koplow, M.J., ‘Officers and Democrats’, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 July 2013, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2013-07-06/officers-and-democrats>, last visited: 8 July 2017.

⁴³ The SER began to be rolled back in 1994 and was finally abolished in 2002: Unal, M.C., ‘The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and popular support: counterterrorism towards an insurgency nature’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 11 June 2012, available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2012.661610?src=recsys&journalCode=fswi20, last visited: 1 August 2017.

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Between 1992 and 1996, the war between the PKK and the Turkish state was at its most savage. There had been a brief and uncertain chance for peace in early 1993, but this was lost when the compromise-minded Turkish President, Turgut Ozal, mysteriously died,⁴⁴ and a temporary ceasefire was abrogated by the PKK's massacre of 33 unarmed soldiers and five civilians they pulled off a bus driving from Bingol to Elazig.⁴⁵ The PKK conducted a ferocious campaign that aimed to weaken the state by targeting its institutions and to discredit it by demonstrating that it could not protect those who sided with it. The PKK assassinated those associated with official power and more broadly terrorised wavering populations. Public works projects such as road-building were attacked indiscriminately by the PKK, with Kurds toiling as labourers as likely to be among the slain as anyone associated meaningfully with the government. Medical facilities were burned down, and the PKK made a special point of destroying schools and murdering teachers,⁴⁶ a campaign that is extant.⁴⁷ As the PKK's capacity grew, it moved from rural insurgency to urban terrorism, even employing suicide bombers.

Systematic atrocities were committed as part of "PKK official policy" after 1992, which human rights organisations assess as amounting to "crimes against humanity". Over the next three years, at least 768 people marked as supporters of the state – teachers, civil servants, off-duty security personnel and random civilians – fell to PKK assassins.⁴⁸ Concurrently, the PKK executed a centrally directed campaign of collective punishment against residential areas with village guards.⁴⁹ At least 25 massacres were conducted by the PKK against places with village guards, slaughtering 360 people, of whom 39 were women and 76 were children.⁵⁰

The tactics adopted by the Turkish government in battling the insurgency ran roughshod over humanitarian concerns. By the mid-1990s, around 3,000 Kurdish villages had been totally destroyed and nearly 400,000 people displaced as the state sought to physically drain away any support base for the PKK.⁵¹ These violent "evacuations", replete with

⁴⁴ 'Özal poisoned with 4 substances: claim', *Hurriyet*, 24 November 2012, available at: www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ozal-poisoned-with-4-substances-claim.aspx?pageID=238&nID=35383&NewsCatID=338, last visited: 2 August 2017; 'Body of Turkish ex-leader shows signs of poisoning: paper', Reuters, 26 November 2012, available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-president-autopsy-idUSBRE8AP09220121126, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁴⁵ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 211-214.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁷ 'PKK kills young teacher after abducting him in Turkey's east', *Hurriyet*, 22 June 2017, available at: www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pkk-kills-young-teacher-after-abducting-him-in-turkeys-east.aspx?pageID=238&nID=114627&NewsCatID=509, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁴⁸ 'Italy Urged to Prosecute PKK Leader Ocalan', *Human Rights Watch*, 20 November 1998, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/1998/11/20/italy-urged-prosecute-pkk-leader-ocalan>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁴⁹ In a macabre manner, reminiscent of the paramilitary Tonton Macoute (officially: Milice de Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale or Militia of National Security Volunteers, MVSN) in Haiti, the PKK "often hanged the guards in trees, their mouths stuffed with money" and signs strapped to their corpses identifying them as "traitors". See: Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 115.

⁵⁰ 'Italy Urged to Prosecute PKK Leader Ocalan', *Human Rights Watch*, 20 November 1998.

⁵¹ Sugden, J., "'Still Critical': Prospects in 2005 for Internally Displaced Kurds in Turkey", *Human Rights Watch*, 6 March 2005, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/03/06/still-critical/prospects-w2005-internally-displaced-kurds-turkey>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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humiliation, theft, destruction of property and torture by security forces, were accompanied by a campaign of extra-judicial violence that in the same period killed or “disappeared” more than 50 Kurdish politicians,⁵² hundreds of Kurdish activists⁵³ and a dozen journalists from the newly created Kurdish outlets such as *Yeni Ulke and Ozgur Gundem*.

1.4 Dwindling Fortunes

By the second half of the 1990s, the PKK was struggling.

The collapse of the Soviet Union removed from the PKK a source of material support and the global narrative of resistance to the capitalist West. A price was also beginning to be paid for the PKK’s alliance with regimes in Syria and Iran that harshly repressed their Kurdish populations and their political aspirations. Ocalan’s leadership in general was a significant aspect of the PKK’s troubles.

Around 15,000 people had been killed in the Turkey – PKK war by 1996.⁵⁴ Many Kurds had been radicalised into the PKK’s ranks by the Turkish government’s brutal counterinsurgency methods. Yet there was also exhaustion; the displacement was working to separate the PKK from its base, and further improvements in Turkish tactics, notably the use of attack helicopters to reach remote PKK encampments and to destroy insurgent resource depots, contributed to Turkey gaining the upper hand. The PKK’s field commanders knew they needed a new direction, but they were hampered from adopting one by Ocalan.

Ocalan wanted the PKK to succeed and he wanted to remain in power; when those two conflicted, the latter took precedence. Rivals were isolated and eliminated, even at the expense of the war with Turkey. All disagreement was seen as an attempt to undermine the leader, and disloyalty was a capital offence. The PKK has killed hundreds of its own dissidents, those who have advocated revisions to the PKK’s autocratic structure or doctrine. The PKK hunted these men down even when they fled to Europe. Sometimes

⁵² In 1990, the People’s Labour Party (HEP) was founded. Though the HEP was ambiguous about its identity, it was the first legal Kurdish party ever in Turkey. It was independent, though infiltrated by, and somewhat dependent on, the PKK. In July 1991, Diyarbakir HEP chairman Vedat Aydin was found murdered a few days after he was seen being taken into the custody of men claiming to be police. In 1992, 27 HEP officials were murdered. Seventeen officials from HEP or its offshoots were killed in 1993, notably including Mehmet Sincar. Sincar was an MP for the Democracy Party (DEP), which broke away from HEP in May 1993. Sincar was on a fact-finding mission about the mysterious killings when he was assassinated on 4 September. Eighteen HEP officials were killed in unexplained crimes in 1994. See: Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 208.

⁵³ The PKK tested its civilian support by staging demonstrations at the funerals of its fighters and orchestrating massive, near-violent demonstrations over the New Year and on other Kurdish festivals. The capacity to mobilise the population in this way was taken by the Turkish government as a direct challenge to its authority, and its response made little distinction between civilian protesters and armed insurgents. Demonstrations were fired on, killing dozens of unarmed Kurds, and state-linked death squads engaged in more targeted killings against suspected PKK civilian sympathisers and known activists, Kurdish politicians, and members of the human rights movement. In 1992, more than 250 such people were gunned down in mysterious circumstances. That number increased to more than 450 in 1993. See: Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 176.

⁵⁴ ‘Turkey’, *Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)*, available at: ucdp.uu.se/#country/640, last visited: 2 August.

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the murders were not for any “crime” at all, they were simply paranoia, with Ocalan perceiving popular military commanders as threats and killing dozens of the students who came into the PKK in the late 1980s as “spies”. The PKK was also known to kill the unfit in its ranks – people driven to mental breakdowns by torture in Turkish prisons, for example.⁵⁵ 1996 was a moment when the internal killings were particularly extensive, which made commanders especially unwilling to tell Ocalan his prescription was mistaken.⁵⁶

Where Ocalan was most wrong was in believing he was safe in Syria. The war had turned so decisively in Turkey’s favour that the government was able to credibly threaten military action against the Assad regime if it did not expel Ocalan. On 9 October 1998, after 19 years in Syria, Ocalan exited the country as quietly as he had arrived.⁵⁷ Assad signed the Adana Agreement 11 days later, on 20 October, which pledged counterterrorism cooperation with Turkey. After an asylum saga that took Ocalan to Greece, Italy and Russia, Ocalan was eventually arrested by Turkish operatives in Kenya on 15 February 1999. Interestingly, given how many states actually *did* play a role in Ocalan’s capture, many PKK operatives and supporters chose to blame a state that did *not* have any involvement: Israel.⁵⁸

Ocalan’s behaviour after capture – collaborating with the Turkish state to bring about the arrest of senior PKK officials and a ceasefire, while not even defending the cause at trial – capped a difficult period for the PKK, and demoralised many. In August 1999, in accordance with Ocalan’s orders from behind bars, the PKK declared a ceasefire and pulled its troops out of Turkey into northern Iraq.⁵⁹

Turkey inflicted a military defeat on the PKK in 1999 but the manner of that defeat helped entrench the PKK politically,⁶⁰ a more important outcome in a revolutionary war, which meant the group was able to reactivate its insurgency later.⁶¹ The underlying injustice – the denial of Kurdish rights and identity – remained alive. The large-scale abuses in the Kurdish areas compounded this. And the state ended up effectively working in tandem with the PKK to eliminate all realistic alternatives to the PKK for enacting political change. The

⁵⁵ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), p. 96.

⁵⁶ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York University Press, 2007), p. 258-62.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 271.

⁵⁸ After a day of protests and riots across Europe on 16 February, three people were killed on 17 February when, as part of a mob, they tried to storm the Israeli Consulate in Berlin and were shot dead. The rumour of MOSSAD’s involvement in Ocalan’s capture remains part of the PKK’s story. Many years later, Ocalan would maintain that Israel had been part of the conspiracy, hatched in London, to bring him down. See: Cohen, R., ‘3 Kurds Shot Dead By Israeli Guards At Berlin Protest’, *The New York Times*, 18 February 1999, available at: www.nytimes.com/1999/02/18/world/3-kurds-shot-dead-by-israeli-guards-at-berlin-protest.html, last visited: 2 August 2017; Ocalan, A., *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century*.

⁵⁹ Tran, M., ‘Kurdish rebels withdraw from Turkey’, *The Guardian*, 25 August 1999, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/aug/25/kurds.marktran>, last visited: 23 July 2017.

⁶⁰ Unal, M.C., ‘The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and popular support: counterterrorism towards an insurgency nature’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 11 June 2012.

⁶¹ Whiteside, C., ‘The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 5 August 2016, available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208287, last visited: 1 August 2017.

PKK also made adjustments that helped reduce the Kurdish resistance – such as Ocalan publicly condemning the attacks on villages with guards, even if it did not change policy – and adoption of political tactics, alongside its military campaign, was significant.

1.5 Terror and Criminality in Europe

As the 1990s drew to a close, Western states increasingly moved to classify the PKK as a terrorist entity. Germany had already designated the PKK as a terrorist group in 1993, though the PKK's political power made it difficult to enforce the law.⁶² The US designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in October 1997. Britain added the PKK to its blacklist in March 2001.⁶³ The 9/11 attacks created further pressure for states and institutions to clarify their positions with regard to terrorism. The European Union and NATO added the PKK to their terrorism lists in 2002.

These designations were not just in solidarity with Turkey. Western tourists have been kidnapped⁶⁴ and killed⁶⁵ by the PKK in Turkey. Moreover, the PKK has used the West as a means to survive, building an infrastructure in Europe, beginning in 1981, to generate revenue and political support for its insurgency in ways that frequently defy the law. This apparatus is also used for terrorism inside Europe when the PKK feels this is in its interests. The first head of the PKK's European wing, Cetin Gungor (Semir), ran afoul of the PKK when he advocated for internal democracy; he was assassinated by the PKK in Sweden in November 1985 after fleeing through three countries.⁶⁶ In 2007, more than 90% of the terrorist attacks in Germany were carried out by the PKK.⁶⁷ There are continued efforts to murder Kurdish dissidents, as well as lower-level violent attacks like arson against perceived enemies.⁶⁸ In 2017, PKK attacks, some with explosives, occurred in Belgium, France and Germany. One single case of arson cost €2 million. Street-level criminality is ongoing, including stabbings.⁶⁹

⁶² 'Gabriel calls for the right to visit Incirlik', *Spiegel Online*, 4 June 2017, available at: www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/tuerkei-sigmar-gabriel-fordert-besuchsrecht-fuer-incirlik-a-1150659.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁶³ 'Proscribed Terrorist Organisations', *British Home Office*, 3 May 2017, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612076/20170503_Proscription.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁶⁴ 'Kurdish Rebels Free 2 Foreign Hostages', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 November 1993, available at: articles.latimes.com/1993-11-20/news/mn-58859_1_foreign-hostages, last visited: 2 August 2017; 'Kurdish rebels kidnap Italian, Swiss tourists', UPI, 21 August 1993, available at: www.upi.com/Archives/1993/08/21/Kurdish-rebels-kidnap-Italian-Swiss-tourists PARA-yilxrit-yibgrit/8932745905600/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁶⁵ Irvine, C., 'British family win £1m terrorism compensation from Turkey', *The Telegraph*, 1 October 2009, available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/6248608/British-family-win-1m-terrorism-compensation-from-Turkey.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁶⁶ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 89-94.

⁶⁷ Freedman, B. and M. Levitt, 'Contending with the PKK's Narco-Terrorism', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 8 December 2009, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/contending-with-the-pkks-narco-terrorism, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁶⁸ 'EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2013', *EUROPOL*, available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/138851274/EU-Terrorism-Situation-and-Trend-Report-2013>, last visited: 6 August 2017.

⁶⁹ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report', *EUROPOL*, 15 June 2017, available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/2017-eu-terrorism-report-142-failed-foiled-and-completed-attacks-1002-arrests-and-142-victims-died>, last visited: 2 August 2017, p. 39.

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The PKK's money-making apparatus in Europe centres upon organised crime. Terrorist groups generally have similar interests to organised criminals, especially with regard to their need to operate in secret and in defiance of the laws of the state to raise money and acquire arms. Thus, it is little surprise that drugs, people trafficking and money laundering so frequently show up as primary revenue streams for terrorist organisations, from jihadist groups like the Taliban⁷⁰ and Lebanese Hizballah,⁷¹ to groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Shining Path in Peru. The PKK has instrumentalised the Kurdish diaspora as a support network, both to operate its overseas networks and as a source of revenue.⁷² The PKK imposed a “revolutionary tax”, better understood as extortion, since, while there were undoubtedly many Kurds in Europe supportive of the PKK, the money was extracted when necessary under the threat of property damage, kidnapping, torture and murder.⁷³

There is some academic dispute about how to classify the PKK, as a transnational criminal syndicate or a political-terrorist organisation,⁷⁴ because there is minimal distinction between the PKK's criminal and terrorist activities.⁷⁵ The PKK's annual revenue from its European wing is estimated at between \$50 million (£39 million) and \$100 million (£78 million).⁷⁶ About a fifth of the PKK's revenue is raised in semi-legal ways, through a vast web of approximately 400 front-organisations, half of which are in Germany, with the remainder in Austria, Belgium, Britain, Greece, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. The PKK also has an enormous propaganda-recruitment network in Europe, covering everything from publishing houses to newspapers such as *Yeni Özgür Politika* in Germany, to radio stations and satellite television channels, notably Roj TV (successor to the British-licensed Med TV) in Denmark and Firat News Agency in the Netherlands.⁷⁷

Money from narcotics is the largest individual part of the PKK's income. Some assess the organisation's profiteering from illegal drugs as indirect: Kurds from Turkey were primary movers of heroin from Iran through Turkey to Europe, where their ethnic kin were distributors, and some of them happened to be PKK supporters who donated money to the party.⁷⁸ However, evidence now suggests that the PKK is involved in the criminal drugs

⁷⁰ Peters, G., ‘How Opium Profits the Taliban’, *United States Institute of Peace*, August 2009, available at: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/taliban_opium_1.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁷¹ Levitt, M., ‘Hezbollah: Party of Fraud’, *Foreign Affairs*, 27 July 2011, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-07-27/hezbollah-party-fraud>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁷² Sozer, M. ‘The PKK and its evolution in Britain (1984–present)’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 7 July 2016, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2016.1194269>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁷³ Eager, P. W., *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence* (Routledge, 2008), p. 175.

⁷⁴ Roth, M. P. and M. Sever, ‘The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2007, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100701558620>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁷⁵ Author conversation with former US counter-intelligence officer, 14 February 2017.

⁷⁶ Onay, A., ‘PKK Criminal Networks and Fronts in Europe’, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 February 2008, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/pkk-criminal-networks-and-fronts-in-europe, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York University Press, 2007), p. 184.

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trade at every stage: from raw production in Pakistan to distillation in their mountain bases in Iraq to distribution on European streets.⁷⁹ In the late 1990s, British intelligence believed that the PKK was responsible for 40% of the heroin that entered the European Union.⁸⁰ The US Treasury Department has named the PKK a significant foreign narcotics trafficker.⁸¹ Senior PKK officials – its de facto leader between 1999 and 2013 Murat Karayilan (Cemal), its head of foreign relations Ali Riza Altun, and the leader of its political operations in Europe Zübeyir Aydar – have been designated as “significant foreign narcotics traffickers”.⁸² As late as 2012, the PKK was sanctioned by the US for the manufacture and distribution of opioids and cannabis via networks in Moldova and Romania.⁸³

Human trafficking was assessed by the NATO Reinforced Economic Committee in the mid-2000s to be the second-most lucrative revenue stream for the PKK.⁸⁴ The PKK’s trafficking in people includes recruiting Europeans, sometimes forcibly and including children, to fight for their insurgency in Turkey. By 1998, the PKK had 3,000 child soldiers in its ranks, of whom 10% were girls,⁸⁵ and this has continued in Syria.⁸⁶ The PKK’s human trafficking involves charging a fee to enable illegal migration into Europe, and sometimes exploiting the tenuous condition of such people to recruit them as fighters.⁸⁷

Money laundering and the counterfeiting of currency are also important sources of financial income for the PKK.⁸⁸ In addition to trafficking narcotics and human beings, the PKK raises money by smuggling more mundane items such as tea and cigarettes,⁸⁹ even

⁷⁹ Onay, A., ‘PKK Criminal Networks and Fronts in Europe’, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 February 2008.

⁸⁰ ‘A Kurd Too Far’, *The Spectator*, 28 November 1998, available at: archive.spectator.co.uk/article/28th-november-1998/17/a-kurd-too-far, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸¹ ‘Recent OFAC Actions’, *U.S. Department of The Treasury*, 30 May 2008, available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/pages/20080530.aspx>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸² ‘Treasury Designates Three Leaders of the Kongra-Gel as Significant Foreign Narcotics Traffickers’, *U.S. Department of The Treasury*, 14 October 2009, available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg318.aspx>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸³ The Moldova network was led by Zeyneddin Geleri, a “high-ranking member of the PKK”. One of his sanctioned associates was Cerkez Akbulut (Cernit Murat), an activist and PKK “tax”-collector who had been targeted by the local police for trying to transport a consignment of heroin worth \$8.8 million. The other associate was Omer Boztepe, a fugitive PKK operative wanted on narcotics charges. Zeyneddin Geleri was also connected to Omer Geleri, the fourth man sanctioned, who was based in Romania and linked with three designated companies. See: ‘Treasury Sanctions Supporters of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) Tied to Drug Trafficking in Europe’, *U.S. Department of The Treasury*, 1 February 2012, available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1406.aspx>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸⁴ Onay, A., ‘PKK Criminal Networks and Fronts in Europe’, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 February 2008.

⁸⁵ Cinar, B., ‘Human Trafficking is used for Recruiting Terrorists’, *Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking*, October 2010, available at: digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=humtrafconf2, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸⁶ ‘Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban’, *Human Rights Watch*, 15 July 2015, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/10/syria-kurdish-forces-violating-child-soldier-ban-0>, last visited: 2 August 2017; ‘Forcible recruitments and the deployment of child soldiers by the Democratic Union Party in Syria’, *KurdWatch*, May 2015, available at: www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_A010_en_Zwangsrekrutierung.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸⁷ ‘The Nexus Among Terrorists, Narcotics Traffickers, Weapons Proliferators, And Organized Crime Networks In Western Europe’, *Library of Congress (U.S. Federal Government)*, December 2002, available at: https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/WestEurope_NEXUS.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁸⁸ Roth, M. P. and M. Sever, ‘The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2007.

⁸⁹ Kazandioğlu, Y. and N. Tas, ‘Turkish security forces strike at PKK smuggling income’, *Anadolu Agency*, 23 May 2016, available at: aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/turkish-security-forces-strike-at-pkk-smuggling-income/577078, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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if the extent is exaggerated by the Turkish government.⁹⁰ Among the primary purposes of the funds generated by the PKK is to purchase weaponry, which axiomatically has to be done on the black market, sometimes in collusion with operatives close to hostile foreign intelligence agencies.⁹¹

The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), the body charged with combating organised crime, assessed in 2016 that the PKK's fundraising in Europe had increased and the proceeds had been used "to fund the group's armed wing HPG (Hezen Parastina Gel, People's Defence Forces) as well as the group's counterpart in Syria, the PYD (Democratic Union Party), and its armed wing YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, People's Protection Units)".⁹²

⁹⁰ 'Cigarette smuggling biggest source of income for PKK', *The Daily Sabah*, 26 September 2015, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/investigations/2015/09/26/cigarette-smuggling-biggest-source-of-income-for-pkk>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁹¹ 'US embassy cables: Russia is virtual "mafia state"', *The Guardian*, 2 December 2010.

⁹² 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2016', *EUROPOL*, 1 December 2016, available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2016>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

2. The PKK's Transition to a Confederal Model

2.1 Branching Out

The 2003 invasion of Iraq would provide some respite for the PKK. As the space shrank for Ocalan and the PKK in Turkey and Syria, it was opening up in Iraq. An unintended side effect of Anglo-American no-fly zones that protected Iraqi Kurdistan after 1991 was protection for the PKK in the Qandil Mountains, and the removal of Saddam Husayn consolidated Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and simultaneously secured the PKK's operational space. Assessing this new environment, the PKK understood that resetting its negative political trajectory required some dissociation from its old brand so that it could appear more local and "nationalist" in the Kurdish-majority zones outside Turkey, and circumvent the terrorist designation and connotation in the War on Terror era.

The PKK's rebrand had already begun by the time Baghdad fell to US-led coalition forces in April 2003. Officially, it had renamed itself the Freedom and Democracy Congress of Kurdistan (KADEK) at its Eighth Congress in April 2002. Shortly afterwards, it began experimentation with a "confederal model", setting up its first local vehicle, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK), to participate in Iraqi Kurdish politics. In time, there was a stated change in ideology, away from Marxist–Leninism to an ideology known as "Democratic Confederalism", a confection of anarchistic and ecological ideas, combined with direct democracy in a stateless framework.⁹³

The power of the local Iraqi Kurdish factions ensured that the PCDK remained marginal, but the idea took hold. In October 2003, the PKK set up the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. Ocalan's brother Osman claims to have personally established the PYD in the Qandil Mountains. The decision not to use the word "Kurdish" or "Kurdistan" in the name was driven by a desire not to antagonise the Assad government. Though the Syrian regime had publicly expelled the PKK and reduced some of the group's military foothold in Syria, the eviction was far from total. The remnants were simply rebranded as the PYD. After the Kurdish anti-regime riots in Qamishli in March 2004, the PKK even formally re-established a military presence in Syria, though once again eschewed any ethnic marker when naming its paramilitaries – the People's Protection Units or YPG – and kept this force hidden until 2012.⁹⁴ Though the Assad regime intermittently

⁹³ The PKK had dropped its demand for independence after Ocalan was imprisoned, but continued with demands for autonomy. In March 2005, Ocalan issued a notice renouncing claims to the nation state altogether. Ocalan wrote his doctrine, composed after exchanges with the American communist-turned-anarchist Murray Bookchin, in a 2011 pamphlet. See: Ocalan, A., 'Democratic Confederalism', 2011, available at: <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

⁹⁴ Gold, D., 'Meet the YPG, the Kurdish Militia That Doesn't Want Help from Anyone', *Vice News*, 31 October 2012, available at: https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/yv5e75/meet-the-ypg, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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cracked down on the PYD between 2003 and 2011, as it did with IS in the same period,⁹⁵ the PKK's activities were allowed to carry on in their essentials inside Syria.⁹⁶ In 2010, Fuat Omar was succeeded as the public leader of the PYD by Saleh Muslim Muhammad, a PKK activist who had spent some time in Assad's prisons and at this time withdrew to the PKK's camps in the Qandil Mountains.⁹⁷ The regime allowed Saleh Muslim to return to Syria in April 2011, an action compared by one scholar – in light of the PYD/PKK's subsequent role in dividing and weakening the anti-Assad opposition and its external backers – to the German General Staff arranging Lenin's train ride into Saint Petersburg at the key moment in 1917 to disorient and defeat its foes.⁹⁸

Syria was not the only country in which the PKK expanded. The PKK created the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) to operate in Iran in 2004. "Eastern Kurdistan", the area of north-western Iran with a Kurdish majority, has a special hold on the imagination of Kurdish irredentists because it was the site of the Republic of Mahabad, the second short-lived Kurdish state in the post-Ottoman era.⁹⁹ Unlike the PYD/YPG, which remained politically operational for several years before exposing its military activity, the PJAK began its armed campaign publicly within a year of its announcement, and has proven – not least because of its shelter on the Iraqi side of the Qandil Mountains – the most formidable of the Iranian Kurdish insurgent groups when it chooses to confront the

⁹⁵ The Assad regime underwrote the operations of the IS movement in Iraq from its arrival there in 2002, facilitated the foreign fighter networks that ran across its territory and supplied the majority of the suicide bombers to IS during the American regency in Iraq. A vast IS infrastructure, overseen by Assad's military-intelligence apparatus, had existed in eastern Syria for nearly a decade by the time the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011. In line with one of Assad's policy goals in backing IS in the first place, to export an internal security problem, occasionally the regime acted against IS – arresting certain operatives for varying amounts of time, for example, and even some shootouts with especially intransigent jihadists. For an overview, see: Lister, C., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Hurst, 2015), pp. 37-47.

⁹⁶ Tayiz, K., 'The PKK's cross-relations', *The Daily Sabah*, 27 August 2015, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/2015/08/27/the-pkks-cross-relations>, last visited: 2 August 2017; Yahya, H., 'The PYD & the PKK: two sides of a coin', *The Hill*, 10 May 2016, available at: thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/279169-the-pyd-the-pkk-two-sides-of-a-coin, last visited: 2 August 2017; Gunter, M. M., *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (Hurst, 2014), pp. 40-42.

⁹⁷ Gunter, M. M., *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (Hurst, 2014), p. 42.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹⁹ The first post-Ottoman Kurdish state was formed as an autonomous zone, an *uzeyd*, within Soviet Azerbaijan in 1923. The entity, known variously as Kurdistansky Uyezdy or "Red Kurdistan", was kept within the borders of Azerbaijan and not given full status as a republic within the Soviet Union in order not to antagonise the new Ataturkist government in Turkey. The *uzeyd* was downgraded to an *okrug* (district), the lowest territorial designation available, in 1929, and the entity was dissolved in 1930. In 1937, the Kurds in Azerbaijan were deported to Kazakhstan by Joseph Stalin, and the Kurds in nearby Georgia were deported in 1944. (See: Kreyenbroek, P. G. & S. Sperl, *Kurds: A Contemporary Overview* (Routledge, 1992), p. 160.) Britain and the Soviet Union jointly invaded Iran in August 1941, toppling the monarch, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had claimed neutrality in the Second World War, refusing to open his country up for Allied supply lines and refusing to terminate the Nazi diplomatic presence in Iran. Pahlavi was replaced by his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the man remembered to most Westerners as "the Shah", who was overthrown by the Islamic revolution in 1979. The Soviets occupied northern Iran and the British the south. The Soviets had undertaken to withdraw from Iran at the end of the war, and the Mahabad state was a last-ditch effort to renege on that promise. The state lasted only between January and December 1946.

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Islamic Republic.¹⁰⁰ A ceasefire was put in place between the PJAK and Iran in September 2011, though sporadic clashes have occurred since April 2016.

In 2004, as the 1999 ceasefire with Turkey unravelled, the PKK created the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), a special forces unit which conducts its most atrocious mass-casualty attacks on civilians in the west of the country. The YPG-held areas have provided a logistical and training support base for the TAK. The arm's length nature of the TAK's relations with the PKK¹⁰¹ allows the PKK to continue to gain international legitimacy through the YPG and the anti-IS fight, while avoiding the political and reputational price for attacks against civilians. At the same time, the PKK still gains the military benefits of the TAK's atrocities by drawing Turkish military resources away from the counter-insurgency efforts in the east, and gains politically by using the TAK in two senses as a foil. First and publicly, the PKK presents itself as incapable of controlling the brash, angry youngsters of the TAK, and suggests that a settlement of the underlying issues in a way that legitimates and empowers the PKK "moderates" will undercut the TAK "extremists". Privately and more short term, the PKK can use its control of the TAK to pressurise the Turkish state by holding out the prospect of restraining the TAK in exchange for concessions.¹⁰²

It is important to note that the PYD, PJAK and PCDK are not "affiliates" or "branches" or "sister groups" of the PKK; they are not "linked to" or "close to" or "an offshoot of" the PKK. In 2005 the PKK had set up the Council of Associations of Kurdistan (*Koma Komalên Kurdistan*, KKK) to gather the PKK, PYD, PJAK and PCDK under a unitary chain of command, and issued a founding statement, the "Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan", which laid out the PKK's ostensible break from its Leninist founding.¹⁰³ At the May 2007 Congress, the KKK was superseded by the Kurdistan Communities' Union (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK). Accordingly, the PYD, PJAK and

¹⁰⁰ Zambelis, C., 'The Factors Behind Rebellion In Iranian Kurdistan', *CTC Sentinel*, 1 March 2011, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-factors-behind-rebellion-in-iranian-kurdistan>, last visited: 2 August 2017; Milburn, F., 'Iranian Kurdish Militias: Terrorist-Insurgents, Ethno Freedom Fighters, Or Knights on the Regional Chessboard?', *CTC Sentinel*, 4 May 2017, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/iranian-kurdish-militias-terrorist-insurgents-ethno-freedom-fighters-or-knights-on-the-regional-chessboard>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁰¹ Fehman Husayn, a KCK executive born in Kobani, is one of the most hard-line actors within the PKK and is believed to have – or to have had – operational control of the TAK. KCK/PKK leader Cemil Bayik and Duran Kalkan (Selahattin Abbas), another KCK executive, had key roles in setting up the TAK.

¹⁰² Geerdink, F., 'Ankara bombing: PKK, TAK ties come under scrutiny again', *Middle East Eye*, 12 December 2016, available at: www.middleeasteye.net/columns/after-ankara-bombing-questions-over-pkk-tak-ties-resurface-1097219220, last visited: 2 August 2017; Cagaptay, S., 'Leadership reshuffle – PKK makes changes in its ranks', *IHS Jane's*, 26 February 2014, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Cagaptay20140226-Janes.pdf>, last visited: 2 August 2017; Gurcan, M., 'The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arm's-Length Proxy of the Kurdistan Workers' Party', *CTC Sentinel*, 27 July 2016, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-kurdistan-freedom-falcons-a-profile-of-the-arms-length-proxy-of-the-kurdistan-workers-party>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁰³ Enzima, W., 'A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard', *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 November 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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PCDK are organic components of a transnational PKK structure, officially embodied in the KCK, under the supreme authority of Abdullah Ocalan.

As explained by NATO's Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism:

The PKK's relationship with its affiliates is ... one of an inseparable strategic leadership body exercising direct command and control over only nominally distinguishable units. ... Like a shell game, the PKK leadership in Qandil 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 truly has no affiliates, rather three fronts and three names consisting of the same personalities, leadership, ideology, and history of terrorism.¹⁰⁴

Reflecting this analysis, in 2009 the US Treasury designated the PJAK "for being controlled by the terrorist group Kongra-Gel (KGG, a.k.a. the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK)".¹⁰⁵ The PKK had delegated certain Iranian-Kurdish members to set up the PJAK, which "would portray itself as independent from but allied with" the PKK. "PJAK was created to appeal to Iranian Kurds," the Treasury explained, but the PKK leadership "controlled PJAK and allocated personnel to the group".¹⁰⁶

2.2 The PKK and the Syrian War

In March 2011, peaceful street protests began in Syria against the government. Initially, the protest movement called for reforms to limit corruption and improve the economic situation; after Assad responded with lethal force, the people demanded the downfall of the regime.

The Assad government responded to the protests by seeking to ensure that the Kurds stayed out of the nascent uprising and to prevent a united Arab-Kurdish front from forming against the government. In April 2011, Assad granted citizenship to 120,000 Syrian Kurds the regime had heretofore kept stateless.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Ferris, J. and A. Self, 'Dead Men Tell No Lies: Using Martyr Data to Expose the PKK's Regional Shell Game', *NATO's Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism*, 5 May 2015, available at: <https://imes.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/imes.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/documents/Capstone-Papers-2015/Ferris%20Self%20Capstone%20Final%20Draft.pdf>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁰⁵ 'Treasury Designates Free Life Party of Kurdistan a Terrorist Organization', *U.S. Department of The Treasury*, 4 February 2009, available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg14.aspx>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁰⁶ The designation of the PJAK was also part of the early outreach to the Iranian regime by the new Obama administration and a refutation of the claim by Tehran that the US was colluding with the PJAK, an accusation bolstered by the visit of PJAK leader Abdurrahman Haj Ahmadi to Washington, DC, in the summer of 2007. See: Zambelis, C., 'The Factors Behind Rebellion In Iranian Kurdistan', *CTC Sentinel*, 1 March 2011, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-factors-behind-rebellion-in-iranian-kurdistan>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁰⁷ 'Syria's Assad grants nationality to Hasaka Kurds', *BBC News*, 7 April 2011, available at: www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12995174, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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From the outset, the PKK has retained a largely conciliatory posture towards its old patron in Damascus. Early in the crisis, the PYD attacked anti-Assad and anti-PKK Kurdish demonstrations, becoming known as “the Shabiha of the Kurds”, in reference to the paramilitary squads that terrorized protesters in Arab areas of Syria.¹⁰⁸ Politically, the PYD signed up to the National Coordination Body (NCB), a part of the “internal opposition” or “pro-Damascus opposition”,¹⁰⁹ which advocates against Assad’s removal and is widely believed to be an instrument of the regime’s intelligence services. The NCB is dominated by Arab nationalists, who reject any kind of autonomous solution for Syria, the central demand of the PYD. The PYD explained its sign-up to the NCB as one of agreement with the NCB principle of limiting the influence of foreign powers, the United States and her allies particularly, inside Syria.¹¹⁰

A wave of assassinations against anti-PYD, pro-revolutionary Kurdish leaders in late 2011 and 2012,¹¹¹ Mishal Tammo the most prominent,¹¹² and the PYD’s attacks on the insurgency as it sought to capture regime bases in Ras al-Ayn in November 2012 entrenched the view that the PYD was an extension of the regime.¹¹³

Though hard evidence of a direct agreement is lacking, three further events suggest a re-engagement of the PKK with the Iran–Assad axis against Turkey, the Gulf states and the West. First, in September 2011, the PJAK implemented a unilateral ceasefire with the Iranian regime, then moved most of its assets into Syria. Then, at the PKK’s Ninth Congress in July 2013, Murat Karayilan, a renowned military leader but known to be more open to compromise and in favour of a more decentralised approach for the PKK’s various national departments, was replaced as KCK executive by more Iran/Assad-friendly, Turkey-centric radicals, Cemil Bayik and Bese Hozat (Hulya Oran). Bayik is known to be close to VEVAK.¹¹⁴ One of Bayik’s deputies was Fehman Husayn (Bahoz Erdal), a long-standing PKK commander of Syrian origins with extensive ties to Assad’s

¹⁰⁸ ‘Kurds see increasing influence in Middle East’, *Deutsche Welle*, 16 August 2012, available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/kurds-see-increasing-influence-in-middle-east/a-16170388>, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹⁰⁹ “‘Internal Opposition’ Suggests Team to Redraft Syrian Constitution”, *Enab Baladi*, 7 May 2016, available at: syrianobserver.com/EN/News/30670, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹¹⁰ Lund, A., ‘A Rift in the National Coordination Body’, *Carnegie*, 31 January 2014, available at: carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54381?lang=en, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹¹¹ ‘The Kurdish Democratic Union Party’, *Carnegie*, 1 March 2012, available at: carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48526, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹² ‘Assad ordered killing of Kurdish activist Mashaal Tammo: Leaked files’, *Al-Arabiya*, 10 October 2012, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/10/10/242928.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹³ Amos, D., ‘In One Corner Of Syria, A Rebel Victory Results In Friction’, *National Public Radio* (NPR), 26 November 2012, available at: www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/11/26/165917900/in-one-corner-of-syria-a-rebel-victory-results-in-friction, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹⁴ Unal, C., ‘A New PKK Through Regional Perspective’, *Strategy On Blog*, 17 June 2014, available at: strategyonblog.blogspot.ie/2014/06/a-new-pkk-through-regionalperspective.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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intelligence services.¹¹⁵ Finally, in July 2012 the Assad regime withdrew from large swathes of Kurdish-majority territory in a manner that was deeply suggestive of coordination between the PYD/PKK and Assad/Iran.¹¹⁶

As the regime pulled back from northern Syria, it crippled the leadership of Kurdish parties such as Tammo's Future Movement and the Kurdish Union (Yekiti) Party that had combined with the Arab opposition, and left large stocks of weaponry that were picked up by the PYD as it seized control of these vacated zones. The regime's decision to take steps which led to the PYD's improved position was intended to keep the Kurdish areas out of the rebellion and to sow discord among Assad's enemies. It succeeded.¹¹⁷ The PYD's territorial control created an immediate problem for Turkey, which was now diverted away from solely focusing on backing rebels to guarding against a PKK terrorist base on its border. As a result, the Syrian opposition found not only that one of its most important backers was partially distracted, but that it, too, was now sidetracked and had resources drained by clashes with the PYD. The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) bolstered its pre-existing ties with Kurdish opposition parties and began providing training to Syrian Kurds as a post-Assad stabilisation force.¹¹⁸ The PYD has ensured that no KRG-trained Kurds are allowed back into Syria. Most observers at the time concurred with the Turkish Foreign Minister's assessment that "the Syrian regime has handed over the region to the PKK".¹¹⁹

Once the regime forces vacated northern Syria, the PYD used its long-standing advantages because of its alliance with the regime to monopolise power.¹²⁰ The offices of independent Kurdish political groups were destroyed, journalists were suppressed, and opposition activists and politicians were kidnapped,¹²¹ tortured, and killed.¹²² Some

¹¹⁵ Cagaptay, S., 'Leadership reshuffle – PKK makes changes in its ranks', *IHS Jane's*, 26 February 2014, available at:

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Cagaptay20140226-Janes.pdf>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹⁶ 'The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria', *International Crisis Group*, 4 May 2017, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/176-pkk-s-fateful-choice-northern-syria>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹⁷ 'Caves, J., *Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 6 December 2012.

¹¹⁸ 'Miller, E., 'Syrian Kurds "training in Iraq for the day after Assad"', *The Times of Israel*, 30 March 2012, available at: www.timesofisrael.com/syrian-kurds-train-in-iraq-for-the-day-after-assad/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹¹⁹ 'Ankara: Assad leaves Turkish border to Kurds', *Hurriyet*, 25 July 2012, available at: www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/ankara-assad-leaves-turkish-border-to-kurds.aspx?pageID=238&nID=26287&NewsCatID=338, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹²⁰ 'Tanir, I., Wilgenburg, W.V., Hossino, O., 'Unity or PYD Power Play? Syrian Kurdish Dynamics After the Erbil Agreement', *The Henry Jackson Society*, 15 October 2012, available at: henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/HJS_Unity-or-PYD-Power-Play_-Report.pdf, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹²¹ For example, about 150 people were arrested in 2013 and roughly 100 in 2014, according to lists of dissidents persecuted by the PYD provided to author by Kurdish activists, May 2017

¹²² Nasreddin Birhek and Kawa Khaled Hussein are prominent cases. There is also Bahzed Dorsen, who disappeared in 2012 and has not been heard of since. See: 'Aleppo: Nasruddin Birhik succumbs to his injuries following assassination attempt', *KurdWatch*, 24 February 2012, available at: kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2464&z=en, last visited: 22 July 2017; 'Kurdish activist detained by the PYD, found dead near Afrin', *ARA News*, 3 October 2013, available at: aranews.net/2013/10/kurdish-activist-kidnapped-by-pyd-found-dead-near-afrin/, last visited: 22 July 2017; 'Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria', *Human Rights Watch*, 18 June 2014, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>, last visited: 22 July 2017.

Kurdish oppositionists call the PYD the “Kurdistan Ba’ath Party”,¹²³ and indeed the PYD has inherited a state structure nearly wholesale from Assad’s Ba’ath regime, upon which it remains deeply dependent and with which it is deeply integrated.¹²⁴ The nature of the YPG/PYD’s leadership is the reason for this: the PKK fundamentally continues to regard Syria as a springboard for its main battle with Turkey, and thus has little will to invest in building a durable governance apparatus for the benefit of Syrians. This denies the PYD/YPG wide-scale legitimacy from the population and necessitates a militarized form of government and abuses of human and political rights in order to maintain control. The U.S.’s support in the anti-IS campaign has reinforced this dynamic by bolstering the Turkey-centric PKK military cadres, making the more localist, Syrian-centric civilian administrators even more dependent on these commanders. The PKK has no desire to change this. As it captured more and more territory and faced attrition, rather than empower local recruits, it has imported “Qandilians”, the PKK operatives trained over the decades at the camps in the Qandil Mountains, many of them Turks or Iranians, to ensure the PKK maintains ideological unity and absolute command and control.¹²⁵

2.3 Allying With the American-led Coalition

The stated policy of the US since August 2011 has been that Syria’s ruler, Bashar al-Assad, should “step aside”.¹²⁶ In 2012, the US put into operation a covert programme, Operation TIMBER SYCAMORE, which provided non-lethal support to the Syrian opposition.¹²⁷ After the Assad regime launched a massive attack on the Ghuta suburbs of Damascus with chemical weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) on 21 August 2013, the Central Intelligence Agency began to supply the Syrian opposition with weapons – the authorisation having been issued two months before in response to previous CWMD attacks by the regime.¹²⁸ The US never provided resources on a level where it could alter battlefield dynamics,¹²⁹ and mostly agreed to the covert programme as a means of controlling the flow of weaponry from its allies to the opposition, specifically to deny the rebels access to anti-aircraft equipment.

¹²³ ‘Kurds and the Revolution of Dignity’, *YouTube*, 16 March 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkMOAejS3Bs>, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹²⁴ Khaddour, K., ‘How Regional Security Concerns Uniquely Constrain Governance in Northeastern Syria’, *Carnegie*, 23 March 2017, available at: [carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/23/how-regional-security-concerns-uniquely-constrain-governance-in-northeastern-syria-pub-68380](https://www.carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/23/how-regional-security-concerns-uniquely-constrain-governance-in-northeastern-syria-pub-68380), last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹²⁵ ‘The PKK’s Fateful Choice in Northern Syria’, *The International Crisis Group*, 4 May 2017.

¹²⁶ Phillips, M., ‘President Obama: “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way”’, *The White House*, 18 August 2011, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹²⁷ Labott, E., ‘Obama authorize covert support for Syrian rebels, sources say’, *CNN*, 2 August 2012, available at: edition.cnn.com/2012/08/01/us/syria-rebels-us-aid/index.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹²⁸ Londoño, E. and G. Miller, ‘CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian rebels’, *The Washington Post*, 11 September 2013, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹²⁹ Lister, C., ‘The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand’, *Brookings Institution*, November 2016, available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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In September 2014, an international coalition led by the United States intervened in Syria – against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda,¹³⁰ having pre-warned the Assad regime – via Iran – that it was off limits.¹³¹ IS continued to advance, despite the airstrikes from the Coalition, and concentrated on the YPG-held Kurdish-majority town of Kobani (or Ayn al-Arab) in northern Syria. After some initial hesitancy, the battle for the town became an international spectacle.¹³² Within days, the US began airdropping weapons to the YPG, which held the town, and provided more than 700 airstrikes over three months, three-quarters of all US airstrikes in Syria, until the Kobani siege was broken.¹³³

In May 2014, President Barack Obama announced an overt train-and-equip (T&E) programme for the Syrian opposition.¹³⁴ It did not begin for a year,¹³⁵ by which time the best candidates had been eliminated.¹³⁶ Even had it been activated more promptly, the programme design made success impossible. President Obama said the T&E programme would support “the best alternative to terrorists and brutal dictators”. It transpired the programme was only intended against IS, which made it politically and practically impossible for most Syrian rebels.¹³⁷ The T&E programme duly collapsed on impact with Syria’s reality in the summer and autumn of 2015.¹³⁸ The programme was formally

¹³⁰ ‘Syria: US begins air strikes on Islamic State targets’, *BBC News*, 23 September 2014, available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29321136, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³¹ Hafezi, P., L. Charbonneau and A. Mohammed, ‘Exclusive: U.S. told Iran of intent to strike Islamic State in Syria – source’, *Reuters*, 23 September 2014, available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa-iran-idUSKCN0HI2F220140923, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³² The US public posture on 8 October 2014 was expressed by Secretary of State John Kerry: the US “strategic objective” was to target “the command and control centers, the infrastructure” of IS to “deprive [it] of the overall ability to wage [war]”, and that objective was achievable even if Kobani fell to IS, “horrific as it is to watch in real time”. By 20 October, Kerry had reversed himself. “It is a crisis moment, an emergency where we clearly do not want to see Kobani become a horrible example of the unwillingness of people to be able to help those who are fighting ISIL,” Kerry said. Kobani was now a “prize” and letting it fall would be “irresponsible”. See: ‘U.S.’s Kerry hints Kobani not strategic goal, buffer zone merits study’, *Reuters*, 8 October 2014, available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-kerry-idUKKCN0HX1TG20141008, last visited: 2 August 2017; ‘Turkey to let Iraqi Kurds reinforce Kobani as U.S. drops arms to defenders’, *Reuters*, 20 October 2014, available at: www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-turkey-iraq-idINKCN0I90WX20141020, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³³ Weiss, M. and H. Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Updated Edition) (Regan Arts, 2016), pp. 261-264.

¹³⁴ ‘Full transcript of President Obama’s commencement address at West Point’, *The Washington Post*, 28 May 2014, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/full-text-of-president-obamas-commencement-address-at-west-point/2014/05/28/cfbcdcaae670-11e3-afc6-a1dd9407abcf_story.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³⁵ ‘Turkey, U.S. to start train-and-equip plan for Syria rebels May 9 – Turkey’, *Reuters*, 2 May 2015, available at: www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-training-idAFKBN0NN0EV20150502, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³⁶ Sensing a threat, Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch, moved to pre-empt the US by eradicating the most powerful, Western-aligned rebel groups – and the US did nothing. The rebel groups’ request for additional support so they could combat al-Qaeda, made in the summer of 2014, had already been denied, and the parsimony of the ammunition supplies meant some were supplied with an average of 16 bullets per month each. See: Entous, A., ‘Covert CIA Mission to Arm Syrian Rebels Goes Awry’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 January 2015, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³⁷ Hamidi, I., ‘Syrian Opposition Fighters Withdraw from US “Train and Equip” Program’, *Al-Hayat*, 22 June 2015, available at: syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29382/Syrian_Opposition_Fighters_Withdraw_from_US_Train_Equip_Program/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹³⁸ The US had effectively sought to create a military unit, known as Division Thirty or the New Syrian Forces, from among the rebels to fight IS. When the NSyA entered Syria, it was attacked by al-Qaeda, and the US continued to withhold serious protection. See: Shaheen, K., ‘US-trained Syrian rebels killed and leaders captured by al-Qaeda affiliate’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/31/us-trained-rebels-killed-captured-syrian-al-qaida-affiliate-nusra>, last visited: 2 August 2017; Weiss, M., ‘Did a U.S.-Trained Syrian Rebel Commander Defect to al-Qaeda?’, *The Daily Beast*, 23 September 2015, available at: www.thedailybeast.com/did-a-us-trained-syrian-rebel-commander-defect-to-al-qaeda, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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suspended in October 2015,¹³⁹ though US support to vetted anti-IS groups continued in a minimal way.¹⁴⁰ A revised T&E programme was officially reactivated in July 2016, operating mostly in southern Syria and near-exclusively against IS. Britain recommenced involvement in October 2016.¹⁴¹

By the time the T&E programme actually started in the spring of 2015, the US had essentially given up on it and thrown all its weight behind the alliance it fell into with the YPG in Kobani.¹⁴² The YPG had some innate advantages, of unity and tactical proficiency, over the rebels because they had spent three decades at war with a NATO army. The cumulative effects of US money, weapons, intelligence and a de facto no-fly zone built the YPG militia into a formidable force governing more than a fifth of Syria's territory.

2.4 The PYD Structure

The US government has, generally,¹⁴³ insisted in public that the YPG and PKK are distinct entities.¹⁴⁴ By now it is clear that the YPG leadership answers, in matters large and small, to the PKK leaders in the Qandil Mountains,¹⁴⁵ which had been the US government understanding, as expressed by the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), until 2015, when the US's alliance with the PYD/YPG was deepening as part of the anti-IS operation.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ Shear, M. D., H. Cooper and E. Schmitt, 'Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS', *The New York Times*, 9 October 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Weiss, M. and N. A. Youssef, 'Big Win Over ISIS Could Mean a New War', *The Daily Beast*, 1 June 2016, available at: www.thedailybeast.com/big-win-over-isis-could-mean-a-new-war, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁴¹ 'UK military operations in Syria and Iraq: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report', *British Parliament*, 8 March 2017, available at: <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmdfence/1065/106502.htm>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁴² Youssef, N. A., 'U.S. Sidelines Its \$500M Syrian Rebel Army', *The Daily Beast*, 11 August 2015, available at: www.thedailybeast.com/us-sidelines-its-dollar500m-syrian-rebel-army, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁴³ There have been a handful of exceptions. See: 'American Defense Secretary Ashton Carter confirms "substantial ties" between the PYD/YPG and PKK', *You Tube*, 28 April 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GUdQJle-1s>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁴⁴ For example, see the statements of the State Department in May 2016 ("[It is] our belief that the YPG is not connected to the PKK"); October 2016 ("[There is] a clear line between the PKK's operations and activities and the regional Kurdish forces [i.e. the YPG]"); and November 2016 ("We do not associate the YPG [with the PKK]"). Even after the new administration came in, in March 2017 the State Department said it "disagree[d] with ... linking the YPG with the PKK". See: 'Daily Press Briefing', U.S. Department of State, 27 May 2016, available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/05/257787.htm>, last visited: 2 August 2017; 'Daily Press Briefing', U.S. Department of State, 7 November 2016, available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/11/264175.htm>, last visited: 2 August 2017; 'Department Press Briefing', U.S. Department of State, 8 March 2017, available at: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/03/268295.htm>, last visited: 2 August 2017; 'Daily Press Briefing', U.S. Department of State, 13 October 2016, available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/10/263089.htm>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁴⁵ Author interview with a regional intelligence official, April 2017.

¹⁴⁶ Lister, C., 'U.S. Must Tell Kurds to Stop Attacking Syrian Rebels', *The New York Times*, 24 February 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/02/24/are-kurds-allies-or-obstacles-in-syria/us-must-tell-kurds-to-stop-attacking-syrian-rebels>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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The PYD/YPG hierarchy is composed of four interlinked layers. The most senior YPG officials, who rarely appear publicly, are entirely Qandilians. The next layer down, the visible YPG leadership, is composed of around 80% of PKK-trained cadres. The heads of the military brigades, the Asayish (police) and other security organs that are the backbone of governance away from the front lines are nearly half composed of Qandilians. Finally, the rank and file of the YPG and the PYD-run civil administration bodies are made up in their majority of locally recruited Kurds, though Qandilians hold the key nodes all the way down the governance network, keeping tight control over the Rojava territories, deciding on everything from budgets to the appointment of commanders to the distribution of supplies.¹⁴⁷

The 2013 reshuffle saw Bayik appointed to the overall leadership spot. He replaced Karayilan, who became the commander-in-chief of the PKK's military units (the People's Defence Forces or HPG). The HPG leader whom Karayilan replaced, Nurettin Halef al-Muhammed (Nurettin Sofi), became the leader of the YPG.¹⁴⁸

Al-Muhammed is a Syrian from Qamishli. As with the construction of PJAK, where the PKK used Iranian-origin Qandilians, the PYD/YPG was instituted with a firm base of Syrian Qandilians. By some accounts,¹⁴⁹ al-Muhammed's number-two was Ferhat Abdi Sahin (Sahin Cilo), a former commander in the HPG.¹⁵⁰ Sahin was born in Kobani. Within the leadership structure, al-Muhammed served as one of Karayilan's deputies; the other was the above-mentioned Fehman Husayn, a Syrian, who became the second-in-command of the HPG and has long been rumoured to be one of the most important power-wielders in Rojava.¹⁵¹

The executive committee of the YPG continually rotates to prevent any one person gaining too much power. In May 2015, al-Muhammed was replaced as head of the YPG by its current leader, Sabri Ok, a Kurd from Turkey who is close to Bayik and a KCK executive member.¹⁵² Another Turkish citizen, Duran Kalkan, appears to have some sway

¹⁴⁷ Author interview with a senior regional intelligence official, 27 April 2017.

¹⁴⁸ Author interview with regional intelligence official, July 2017

¹⁴⁹ Soylu, R., 'Archives, testimonies confirm PYD/YPG's organic link with PKK terror organization', *The Daily Sabah*, 19 February 2016, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/02/20/archives-testimonies-confirm-pydydpgs-organic-link-with-pkk-terror-organization>, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹⁵⁰ After Turkey launched airstrikes against YPG/PKK bases in Syria on 25 April 2017, U.S. soldiers were deployed to make a show of solidarity, and the YPG ensured that the soldiers were walking side-by-side with Sahin, one of the most-wanted men by the Turkish government, further alienating two NATO allies and bringing the U.S. ever-closer to defending an outright alliance with the PKK. See: Chulov, M. and Hawramy, F., 'Ever-closer ties between U.S. and Kurds stoke Turkish border tensions', *The Guardian*, 1 May 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/01/tensions-rise-along-the-turkey-syria-border-pkk-ypg-erdogan>, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹⁵¹ Winter, C., 'Turkey's Syrian Kurdish Dilemma', *Ekrud Daily*, 4 August 2012, available at: ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/8/turkey4072.htm, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹⁵² Author interview with regional intelligence official, July 2017

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over deployments in Syria,¹⁵³ though whether he is in the country is unclear.

Other Syrian-origin PKK commanders in Syria directing the YPG project from the shadows are: Nasr Abdallah; the governor of Hasaka Province, Lewend Rojava; Nuri Mahmud (Karwan), a recent resident in Damascus and now a senior YPG official; “Serdar Derek”; and “Taulim”. The visible YPG leaders, Ahmad Abdulqadir Abdi (Polat Can), the representative to the Coalition, and Mahmud Muhammad (Xebat Derik), and the political leadership of the PYD – Ilham Ahmed (Ronahi Efrin), Walid Fahim Khalil (Aldar Khalil), Hediya Yousef, and “Rojin Ramo” – are all PKK-trained militants.¹⁵⁴

The PKK chain of command also runs through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the formal partner organisation of the US-led anti-IS Coalition that was created as a political construct by the US in October 2015.¹⁵⁵ The SDF is theoretically a coalition between the YPG/PKK on one side and Arab, Turkoman and Christian units on the other. Most of these groups are dependencies – or by now outright proxies – of the PKK, and the independent factions that joined the SDF have been marginalised.¹⁵⁶ The US Department of Defense claims that non-YPG fighters constitute three-quarters of the SDF.¹⁵⁷ This is very likely exaggerated; it is also somewhat irrelevant. The ethnic diversity of the SDF has not altered the PKK’s political monopoly over the SDF, since all new recruits to the SDF – many of whom are Arabs – have to accede to the PKK’s political ideology.¹⁵⁸ Put simply, the policy was subverted by the PKK to provide more acceptable local administrators for its statelet, embedding the PKK’s hegemony, which the Americans intended to dilute when pressing for this policy.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ ‘PKK readying to deploy next to Syrian wing to stop FSA fight against DAESH’, *The Daily Sabah*, 30 August 2016, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/08/31/pkk-readying-to-deploy-next-to-syrian-wing-to-stop-fsa-fight-against-daesh>, last visited: 22 July 2017.

¹⁵⁴ ‘The PKK’s Fateful Choice in Northern Syria’, *The International Crisis Group*, 4 May 2017.

¹⁵⁵ Hubbard, B., ‘New U.S.-Backed Alliance to Counter ISIS in Syria Faltering’, *The New York Times*, 2 November 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/world/middleeast/new-us-backed-alliance-in-syria-exists-in-name-only.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017; ‘American General Explains Rebranding the YPG Away From the PKK’, YouTube, 22 July 2017, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVZCIel_2Xw, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Orton, K., ‘The Coalition’s Partner Against the Islamic State: The Syrian Democratic Forces’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 9 July 2017, available at: henryjacksonsociety.org/2017/07/09/the-coalitions-syrian-partner-against-islamic-state-the-syrian-democratic-forces/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Dorrian via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq’, *U.S. Department of Defense*, 15 March 2017, available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1119873/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-col-dorrian-via-teleconference-from-bag/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁵⁸ Orton, K., ‘The Coalition’s Partner Against the Islamic State: The Syrian Democratic Forces’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 9 July 2017.

¹⁵⁹ Sly, L., ‘U.S. military aid is fueling big ambitions for Syria’s leftist Kurdish militia’, *The Washington Post*, 7 January 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-military-aid-is-fueling-big-ambitions-for-syrias-leftist-kurdish-militia/2017/01/07/6e457866-c79f-11e6-acda-59924caa2450_story.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

3. The YPG Foreign Fighters

Internationally, the PYD has run a very sophisticated media outreach and brand-control campaign from political offices stretching throughout Europe to Russia and even into Saudi Arabia,¹⁶⁰ mobilising both traditional forms of media and social media to advance its cause. The PYD has highlighted two key themes in its Western outreach: the group's antagonism to the Islamic State – indeed, its opposition to all Islamists and even apolitical religious conservatives – and its promotion of universalist liberal ideas such as “women's rights, democracy, pluralism, diversity, economic justice and even environmental sustainability”.¹⁶¹

The large number of foreigners in the ranks of the YPG, especially Turks of Kurdish origin, is hardly a surprise.¹⁶² What is more surprising is that there has been a flow of recruits who are neither Kurdish nor members of the PKK. In many ways the mobilisation of a non-Kurdish foreign fighter stream to the YPG is a by-product of its international messaging – which is anti-IS, progressive, even utopian, and focused on the protection of minorities, specifically Kurds. In large measure these recruits are not considered military assets, are kept away from the front lines and are used to feed back into this international and internationalist messaging in more targeted, vernacular forms.¹⁶³ If YPG recruits strenuously insist on going to the front, they are permitted to do so. This was seen during the Minbij operation in 2016, which led to six foreign fighters being killed. A number of the other deaths are consequences of surprise raids behind the lines from the YPG's enemies.

A significant trickle of Western foreign fighters to the YPG began in the summer of 2014, though some had already journeyed to Rojava, after IS besieged Sinjar Mountain, leaving Yazidi people trapped. This was soon followed by IS's attempt to overrun the Kurdish town of Kobani in northern Syria, which became an important political contest between the nascent US-led Coalition and the jihadists. The initial wave of volunteers mostly comprised apolitical military veterans, who became known informally as the Lions of Rojava. However, the YPG would soon switch its recruitment pattern to focus on the Western extreme left, and the founding of the “Internationalist Freedom Battalions” (EOT) in June 2015 as an umbrella formation for the various communist and anarchist militants who had come to Rojava from abroad reflected this reorganisation.

¹⁶⁰ Khalidi, A., ‘PKK celebrates anniversary in Saudi city, may anger Turkey’, *Kurdistan 24*, 5 December 2016, available at: www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/57e7253f-4b8c-4bbd-ba7f-65eb0993d7d5/PKK-celebrates-anniversary-in-Saudi-city, last visited: 2 August 2017; Van Wilgenburg, W., ‘Analysis: Shift in Rhetoric Among Kurdish Politicians in Syria’, *Syria Deeply*, 14 July 2017, available at: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/07/14/analysis-shift-in-rhetoric-among-kurdish-politicians-in-syria>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶¹ Khalaf, R., ‘Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria’, *Chatham House*, December 2016, pp. 21-23, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-12-08-governing-rojava-khalaf.pdf>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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At its founding, the EOT included: the Marxist–Leninist Communist Party (MLKP), a violent communist organisation from Turkey that adheres to the political line of Albania’s former ruler, Enver Hoxha; Reconstruccion Comunista (Communist Reconstruction, RC), also a Hoxhaist group, from Spain, with close links to the MLKP; The Liberation Army of the Workers and Peasants of Turkey (TIKKO), the armed wing of the Maoist-line Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist – Leninist (TKP/ML), which has engaged in insurgent activities in Turkey since the 1970s; and the United Freedom Forces (BOG), a conglomeration of five hard-left Turkish groups, the two most important being the Revolutionary Communist Party (DKP) and the Marxist – Leninist Armed Propaganda Corps-Revolutionary Front (MLSPB-DC).¹⁶⁴

Later, the EOT would add a Greek anarcho-communist group, the Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity; an English-speaking unit, the Bob Crow Brigade, which contains British, Irish and Canadian Leftists; and the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), which appears to be dominated by English speakers as well.¹⁶⁵ In July 2017, IRPGF announced the formation of a subunit, The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA). IS’s persecution and murder of homosexuals is notorious, and the claim that an LGBT military force was seeking retribution drew significant international attention. TQILA had no military significance, however, and was just one more part of the PKK’s media-political outreach to Western audiences.¹⁶⁶

This section of the report examines the profiles of the foreign fighters who have joined the YPG in Syria, defined here as those who are non-Kurdish. In the few cases in which Kurdish heritage is possessed, it is by individuals who possess citizenship of states outside Syria and who grew up beyond the Kurdish-majority areas of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. There is comprehensive documenting of those who have died in the YPG’s ranks, followed by an examination of the legal difficulties some YPG foreign fighters have had relating to their activities in Syria. A sample of active or returned Western YPG fighters is also provided to offer additional context.

¹⁶² Stein, A. and M. Foley, ‘The YPG-PKK Connection’, *The Atlantic Council*, 26 January 2016, available at: www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection, last visited: 2 August 2017; ‘Data of 530 slain Kurdish militants: check the list’, *Zaman al-Wasl*, 23 August 2016, available at: <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/17583.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶³ Wolf, M., ‘Americans “Fighting ISIS” Are Just Props’, *The Daily Beast*, 13 March 2015, available at: www.thedailybeast.com/americans-fighting-isis-are-just-props, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Orton, K., ‘Syrian Kurds Announce Unified Foreign Fighter Unit’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 13 June 2015, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/06/13/syrian-kurds-announce-unified-foreign-fighter-unit/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶⁵ Orton, K., ‘Syrian Kurds Announce Unified Foreign Fighter Unit’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 13 June 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Orton, K., ‘The Latest Chapter of Syria’s Media War: A “Gay Unit” Fighting the Islamic State’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 31 July 2017, available at: henryjacksonsociety.org/2017/07/31/the-latest-chapter-of-syrias-media-war-a-gay-unit-fighting-the-islamic-state/, last visited: 8 August 2017.

3.1 The Deceased

ASHLEY JOHNSTON

Codename: Heval Bagok Serhed

Date of birth: 15 April 1986¹⁶⁷

Date joined YPG: c. November 2014¹⁶⁸

Date of death: 23 February 2015¹⁶⁹

Age: 28

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Queensland, Australia

Occupation: Military

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Johnston trained with the Australian Army and then served seven years as a reservist. He set off from Australia to Europe in October 2014, telling family and friends he was going to explore Greenland. Only on 30 December 2014 did he tell his mother where he was. Johnston is believed to have worked alongside Jordan Matson (profiled in Section 3.3) and the Lions of Rojava unit.¹⁷⁰ He was serving with half a dozen YPG fighters, including at least one foreigner, when their vehicle broke down near Tel Hamis, a key town in the Hasaka Province that the YPG was trying to capture from IS. Johnston was killed by a suicide bomber when the convoy was ambushed by IS fighters.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Aston, H. and M. Levy, 'Australian killed fighting Islamic State named as Ashley Kent Johnston', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 2015, available at: www.smh.com.au/national/australian-killed-fighting-islamic-state-named-as-ashley-kent-johnston-20150226-13pnke.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶⁸ Aston, H., 'Mother of killed Australian Ashley Johnston did not know he was on the frontline against Islamic State', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2015, available at: www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/mother-of-killed-australian-ashley-johnston-did-not-know-he-was-on-the-frontline-against-islamic-state-20150303-13tnk5.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁶⁹ Xelil, R., Twitter post, 28 February 2015, available at: <https://twitter.com/RedurXelil/status/571782529381871616>, last visited: 30 June 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Aston, H., 'Mother of killed Australian Ashley Johnston did not know he was on the frontline against Islamic State', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2015.

¹⁷¹ 'Islamic State: Australian fighting with Kurds against jihadists in Syria has been killed, rights group says', *Syrian Observatory for the Human Rights*, 26 February 2015, available at: www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=13596, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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KONSTANDINOS ERIK SCURFIELD

Codename: Heval Kemal
Date of birth: 22 September 1989¹⁷²
Date joined YPG: December 2014¹⁷³
Date of death: 2 March 2015
Age: 25
Sex: Male
Place of origin: Barnsley, Britain¹⁷⁴
Occupation: Military
Kurdish descent: No
Military background: Yes
Prior militant ties: None known

Konstandinos Scurfield, often known as “Kosta”, had been artistically inclined in high school, and expressed a desire to be an actor.¹⁷⁵ At 20 years old, he changed direction and volunteered for national service in Greece – something made possible by his Greek background. Scurfield served six months, mostly consisting of sentry duty. After returning to the UK, he joined the Royal Marines and excelled as a battlefield medic. Scurfield’s mother says her son told her on Christmas Day 2013 that he was going to “go to Syria and help” because “the Kurds are dying and our government’s doing nothing”.¹⁷⁶ Scurfield resigned from the British military in September 2014, got in contact with a YPG recruiter through the Facebook page for the Lions of Rojava unit, flew to northern Iraq, where the PKK retains its headquarters in the Qandil Mountains, and was soon in battle in Sinjar.

According to a man known as Macer Gifford, a British YPG operative (profiled in Section 3.3), Scurfield “had no time for people who didn’t believe in the cause”, and became agitated about foreign fighters who came to Syria and did not heed the instructions of the YPG.¹⁷⁷ Scurfield was killed in an IS ambush near Tel Hamis, a key town from which the YPG had expelled IS on 27 February 2015.¹⁷⁸

Pro-PYD/YPG activists in Britain relayed confirmation from Jordan Matson (profiled in

¹⁷² ‘Death Of A British Soldier: Why Did This Marine Give His Life To Fight ISIS?’, *FHM*, 16 November 2015, available at: www.fhm.com/posts/death-of-a-british-soldier-why-did-this-marine-give-his-life-to-fight-isis-96899, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁷³ MacAskill, E., ‘Konstandinos Erik Scurfield: the former marine who died in someone else’s war’, *The Guardian*, 4 March 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/konstandinos-erik-scurfield-ex-marine-died-someone-elses-war-ypg-isis>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Killed ex-Marine was “horrified” by IS’, *ITV News*, 4 March 2015, available at: www.itv.com/news/calendar/2015-03-04/killed-ex-marine-was-horrified-by-is/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Anti-IS Briton “a real character”’, *Mail Online*, 5 March 2015, available at: www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-2980619/Anti-IS-Briton-wanted-help.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Death Of A British Soldier: Why Did This Marine Give His Life To Fight ISIS?’, *FHM*, 16 November 2015.

¹⁷⁷ ‘Death Of A British Soldier: Why Did This Marine Give His Life To Fight ISIS?’, *FHM*, 16 November 2015.

¹⁷⁸ ‘Kurdish forces capture part of IS Syria stronghold: monitor’, *AFP*, 27 February 2015, available at: <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/kurdish-forces-capture-part-syria-stronghold-monitor-190810924.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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Section 3.3) that Scurfield had been killed. According to the activists, Matson was “one of [Scurfield’s] closest friends”, and the two had been “together from [Scurfield’s] first day” in Rojava.¹⁷⁹ Many of the early YPG foreign fighters were close to Matson. The activists also used the occasion to pressure the British government, which was wary of the PYD/YPG because of its “links to the Assad regime”,¹⁸⁰ by claiming that if London did not provide more support to the YPG “we will hear of more of these tragedies”.¹⁸¹

IVANA HOFFMANN

Codename: Avasin Tekosin Günes¹⁸²

Date of birth: 1 September 1995¹⁸³

Date joined YPJ: c. December 2014¹⁸⁴

Date of death: 7 March 2015

Age: 19

Sex: Female

Place of origin: Duisburg, Germany

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: Marxist–Leninist Communist Party (MLKP)

Hoffmann was an ardent communist, and the first female foreign fighter killed in the ranks of the YPG/J. She was of African descent and joined the MLKP while growing up in Germany. A death notice issued by the MLKP said she was drawn to Syria by the plight of Christians.¹⁸⁵ It was technically within the ranks of the MLKP that Hoffman was killed in a pre-dawn firefight with the Islamic State in Tel Tamr.¹⁸⁶ The MLKP is a small, radical left-wing outfit that has engaged in militant activity in Turkey and has sent fighters into Syria to buttress the YPG/J, on which it is dependent.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁹ ‘Killed ex-Marine was “horrified” by IS’, *ITV News*, 4 March 2015.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report: UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, March 2015, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415796/48533_Cm_9029_Accessible.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁸¹ ‘Killed ex-Marine was “horrified” by IS’, *ITV News*, 4 March 2015.

¹⁸² ‘Thousands march for Ivana Hoffmann in Duisburg’, *ANF News*, 14 March 2015, available at: <https://anfenglish.com/news/thousands-march-for-ivana-hoffmann-in-duisburg-10670>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁸³ Osborne, L., ‘First female western fighter dies fighting Islamic State’, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/first-female-western-fighter-ivana-hoffmann-dies-fighting-islamic-state>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁸⁴ Perry, T. and S. Westall, ‘German woman killed fighting Islamic State in Syria’, *Reuters*, 9 March 2015, available at: <https://www.yahoo.com/news/german-woman-killed-fighting-islamic-state-syria-124532421.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ ‘Thousands march for Ivana Hoffmann in Duisburg’, *ANF News*, 14 March 2015.

¹⁸⁷ Soner, B. A., O. Aslan and H. Kiyici, ‘PKK’s Regional Franchise of Terror’, *The Center for Terrorism and Security Studies*, 4 May 2017, available at: https://www.pa.edu.tr/Project/Files/News/2017/05/10/PKK’S%20REGIONAL%20FRANCHISE%20OF%20TERROR_01.05.17.pdf, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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MOHAMMAD HOSSEIN KARIMI

Codenames: Aryel Kobani; Ariel Pythagoras

Date of birth: Unknown

Date joined YPG: Unknown

Date of death: 9 May 2015¹⁸⁸

Age: Unknown

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Tehran, Iran

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Quite a number of Iranian citizens from the Kurdish-majority areas have fought for the YPG, primarily because the PKK has moved much of its Iranian department, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), into Syria. A long-time Iranian PKK operative is governor of Tel Abyad, for example.¹⁸⁹

However, Karimi was not ethnically Kurdish. A philosophy graduate, Karami crossed into Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq in early 2015 and then trained at the PKK's bases in the Qandil Mountains before being transported into Rojava with a number of other foreigners, including American and British citizens. Karami was part of a foreign fighter group that called itself "The Chai Boys," self-deprecatingly, referring to the boys too young to fight who served the soldiers' tea. Karami was shot during a gunfight in Ras al-Ayn and died at the scene owing to the YPG's failure to apply rudimentary medical techniques.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ 'Shhid Ariel Pusagunyan – Muhamed Huseyin Kerimi', *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-ariel-pusagunyan-muhamed-huseyin-kerimi/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁸⁹ 'The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria', *International Crisis Group*, 4 May 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Keighley, P. S., 'The American Jew who fought ISIS, and was then exiled from Israel', *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 July 2015, available at: www.jpost.com/Magazine/The-American-Jew-who-fought-ISIS-and-was-then-exiled-from-Israel-409981, last visited: 2 August 2017; 'Foreign Fighters in Syria', *Columbia Political Review*, 14 June 2017, available at: www.cpreview.org/blog/2017/6/foreign-fighters-in-syria, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

KEITH BROOMFIELD

Codename: Gelhat Rumet

Date of birth: 8 March 1978

Date joined YPG: 24 February 2015

Date of death: 3 June 2015

Age: 37

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Massachusetts, United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Keith Broomfield was “a motorcycle buff who ran afoul of the law”.¹⁹¹ In 2004, he was arrested on weapons and narcotics charges, including possession with the intent to distribute methamphetamines. After pleading guilty, Broomfield was sentenced to 18 months in jail.

Broomfield took to the Christian religion after a motorcycle accident left him in chronic pain. Broomfield’s father says, his son “heard about Kurds being persecuted for their Christian faith and felt compelled to help.”¹⁹² This despite the fact that most Kurds are Sunni Muslims and the exceptions in the ranks of the YPG/PKK tend to be atheists. Broomfield, who was also reportedly known as “Damhad” (“it’s time to do something”),¹⁹³ was killed in the village of Qentere in the Kobani Canton.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Binkley, C., ‘American killed fighting ISIS felt calling after rocky past’, *The Seattle Times*, 17 June 2015, available at: www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/american-killed-fighting-isis-felt-calling-after-rocky-past/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁹² Binkley, C., ‘American killed fighting ISIS felt calling after rocky past’, *The Seattle Times*, 17 June 2015.

¹⁹³ Westcott, L., ‘Details Emerge About Keith Broomfield, American Killed Fighting ISIS’, *Newsweek*, 11 June 2015, available at: www.newsweek.com/keith-broomfield-isis-american-fighting-isis-foreign-fighters-isis-syria-ypg-342215, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁹⁴ ‘Shhid Gelhat Rumet – Keith Lewis Broomfield’, *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-gelhat-rumet-keith-lewis-broomfield/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

REECE HARDING

Codename: Heval Bagok Australi; Bagok Serhed¹⁹⁵

Date of birth: 31 August 1991

Date joined YPG: 4 May 2015

Date of death: 27 June 2015

Age: 23

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Gold Coast: Australia

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Harding left Australia on 2 May 2015 without informing friends or family, and shortly thereafter arrived in Rojava. He said he had joined the YPG “because I couldn’t sit around any longer watching innocent women and children being raped and slaughtered” by the Islamic State, which, said Harding, “needs to be destroyed before it spreads any further”.¹⁹⁶

Harding was killed when he stepped on an anti-tank mine in the village of Mishrefa, east of Minbij and north of Raqqa city, as he headed toward a field where the YPG was clashing with the Islamic State. Twenty-two other YPG fighters were killed that day.¹⁹⁷

In Syria, Harding met Joe Akerman (profiled in Section 3.3), a British YPG foreign fighter, who was with Harding when he was killed. “I knew [Harding] had no military experience, but some of the other guys are idiots. Reece wasn’t an idiot,” Akerman said later. “Reece wasn’t out there to get a name for himself, or for any press, or for any money. He was just out there to help.”¹⁹⁸

Harding’s family have become campaigners against the Australian laws that can apply criminal penalties to citizens who join the YPG.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ ‘Shhid Bagok Serhad – Reece Harding’, YPG International, 4 October 2016, 2 August 2017.

¹⁹⁶ ‘Australian man Reece Harding killed helping Kurds fight Isis in Syria – reports’, Australian Associated Press, 30 June 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/jul/01/australian-man-reece-harding-killed-helping-kurds-fight-isis-in-syria-reports>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*; ‘Reece Harding memorial held on Gold Coast a year after his death in Syria’, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 26 June 2016, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-26/reece-harding-memorial-held-in-nerang-year-after-death/7544658, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁹⁸ Oaten, J., ‘Reece Harding becomes “symbol of Kurdistan” after his death in fight against IS’, ABC News, 26 June 2016, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-26/reece-harding-becomes-symbol-of-kurdistan/7543852, last visited: 2 August 2017.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid*.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

KEVIN JOACHIM

Codename: Dilsoz Buhar²⁰⁰
Date of birth: 2 November 1993²⁰¹
Date joined YPG: November 2012
Date of death: 6 July 2015
Age: 21
Sex: Male
Place of origin: Karlsruhe, Germany
Occupation: Unknown
Kurdish descent: No
Military background: No
Prior militant ties: None known

Joachim had not served in the military prior to travelling to Syria. He identified himself as a Marxist–Leninist, until he discovered Abdullah Ocalan’s writings and became persuaded by “Democratic Confederalism”, which Joachim thought might be a solution for the whole world. Joachim said he joined the YPG at the “start” of the “Rojava revolution,” a mere few months after the Assad regime withdrew from the Kurdish areas of northern Syria and left them to the PYD/YPG.²⁰² Joachim was killed in Suluk in Tel Abyad (“Giri Spi” in Kurdish) in the north of Raqqqa Province. He was buried in Germany on 22 August 2015.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ ‘Sehid Dilsoz Bihar – Kevin Jochim’, *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-dilsoz-bihar-kevin-jochim/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁰¹ ‘YPG confirms death of its brave German fighter Kevin Joachim’, *ANF News*, 13 July 2015, available at: kurdishdailynews.org/2015/07/13/ypg-confirms-death-of-its-brave-german-fighter-kevin-joachim/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁰² ‘German YPG Commander “Dilsoz Bahar” Interview’, *YouTube*, 28 April 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUDYjedlltQ>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁰³ ‘YPG fighter laid to rest in Germany’, *Rudaw*, 22 August 2015, available at: www.rudaw.net/english/world/220820153, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

RIFAT HOROZ

Codename: Karker Kobani

Date of birth: c. 1955

Date joined YPG: 15 September 2014 (joined PKK around 1991)

Date of death: 11 July 2015

Age: 60

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Turkey

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: PKK

Horoz lived in Silopi, in Sirmak Province in southeastern Turkey on the Syrian border. He was of Albanian descent: his father had been among the Albanian population in Greece that was, with Greece's Turkic and other Muslim populations, deported to Turkey during the "population exchange" in 1923. Horoz's ancestors were among the Greek Muslims used by the new Turkish republic to populate the areas of eastern Anatolia.

Horoz did not have a military background. After he lost his father at the age of 13, Horoz moved to Istanbul, where he was swept up in the tumult of the late 1970s and ended up joining one of many emerging groups on the militant left that asserted a Kurdish identity in a milieu that was still largely Kemalist. Horoz was arrested in 1978 and imprisoned. In prison Horoz was further radicalised. The political prisons in Turkey at that time were notorious proselytising grounds, and no group was better organised than the PKK.²⁰⁴

Horoz drifted into the PKK's orbit after his release from prison in 1991 and went to Kobani on 15 September 2014 in response to the instructions issued by PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to his supporters. In Syria, Horoz became known for bomb clearances in areas captured from IS by the YPG.²⁰⁵ He was killed shortly after the YPG believed it had secured Kobani, by an IS infiltration operation into the city.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York University Press, 2007), p. 112.

²⁰⁵ 'Karker Heval: The Life Of A Revolutionary And Internationalist Martyred In Kobanê', *Rojava Report*, 3 July 2015, available at: <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/07/03/karker-heval-the-life-of-a-revolutionary-and-internationalist-martyred-in-kobane/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁰⁶ 'YPG Kobanê Command: We will make ISIS gangs pay for the massacre', *Hawar News Agency: ANHA*, 29 June 2015, available at: en.hawarnews.com/ypg-kobane-command-we-will-make-isis-gangs-pay-for-the-massacre/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

MAKSIM TRIFONOV

Codenames: Maksim Peresvet; Norman

Date of birth: 13 September 1989²⁰⁷

Date joined YPG: 16 September 2015

Date of death: 22 September 2015

Age: 26

Sex: Male

Place of origin: St. Petersburg, Russia

Occupation: Intelligence officer

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: Separatists/insurgents in Ukraine

In the summer of 2014, Trifonov went to fight for the separatists in the Donbass area of Ukraine. Trifonov claimed he went to Donbass as a volunteer, though there are claims he went as an officer of Russian military intelligence (GRU),²⁰⁸ which tightly controls the insurgency in eastern Ukraine.²⁰⁹ He subsequently travelled to Syria, and had been with the YPG for only a matter of days when he and a Kurdish YPG fighter struck a mine while driving in the Kobani area.²¹⁰ Both men were killed.²¹¹

Trifonov's social media output suggests he had extremist political views. "Do you know what distinguishes Ukrainians from ISIS? For me, nothing. I want to kill both of them," Trifonov tweeted several days before his death, his second-to-last message on Twitter.²¹²

There is a claim that Trifonov faked his death in Syria so he could disappear.²¹³ However, communication was relayed from YPG to pro-Russian insurgents in Ukraine informing them that Trifonov was dead,²¹⁴ which suggests this claim is false.

²⁰⁷ 'Maksim Peresvet (Norman)', *Cargo 200*, 24 September 2015, available at: gruz200.net/?n=953, last visited: 2 July 2017.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Schindler, J., 'Donetsk Rebels and Russian Intelligence', *The XX Committee*, 19 July 2014, available at: <https://20committee.com/2014/07/19/donetsk-rebels-and-russian-intelligence/>, last visited: 2 August 2017; Schindler, J., 'Russia's "Secret" Army in Ukraine', *The XX Committee*, 28 August 2015, available at: <https://20committee.com/2015/08/28/russias-secret-army-in-ukraine-2/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹⁰ 'An LPR rebel from the rapid response team "Batman" killed in Syria', *Russkaya Vesna* (Russian Spring), 30 September 2015, available at: rusvesna.su/news/1443578405, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹¹ It is possible that Trifonov was not the first Russian killed in the ranks of the YPG. A Russian named Misha Sergeev is alleged to have been killed in clashes with the Turkish army while fighting for the YPG in July 2015, though details are scant: Gusel'nikov, A., 'Russian volunteers blazed a trail to Syria', *URA*, 5 November 2015, available at: <https://ura.news/articles/1036266238>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹² Norman, M., Twitter post, 18 September 2015, available at: <https://twitter.com/MaxNormann/status/644929780777918464>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹³ 'The Nazi-invader who fought in Donbass Falls victim to the Syrian rebels', *Crime*, 24 September 2015, available at: crime-ua.com/news/20150924/trifonov, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹⁴ 'An LPR rebel from the rapid response team "Batman" killed in Syria', *Russkaya Vesna* (Russian Spring), 30 September 2015.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

JOHN ROBERT GALLAGHER

Codename: Heval Gabar Rojava

Date of birth: 1983²¹⁵

Date joined YPG: May 2015²¹⁶

Date of death: 4 November 2015

Age: 32

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Ontario, Canada

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Gallagher served in the Canadian military for three years and had been deployed in Bosnia.²¹⁷ He said that he had left the military because there had seemed no prospect of anything beyond training in Canada. This was before 2001. Gallagher subsequently told colleagues that he felt “guilty” about missing the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and said similar motives were at play with a number of YPG volunteers. Joining an effort to destroy IS was not just eliminating a deadly enemy but “helping the whole world get over a bad idea”, Gallagher said.²¹⁸

Gallagher fought for two months with the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga. In an essay posted to Facebook in May 2015²¹⁹ and eventually reprinted by news outlets,²²⁰ Gallagher explained his motives. “The cause of a free and independent Kurdistan is important enough to be worth fighting for all on its own,” he wrote. “But there is an even better reason. For decades now, we have been at war. This war has been unacknowledged by our leaders, but enthusiastically proclaimed by our enemies. ... This war may have started in 1979, or earlier; 2001 increased the intensity of the conflict; the withdrawal from Iraq kicked

²¹⁵ ‘Schid Gabar Rojava – John Robert Gallagher’, *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/schid-gabar-rojava-john-robert-gallagher/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹⁶ ‘John Gallagher, a Canadian join Kurdish YPG to fight ISIL’, *YouTube*, 5 November 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHif9UZDCBw>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹⁷ Lambert, T., ‘John Gallagher Died Fighting the Islamic State. His Story Is More Than Tragedy’, *Vice News*, 11 November 2015, available at: <https://news.vice.com/article/john-gallagher-died-fighting-the-islamic-state-his-story-is-more-than-tragedy>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²¹⁸ ‘John Gallagher, a Canadian join Kurdish YPG to fight ISIL’, *YouTube*, 5 November 2015.

²¹⁹ Gallagher, J., ‘Why the War in Kurdistan Matters’, Facebook post, 6 May 2015, available at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10152939717688845&id=642603844&__fns&hash=Ac3w_3hmW5bdzMdW, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²²⁰ Gallagher, J., “‘We are all on the front lines’: Canadian reportedly killed fighting ISIL wrote essay about why he went to war”, *National Post*, 5 November 2015, available at: <http://nationalpost.com/g00/news/world/israel-middle-east/we-are-all-on-the-front-lines-canadian-reportedly-killed-fighting-isil-wrote-essay-about-why-he-went-to-war/wcm/44516ea1-42c0-438a-a300-cd0f3d57db80>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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off the latest phase.” Gallagher insisted that the war was “about ideas as much as it is about armies”: “Slavery, fascism, and communism were all bad ideas which required costly sacrifice before they were finally destroyed. In our time, we have a new bad idea: Theocracy.” Gallagher concluded, “I’m prepared to give my life in the cause of averting the disaster we are stumbling towards as a civilization. A free Kurdistan would be good enough cause for any internationalist, but we are fortunate enough to be able to risk our necks for something more important and more righteous than anything we’ve faced in generations.”

About a month after this essay, Gallagher joined the YPG. During an interview with Macleans in August 2015, Gallagher said he had not yet been allowed to engage in any actual military activity against IS.²²¹ A number of YPG foreign fighters had complained around that time that they were mostly being used as props to engage with the Western press, rather than in battle with IS.²²²

Gallagher had been a member of a foreign fighter group within the YPG named Martyr Bagok, in reference to Ashley Johnston, the first non-Kurdish foreign fighter in the ranks of the YPG to be killed. The unit, a small, professional cadre affiliated with the Lions of Rojava, is more commonly known as “The 223”, for the date – 23 February (2015) – when Johnston had been killed.²²³

Gallagher was struck down by an IS suicide bomber as the YPG tried to wrest al-Hawl from the jihadists.²²⁴ He was buried in Canada on 20 November 2015.²²⁵

²²¹ Khan, A. R., ‘A tale of two Canadians, fighting Islamic State’, *Macleans*, 9 August 2015, available at: www.macleans.ca/news/world/a-tale-of-two-canadians-fighting-islamic-state/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²²² Wolf, M., ‘Americans “Fighting ISIS” Are Just Props’, *The Daily Beast*, 13 March 2015, available at: www.thedailybeast.com/americans-fighting-isis-are-just-props, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²²³ Bell, S., ‘A secretive unit of international veterans went on its first anti-ISIL mission last fall. Hours later, a Canadian was dead’, *National Post*, 29 April 2016, available at: nationalpost.com/g00/news/canada/the-223-a-secretive-unit-of-international-veterans-went-on-its-first-mission-against-isis-last-november-hours-later-a-canadian-was-dead/wcm/f246ec53-01ac-479b-be2c-27e3ac5e4e59, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²²⁴ Logan, N., ‘John Gallagher: Here’s what we know about the Canadian killed while fighting ISIS in Syria’, *Global News*, 5 November 2015, available at: globalnews.ca/news/2321304/john-gallagher-heres-what-we-know-about-the-canadian-killed-while-fighting-isis-in-syria/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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GUNTER HELSTEN

Codename: Rustem Cudi
Date of birth: 11 August 1960
Date joined YPG: c. June 2015²²⁶
Date of death: 23 February 2016
Age: 55
Sex: Male
Place of origin: Germany
Occupation: Unknown
Kurdish descent: No
Military background: Yes
Prior militant ties: None known

Helsten served in the German military before travelling to fight for the YPG.²²⁷ He was killed near al-Shadadi, apparently by sniper fire while tending to an injured comrade.²²⁸

²²⁵ Dubinski, K., 'Body of John Gallagher, who was killed while fighting in Syria, returns home to Blenheim', *Windsor Star*, 20 November 2015, available at: windsorstar.com/news/local-news/body-of-john-gallagher-who-was-killed-while-fighting-in-syria-returns-home, last visited: 2 November 2017.

²²⁶ Dr Partizan [pseudonym], Twitter post, 9 April 2016, available at: https://twitter.com/Dr_Partizan/status/718903893229498372, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²²⁷ 'Sehid Rustem Cudi – Guenther Hellstein', *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-rustem-cudi-guenther-hellstein/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²²⁸ Bacchi, U., 'Syria: German YPG militant Gunter Helsten killed fighting ISIS in al-Shadadi', *The International Business Times*, 24 February 2016, available at: www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-german-ypg-militant-gunter-helsten-killed-fighting-isis-al-shadadi-1545750, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

MARIO NUNES

Codename: Heval Kendal;²²⁹ Kendal Qaraman²³⁰

Date of birth: 23 January 1994

Date joined YPG: Early 2015

Date of death: 3 May 2016

Age: 22

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Portalegre, Portugal

Occupation: Military

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Nunes had served in the Portuguese military, but abandoned the Air Force to join the YPG.²³¹ He served with the YPG for four months in early 2015, and then returned to Rojava in January 2016.²³² Nunes died near Tel Temir,²³³ and appears to have committed suicide to avoid falling into the hands of IS.²³⁴

²²⁹ 'Portuguese YPG fighter dies in Syria', *ARA News*, 1 June 2016, available at: <http://aranews.net/2016/06/portuguese-ypg-fighter-dies-in-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²³⁰ 'Shhid Kendal Qaraman – Mario Nunes', *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-kendal-qaraman-mario-nunes/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²³¹ 'Great interview: "I would rather die than do nothing"', *Sabado*, 2 September 2015, available at: <http://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/o-portugues-que-foi-lutar-contra-o-estado-islamico>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²³² 'Portuguese YPG fighter dies in Syria', *ARA News*, 1 June 2016.

²³³ 'Shhid Kendal Qaraman – Mario Nunes', *YPG International*, 4 October 2016.

²³⁴ 'Two Internationalist Fighters Die in Fight for Rojava Revolution', *Kurdish Question*, 31 May 2016, available at: <http://kurdishquestion.com/article/3202-two-internationalist-fighters-die-in-fight-for-rojava-revolution>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

JAMIE BRIGHT

Codename: Heval Gabar Amed

Date of birth: 1971²³⁵

Date joined YPG: December 2014 or January 2015

Date of death: 25 May 2016

Age: 44²³⁶

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Australia

Occupation: Decorator

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Bright had been in the military and was working as a painter and decorator immediately before joining the YPG. Unlike most YPG foreign fighters who arrive at the PKK bases in northern Iraq before transferring to Syria, Bright went to Turkey and crossed into Syria from there.²³⁷ He was killed in al-Shadadi in 2016.²³⁸

²³⁵ 'Shhid Gabar Amed – Jamie Bright', *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: <http://yppg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-gabar-amed-jamie-bright/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²³⁶ Probyn, A., 'WA coroner wants to examine body of foreign fighter Jamie Bright', *The West Australian*, 13 July 2016, available at: <https://thewest.com.au/news/australia/wa-coroner-wants-to-examine-body-of-foreign-fighter-jamie-bright-ng-ya-112788>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²³⁷ Toohey, P., 'Tributes flow for ex-Australian soldier Jamie Bright, killed fighting ISIS in Syria', *News.au*, 30 May 2016, available at: <http://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/tributes-flow-for-ex-australian-soldier-jamie-bright-killed-fighting-isis-in-syria/news-story/72801d08dc03e546b55d1a56bfbbb6ed>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²³⁸ Probyn, A., 'WA coroner wants to examine body of foreign fighter Jamie Bright', *The West Australian*, 13 July 2016.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

LEVI JONATHAN SHIRLEY

Codename: Heval Agir; Agur Servan

Date of birth: c. 1992

Date joined YPG: February 2015

Date of death: 14 July 2016

Age: 24

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Born in Nevada, lived in Colorado, United States²³⁹

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Levi Shirley joined the YPG in February 2015, before returning to the United States. He travelled back to Syria in January 2016.²⁴⁰ When foreign fighters join the YPG they make a video explaining their motives for joining the cause, which is then put out as a martyrdom statement by YPG media if the individual is killed. In Shirley's video he cited IS's atrocities – specifically its burning alive of a Jordanian pilot – and said, “I came here to stop that.”²⁴¹

Shirley was part of a small Jewish contingent within the YPG.²⁴² The YPG engaged in outreach to Western Jewish communities, and the foreign fighters have been a significant part of this campaign.²⁴³

Shirley “often talked about how he had served two years in the Marines before he was hit by a car and discharged”, but in fact he had no military background.²⁴⁴ Shirley's reasons for making this claim are not clear. One possibility is that it was an attempt to conform to an environment dominated by former servicemen.²⁴⁵ Shirley was killed during the US-backed, YPG-led offensive to expel IS from Minbij.

²³⁹ Lamothe, D., ‘Levi Shirley wanted to be a Marine. Instead, he died an American vigilante fighting ISIS in Syria’, *The Washington Post*, 21 July 2016, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/07/21/levi-shirley-wanted-to-be-a-marine-instead-he-died-as-an-american-vigilante-fighting-isis-in-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁴⁰ Frantzman, S. J., ‘American Jew Among Those Killed Fighting Isis Alongside Kurds In Syria’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 July 2016, available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/American-Jew-among-those-killed-fighting-ISIS-alongside-Kurds-in-Syria-462183>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁴¹ ‘Şehid Agir Şervan (Levi Jonathan Shirley)’, *You Tube*, 21 July 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVNUYozjbUg>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁴² Frantzman, S. J., ‘American Jew Among Those Killed Fighting Isis Alongside Kurds In Syria’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 July 2016.

²⁴³ Amos, R., ‘I Fought ISIS with the Kurds In Syria. This Is What It Was Like’, *The Tower*, January 2017, available at: <http://www.thetower.org/article/i-fought-isis-with-kurds-in-syria-this-is-what-it-was-like/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁴⁴ Lamothe, D., ‘Levi Shirley wanted to be a Marine. Instead, he died an American vigilante fighting ISIS in Syria’, *The Washington Post*, 21 July 2016.

²⁴⁵ Halevy, D., ‘American Jew who fought with Kurds dies fighting ISIS’, *Israel National News*, 23 July 2016, available at: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/215413>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

DEAN CARL EVANS

Codename: Givara Rojava
Date of birth: 7 October 1993²⁴⁶
Date joined YPG: 14 March 2015
Date of death: 21 July 2016
Age: 22
Sex: Male
Place of origin: Wiltshire, Britain
Occupation: Farmer
Kurdish descent: No
Military background: No
Prior militant ties: None known

In September 2011, just before his eighteenth birthday and three months after his mother had died, Dean Evans applied to join the military, but was prevented from doing so because of his asthma. However, Evans was determined to “get a uniform”, as his father put it. In July 2012, he did a three-week trial with the French Foreign Legion.

Returning to Warminster, Evans took on various jobs at dairy farms; at one point he worked on such a farm in Germany for five months. Beginning in the summer of 2014, Evans spent eight months studying the Syrian war. He got in touch with a YPG recruiter through Facebook and pledged to “wage war against all forms of fascism and capitalist hegemony that try to enslave people and destroy nature”.

Evans left Britain on 8 March 2015, travelled through Dusseldorf and Berlin in Germany, and landed in Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq. There he linked up with the PKK, which has its headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. From there he was transferred across the border to Syria, where he joined the Lions of Rojava unit and took on a name inspired by Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Paid only in food, Evans spent three months fighting in Tel Tamr. Despite a terrible bout of dysentery, he rose through the ranks from infantryman to sniper to rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) gunner.

²⁴⁶ Blake, M., “‘It wasn’t about killing people’: what drove a British farmer to the Syrian frontline?”, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/29/isis-wasnt-about-killing-people-what-drove-british-farmer-syrian-frontline>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

Evans returned to Britain on 26 June 2015 and, after nine hours being questioned by police, was released and went back to working on his farm. However, he found the allure of returning to the fight too strong. On 28 January 2016 – against the “strong advice” of the police – Evans’ stepfather drove him to the airport, and Evans handed him a will. “I’d much rather live a short, exciting life than a long, boring one,” Evans told his stepfather, adding, “I know that when I die, I will walk straight into the arms of my mum.”²⁴⁷ Evans was killed, along with a female fighter during the US-backed operation to clear IS from Minbij.²⁴⁸ He was buried in Syria.²⁴⁹

MARTIN GRUDEN

Codename: Rodi Cekdar²⁵⁰

Date of birth: c. 1983

Date joined YPG: Unknown

Date of death: 27 July 2016

Age: 33²⁵¹

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Ljubljana, Slovenia

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Unknown

Prior militant ties: None known

Gruden was killed around Minbij during the US-backed operation to liberate it from IS.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ Cacciottolo, M., ‘Dean Evans: “Courageous son” died fighting IS’, *BBC News*, 23 November 2016, available at: www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-38065437, last visited: 2 August 2017.; Finnigan, L., ‘Briton killed fighting Isil in Syria “dreamed of being a soldier” but failed Army medical because of asthma’, *The Telegraph*, 29 October 2016, available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/29/brit-killed-fighting-isil-in-syria-dreamed-of-being-a-soldier-bu/, last visited: 2 August 2017.; Blake, M., “‘It wasn’t about killing people’: what drove a British farmer to the Syrian frontline?”, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2016.

²⁴⁸ Blake, M., “‘It wasn’t about killing people’: what drove a British farmer to the Syrian frontline?”, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2016.

²⁴⁹ Cacciottolo, M., ‘Dean Evans: “Courageous son” died fighting IS’, *BBC News*, 23 November 2016.

²⁵⁰ ‘Two Western YPG volunteers killed in Manbij’, *Rudaw*, 2 August 2016, available at: www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/020820163, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵¹ Esih, U., ‘In Syria, brother against brother’, 4 August 2016, available at: <https://www.pressreader.com/slovenia/vecer/20160804/281505045597265>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵² ‘Shhid Rodi Cekdar – Martin Gruben’, *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: yppg-international.org/2016/10/04/sehid-rod-cekdar-martin-gruben/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

BADEEN ABDULHAMID MUHAMMAD AL-IMAM

Codename: Firaz Kardo

Date of birth: 1958²⁵³

Date joined YPG: Unknown

Date of death: 3 August 2016

Age: c. 58

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Sweden²⁵⁴

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: Yes

Military background: Unknown

Prior militant ties: None known

Badeen al-Imam was initially reported to be an Egyptian, which would have made him one of few known foreign Arab fighters in the YPG. It subsequently transpired that the picture was a little more complicated: al-Imam was a Swedish citizen from Malmo, whose mother was from Cairo and whose father was a Kurd from Bashur in Iraq.²⁵⁵ Al-Imam was killed during the Minbij operation. He was buried in northern Iraq and his funeral became a flashpoint between the YPG and the Kurdish opposition, which was experiencing a crackdown from the YPG inside Syria at the time.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ 'Shid Firaz Kardo – Badin Abdulhamid Mohammed al-Imam', *YPG International*, 4 October 2016, available at: <http://ypg-international.org/2016/10/04/shid-firaz-kardo-badin-abdulhamid-mohammed-al-imam/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵⁴ 'First "YPG" Egyptian fighter killed in Aleppo', *Orient News*, 9 August 2016, available at: http://orient-news.net/en/news_show/119817/0/First-%E2%80%98YPG-Egyptian-fighter-killed-in-Aleppo, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵⁵ Fredriksson, J., Twitter post, 6 August 2016, available at: <https://twitter.com/nyheternajohan/status/762004854906773505>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵⁶ 'Tensions escalate between Kurdish parties in Syria', *ARA News*, 17 August 2016, available at: <http://aranews.net/2016/08/tensions-escalate-kurdish-parties-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

JORDAN MACTAGGART

Codename: Ciwan Firat
Date of birth: 12 July 1994²⁵⁷
Date joined YPG: Early 2014²⁵⁸
Date of death: 3 August 2016
Age: 22
Sex: Male
Place of origin: Colorado, United States
Occupation: Unknown
Kurdish descent: No
Military background: No
Prior militant ties: None known

MacTaggart had no prior military service. He explained his decision to join the YPG as being based on the:

love of the Kurds – that was my primary focus – and second because of the monster that Daesh [IS] is. But I came out here because I believe in revolution, I believe in the rights of the people, and I believe the Kurds do this well. I believe in social democracy ... and I think if [the YPG] get a foothold here it could be very progressive. ... I've always believed that people should do something with their lives rather than sitting around and just going to work, punching in the nine-to-five.²⁵⁹

A story about MacTaggart that became widespread among the YPG says that he was shot in the leg during an engagement with IS and was accidentally left in the field, after which he applied a tourniquet on himself and crawled back to base through the night.²⁶⁰

MacTaggart returned to Colorado in October 2015, then left again for Syria in January 2016.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ 'Jordan MacTaggart', *Castle Rock Funeral & Cremation Services*, available at: www.castlerockfuneralandcremation.com/obituaries/Jordan-Mactaggart/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵⁸ 'War against ISIS/Daesh: Respect to the fallen fighter Jordan Mactaggart of YPG (Rojava, Syria)', 325, 13 August 2016, available at: <https://325.nostate.net/2016/08/13/war-against-isisdaesh-respect-to-the-fallen-fighter-jordan-mactaggart-of-ypg-rojava-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁵⁹ Ciwan Firat (Jordan Mactaggart), *YouTube*, 12 August 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0A5bsx0V2c>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁶⁰ 'War against ISIS/Daesh: Respect to the fallen fighter Jordan Mactaggart of YPG (Rojava, Syria)', 325, 13 August 2016.

²⁶¹ Read, R., 'Punk Rock And An AK-47: How One American Gave His Life Traveling To Syria To Fight ISIS', *The Daily Caller*, 8 August 2016, available at: dailycaller.com/2016/08/08/punk-rock-and-an-ak-47-how-one-american-gave-his-life-traveling-to-syria-to-fight-isis/, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

MacTaggart was killed during the Minbij operation when his unit was ambushed by IS and surrounded.²⁶² John Harding, a YPG fighter from northern England, saw MacTaggart days before his death and said that his “zeal and revolutionary fervour did not waiver”.²⁶³

WILLIAM SAVAGE

Codename: Amed Kobani

Date of birth: 1989²⁶⁴

Date joined YPG: January 2015²⁶⁵

Date of death: 10 August 2016

Age: 27

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Born in Maryland, lived in North Carolina, United States

Occupation: Bouncer

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Savage failed to get into college a number of times and could not access the US military because of a medical complication. He went to Raleigh, North Carolina, in 2011 “to get himself together”, beginning by working at the front desk of the Velvet Cloak Inn and then as a bouncer at Mosaic Wine Lounge.²⁶⁶

“Will has a protective instinct and really hated what he saw going on with ISIS and the Kurds,” Savage’s father said, explaining why his son went to the region. “He also needed to be actively courageous and fighting for an important cause and making a real difference. ... He found something he could die for and died for it.”²⁶⁷

²⁶² Contreras, O., ‘Jordan MacTaggart, Coloradan killed in Syria, “liberated areas occupied by ISIS terrorists”’, *ABC Denver*, 13 August 2016, available at: www.thedenverchannel.com/news/front-range/denver/jordan-mactaggart-coloradan-killed-in-syria-liberated-areas-occupied-by-isis-terrorists, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁶³ Kansoy, A. and A. Sahin, ‘Interview with UK YPG volunteer and medic John Harding’, *Kurdish Question*, 24 April 2017, available at: www.kurdishquestion.com/article/3900-interview-with-uk-ypg-volunteer-and-medic-john-harding, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁶⁴ Kajjo, S., ‘American Volunteer Killed While Battling IS in Syria’, *Voice of America*, 18 August 2016, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/american-volunteer-killed-battling-is-syria/3470931.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁶⁵ Kajjo, S., ‘American Volunteer Killed While Battling IS in Syria’, *Voice of America*, 18 August 2016.

²⁶⁶ Shaffer, J., ‘Raleigh father proud of son lost to fighting in Syria – Shaffer’, *The News and Observer*, 16 September 2016, available at: <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/josh-shaffer/article102303607.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁶⁷ Van Wilgenburg, W., ‘US volunteer praised for his humility dies in fight against ISIS in Syria’, *ARA News*, 18 August 2016, available at: <http://aranews.net/2016/08/us-volunteer-praised-humility-dies-fight-isis-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

Savage initially fought in the ranks of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga before joining the YPG.²⁶⁸

He was killed as he helped civilians evacuate Minbij, having been specifically targeted by IS.²⁶⁹ Two days later, Minbij fell to the YPG.

ANTON LESCHEK

Codename: Zana Ciwan

Date of birth: Unknown

Date joined YPG: September 2016

Date of death: 24 November 2016

Age: Unknown

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Bielefeld, Germany²⁷⁰

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Unknown

Prior militant ties: None known

Leschek was formally part of the Minbij Military Council, the Arab council that the YPG uses to govern Minbij city. He was killed in a Turkish airstrike west of Minbij; also struck at the time was an American YPG volunteer, Michael Israel, who died several days later from his injuries.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ *ibid.*

²⁶⁹ Kajjo, S., 'American Volunteer Killed While Battling IS in Syria', *Voice of America*, 18 August 2016.

²⁷⁰ syndicalist [pseudonym], Twitter post, 1 December 2016, available at: <https://twitter.com/syndicalisms/status/804351610503696384>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁷¹ 'MMC Statement on Michael Israel and Anton Leschek, Killed in Turkish Airstrikes in Syria', *Kurdish Question*, 1 December 2016, available at: <http://kurdishquestion.com/article/3663-mmc-statement-on-michael-israel-and-anton-leschek-killed-in-turkish-airstrikes-in-syria>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

MICHAEL ISRAEL

Codename: Robin Agiri

Date of birth: c. 1989

Date joined YPG: June 2016

Date of death: c. 26 November 2016

Age: 27

Sex: Male

Place of origin: California, United States

Occupation: Political activist (socialist)

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Israel became a prominent activist against the invasion of Iraq and was involved in a series of socialist organisations: he was the co-chair for a time of the Democratic Socialists of America in Sacramento, helped organise the Motherlode Progressives group, and was a participant in the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011.²⁷²

Israel, who had no military experience before journeying to Rojava, was into his second tour at the time he was killed. Israel was killed with German YPG fighter Anton Leschek, and allegedly ten others, in a Turkish airstrike, northeast of al-Bab and west of Minbij.²⁷³

The US State Department refused to comment on the fact that an allied government had killed an American citizen, beyond noting that the US authorities have strongly discouraged people from travelling to Syria, and the Department of Justice noted that there could be criminal liability from such trips.²⁷⁴

²⁷² 'In Memory of Michael Israel', *Democratic Socialists of America*, 2 December 2016, available at: <https://medium.com/@DemSocialists/in-memory-of-michael-israel-2ba8986aab7d>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁷³ Mejia, B. and N. Bulos, 'Californian killed in Syria is remembered as humble, dedicated to Kurdish cause', *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 2016, available at: <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-california-man-20161201-story.html>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁷⁴ Harp, S., 'The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State', *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017, available at: www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/american-anarchists-ypg-kurdish-militia-syria-isis-islamic-state-w466069, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

RYAN LOCK

Codename: Berxwedan Gîvara²⁷⁵

Date of birth: c. 1996²⁷⁶

Date joined YPG: August 2016

Date of death: 21 December 2016

Age: 20

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Chichester, Britain

Occupation: Chef

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Lock had no prior military experience; he had been a chef before travelling to the Middle East.²⁷⁷ He was killed in the company of a Canadian YPG fighter, Nazzareno Tassone, and three other YPG fighters in the village of Jaber, near Raqqa.²⁷⁸ It is likely that Lock committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Islamic State.²⁷⁹ Lock was returned to Britain on 19 February 2017, and the route from Heathrow Airport to the cemetery was lined with Kurds and others.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ 'Two foreign YPG volunteers died in Syria four days before Christmas', *Rudaw*, 1 March 2017, available at: www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/03012017, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁷⁶ 'Hero's welcome for Briton Ryan Lock killed fighting IS in Syria', *BBC News*, 19 February 2017, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-39020621>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁷⁷ 'Two foreign YPG volunteers died in Syria four days before Christmas', *Rudaw*, 1 March 2017.

²⁷⁸ 'British and Canadian YPG Volunteers Died in Syria Fighting ISIL', *Millet Press*, 4 January 2017, available at: http://www.milletpress.com/Detail_EN.aspx?Jiamre=2266&T=British%20and%20Canadian%20YPG%20Volunteers%20Died%20in%20Syria%20Fighting%20ISIL, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁷⁹ Vardy, E., 'Briton Ryan Lock "killed himself" to avoid IS capture', *BBC News*, 31 January 2017, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-38812873>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁸⁰ 'Hero's welcome for Briton Ryan Lock killed fighting IS in Syria', *BBC News*, 19 February 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

NAZZARENO ANTONIO TASSONE

Codename: Agir Ararat

Date of birth: 5 November 1992²⁸¹

Date joined YPG: June 2016²⁸²

Date of death: 21 December 2016²⁸³

Age: 24

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Born in Ontario, had been living in Edmonton, Canada²⁸⁴

Occupation: Railway

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Nazzareno Tassone had no military service prior to going to Rojava.²⁸⁵ He had been an avid video game player. He had moved from Ontario to Edmonton with his girlfriend in 2014 to take a job with Canadian Pacific Rail.²⁸⁶ Tassone was killed in Jaber village, near Raqqa, at the same time as the British YPG fighter Ryan Lock and three other YPG operatives.²⁸⁷ IS took Tassone's body,²⁸⁸ and it was only confirmed recovered on 13 May 2017.²⁸⁹

²⁸¹ 'Nazzareno "Naz" Tassone', *Patterson Funeral Home*, available at: http://www.pattersonfuneralhome.com/memsol.cgi?user_id=1976359, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁸² Bell, S., 'Kurdish forces announce Canadian died fighting ISIL in Syria, calling him a martyr and a hero', *National Post*, 3 January 2017, available at: <http://nationalpost.com/news/kurdish-forces-call-canadian-a-martyr-and-a-hero-after-announcing-he-died-fighting-isil-in-syria/wcm/0a31a66c-dba6-4756-a0eb-9c773449e1b5>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁸³ *ibid.*

²⁸⁴ 'Canadian man fighting IS in Syria killed, Kurdish group says', *CablePulse 24* (CP24), 4 January 2017, available at: <http://www.cp24.com/news/canadian-man-fighting-is-in-syria-killed-kurdish-group-says-1.3227502>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Lamoureux, M., 'The Canadian LARPer Who Died Fighting ISIS', *Vice News*, 4 January 2017, available at: https://www.vice.com/en_nz/article/ypv7k5/the-canadian-larper-who-died-fighting-isis, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁸⁷ 'British and Canadian YPG Volunteers Died in Syria Fighting ISIL', *Millet Press*, 4 January 2017.

²⁸⁸ 'Canadian man fighting IS in Syria killed, Kurdish group says', *CablePulse 24* (CP24), 4 January 2017.

²⁸⁹ Hunchar, A., 'Edmonton man's body recovered from ISIS, says mother', *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (CBC), 15 May 2017, available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/nazzareno-tassone-isis-ypg-1.4116645>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

PAOLO TODD

Codename: Kawa Amed

Date of birth: c. 1984²⁹⁰

Date joined YPG: 4 November 2016

Date of death: 15 January 2017²⁹¹

Age: 33

Sex: Male

Place of origin: California, United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Todd said he had joined the YPG to support the Kurdish cause and “indigenous rights”, and claimed to be fighting in a “heavy weapons unit”.²⁹² He was killed in Little Swadiyah, north of Raqqa city, the fourth foreign fighter to fall as part of the YPG’s Operation EUPHRATES WRATH, which began on 6 November 2016 in an effort dislodge IS from its Syrian “capital”, Raqqa city.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ ‘Two US Volunteers Killed Fighting for Kurdish Militia in Syria’, *The Whim*, 27 January 2017, available at: <http://www.thewhim.com/two-us-volunteers-killed-fighting-kurdish-militia-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁹¹ ‘Another US volunteer killed in Raqqa operation’, *ARA News*, 23 January 2017, available at: <http://aranews.net/2017/01/another-us-volunteer-killed-in-raqqa-operation/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁹² ‘American Paolo Todd killed fighting against Islamic state in ISIS capital raqqa in Syria’, *YouTube*, 22 January 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CH0Ya5pk2-g>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁹³ ‘American man fighting with Syrian Kurds killed in battle against IS’, *Ekurd Daily*, 23 January 2017, available at: <http://ekurd.net/american-syrian-killed-kurds-2017-01-23>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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ALBERT AVERY HARRINGTON

Codename: Cekdar Rojava or Neshro Hiro

Date of birth: c. 1968

Date joined YPG: 15 March 2015

Date of death: 25 January 2017

Age: 49

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Ohio, United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Harrington, a former US Marine,²⁹⁴ discharged in 1991,²⁹⁵ was fighting as part of the “Assisting Volunteers of Rojava” when he was struck by an IS suicide bomber on 22 January. Harrington died from his wounds three days later. A death notice for Harrington was posted by both the YPG and Syriac Military Council. Harrington was the fifth Western foreign fighter to be killed as part of Operation EUPHRATES WRATH.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ ‘U.S. Marine Veteran Killed While Fighting ISIS In Syria’, *Warfare Footage*, 31 January 2017, available at: <http://warfarefootage.com/2017/01/u-s-marine-veteran-killed-while-fighting-isis-in-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁹⁵ ‘Two US Volunteers Killed Fighting for Kurdish Militia in Syria’, *The Whim*, 27 January 2017.

²⁹⁶ ‘Kurds confirm death of third US volunteer as part of Raqqa campaign’, *ARA News*, 28 January 2017, available at: <http://aranews.net/2017/01/kurds-confirm-death-third-us-volunteer-part-raqqa-campaign/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

PYD FOREIGN FIGHTER PROJECT

NICHOLAS ALAN WARDEN

Codename: Rodi Deysie
Date of birth: 17 June 1988
Date joined YPG: February 2017
Date of death: 5 July 2017
Age: 29
Sex: Male
Place of origin: New York, United States
Occupation: Military
Kurdish descent: No
Military background: Yes
Prior militant ties: None known

Nicholas Warden had wanted to become a soldier since 11 September 2001, when he was 13 years old. A Buffalo area native, Warden graduated from Cleveland High School and joined the army. He served for nearly five years and did two tours in Afghanistan, reaching the rank of sergeant. After serving in the US military, Warden joined the French Foreign Legion. He left the Legion in 2016 and “had plans to take a six-figure job with Triple Canopy, a contracting firm that works with the US Army”.²⁹⁷

The attacks by the Islamic State in France, near where his eighteen-month-old daughter lived, moved him to action. Warden said he was motivated to join the YPG by “the terrorist attacks [the Islamic State] were doing in Orlando, in San Bernardino, in Nice, in Paris”.²⁹⁸ Warden was killed along with five other YPG fighters, two of them Westerners (Robert Grodt and Luke Rutter), in an IS ambush against a YPG patrol south of Raqqa city.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ ‘Buffalo area native Nicholas Warden killed battling ISIS in Syria’, *NYup*, 12 July 2017, available at: www.newyorkupstate.com/buffalo/2017/07/buffalo_area_native_nicholas_warden_killed_battling_isis_in_syria.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁹⁸ ‘YPG’s American Martyr Nicholas Alan Warden (Rodi Deysie)’s final message and photos’, *YPG International*, 11 July 2017, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/YPG/videos/1517994994888758/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

²⁹⁹ ‘Demhat is now a candlelight in the Rojava Revolution illuminated by martyrs’, *Yeni Ozgur Politika* [PKK newspaper in Europe], 12 July 2017, available at: <https://www.ypgrojava.org/Demhat-is-now-a-candlelight-in-the-Rojava-Revolution-illuminated-by-martyrs>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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ROBERT GRODT

Codename: (Heval) Demhat Goldman

Date of birth: February 1989

Date joined YPG: Late January/early February 2017³⁰⁰

Date of death: 5 July 2017

Age: 28

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Born in California, was living in New York, United States

Occupation: Welder

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Grodt stated that he had worked for various non-profit organisations and as a welder before he went to Rojava. He had started to follow the Kurdish issue around 2004, directed to it by the work of journalist Christopher Hitchens.³⁰¹ Grodt was previously, briefly, in the news in 2011 and 2012. He worked as a volunteer medic for the “Occupy Wall Street” protests in New York in late 2011, which took over Zuccotti Park from 17 September to 15 November 2011. Grodt had fully partaken in the non-political aspects of the Zuccotti Park encampment,³⁰² before meeting his future fiancée at the event; she was pepper sprayed by police and fell into his arms in an incident that became something of a media story.³⁰³

Grodt was drawn to the YPG’s cause by the Kobani battle in late 2014. His mobilisation to join the YPG was made possible through contact with recruiters on the *YPG International* site. Grodt saw a “chance to take a hand in something that’s really important”, and not just for the Kurds. Political-revolutionary motives were important to Grodt, who wished to help push the Middle East in a “progressive sort of way”. He was involved in the political aspects of Rojava’s governance.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ In an interview published on 24 June 2017, Grodt said he had been in YPG-held territory for “a little shy of five months”: see at 0:25, ‘American YPG fighter tells his story of coming and joining the fight’, *YouTube*, 24 June 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee4U0918UYo>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰¹ See 0:35, *ibid.*

³⁰² Firger, J., ‘At Zuccotti Park, Love Under the Tarps’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 October 2011, available at: <https://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2011/10/24/occupy-wall-street-sex-at-zuccotti-park/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰³ ‘Occupy Wall Street protesters preoccupied with pepper spray and love’, *Los Angeles Times*, 26 October 2011, available at: latimesblogs.latimes.com/nationnow/2011/10/love-among-the-occupiers.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰⁴ ‘American YPG fighter tells his story of coming and joining the fight’, *YouTube*, 24 June 2017; ‘American YPG fighter: I am here to contribute to revolution’, ANF News, 25 June 2017, available at: <https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojava/american-ypg-fighter-i-am-here-to-contribute-to-revolution-20644>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

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Like most of the later recruits, Grodt had no military background but did have a record of hard-left politics.³⁰⁵ Other motivations Grodt listed were helping to secure Kurdish autonomy and fighting IS to “help create a more secure world”. He testified to being swayed by the “ideological training” of the YPG as he entered the ranks. Grodt signed off his pre-recorded martyrdom video by saying, “*Biji Serok Apo*” (“Long live Chairman Apo”).³⁰⁶ *Apo* (uncle) is the name by which most PKK members refer to Ocalan, and is the name on the patches worn by YPG soldiers: a yellow logo with Ocalan’s face and the phrase *Reber Apo* (Leader Apo).

Grodt was killed near Raqqa in an IS attack that killed a total of six people; two of the other casualties were Western foreign fighters: Nicholas Warden (American) and Luke Rutter (British).³⁰⁷ Grodt’s death was announced by the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF) – the anarchist component of the YPG that Grodt appears to have joined – on 10 July 2017.³⁰⁸

LUKE RUTTER

Codename: Soro Zinar

Date of birth: 22 September 1994

Date joined YPG: 1 March 2017³⁰⁹

Date of death: 5 July 2017³¹⁰

Age: 22

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Birkenhead, Britain³¹¹

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Rutter, who had no military experience, had travelled to Rojava after telling his family he was going to join the French Foreign Legion. He described his motives as a belief that the

³⁰⁵ Gibbons-Neff, T., ‘Two Americans killed battling ISIS in Syria’, *The Washington Post*, 11 July 2017, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/07/11/two-american-foreign-fighters-killed-battling-isis-in-syria/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰⁶ ‘YPG’s American Martyr Robert Grodt (Demhat Goldman)’s last message and photos’, *YPG International*, 11 July 2017, available at: https://www.facebook.com/YPG/videos/1517986851556239/?hc_ref=OTHER, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰⁷ ‘Demhat is now a candlelight in the Rojava Revolution illuminated by martyrs’, *Yeni Ozgur Politika* [PKK newspaper in Europe], 12 July 2017.

³⁰⁸ International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), *Twitter post*, 11 July 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/IRPGF/status/884515833673904129>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³⁰⁹ Blake, M., ‘British man killed alongside American fighting Isis in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 11 July 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/11/british-man-luke-rutter-killed-fighting-isis-in-syria>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³¹⁰ ‘YPG’s British Martyr Luke Rutter (Soro Zinar)’s final message and photos’, *YPG International*, 11 July 2017, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/YPG/videos/1518023148219276/>, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³¹¹ Blake, M., ‘British man killed alongside American fighting Isis in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 11 July 2017.

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YPG was “the best opportunity for peace” for the entire Middle East.³¹²

Rutter was caught in an ambush while patrolling behind the lines south of Raqqa city. A comrade stepped on a mine and IS jihadists then began firing on the group. Six YPG operatives were killed in the incident, three of them Western foreign fighters: Rutter and two Americans, Robert Grodt and Nicholas Warden.³¹³ Rutter was pronounced dead at the scene and his body was sent to Hasaka for autopsy.³¹⁴

DAVID TAYLOR

Codename: Zafer Qerecox³¹⁵

Date of birth: February 1991

Date joined YPG: May 2017

Date of death: 16 July 2017³¹⁶

Age: 26

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Florida, United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Taylor studied philosophy at university and then spent four years in the US Marines, serving in Afghanistan, Japan, South Korea and Jordan. He was discharged in 2016, returned to the United States, and then went to visit family in Ireland, where the family is originally from. Taylor began to travel around Europe, and then his family lost contact. Taylor had travelled to Syria after telling only one friend, whom he swore to secrecy. Once in Syria, Taylor emailed his father to tell him he was “doing the right thing. It’s for their freedom”.³¹⁷

Taylor said he was educated in ideology, weapons and military tactics when he arrived in YPG-held areas.³¹⁸ He was killed near Raqqa, the fourth YPG foreign fighter to be killed since the operation to expel IS from the city itself began.

³¹² ‘YPG’s British Martyr Luke Rutter (Soro Zinar)’s final message and photos’, *YPG International*, 11 July 2017.

³¹³ ‘Demhat is now a candlelight in the Rojava Revolution illuminated by martyrs’, *Yeni Ozgur Politika* [PKK newspaper in Europe], 12 July 2017.

³¹⁴ Blake, M., ‘British man killed alongside American fighting Isis in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 11 July 2017; ‘Briton Luke Rutter killed fighting IS in Syria’, BBC News, 11 July 2017, available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40572844, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³¹⁵ ‘YPG’s American volunteer David Taylor was martyred July 16 fighting Daesh in Raqqa’, *You Tube*, 25 July 2017, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U0kFIC7U74, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³¹⁶ ‘YPG’s British Martyr Luke Rutter (Soro Zinar)’s final message and photos’, *YPG International*, 11 July 2017.

³¹⁷ Schneider, M., ‘Ex-Marine killed in Syria passionate about fight against IS’, *McClatchy DC Bureau*, 25 July 2017, available at: www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/national-politics/article163480113.html, last visited: 2 August 2017.

³¹⁸ ‘YPG’s American volunteer David Taylor was martyred July 16 fighting Daesh in Raqqa’, *You Tube*, 25 July 2017.

3.2 Legal Complications for YPG Foreign Fighters

3.2.1 Britain

ŞILAN ÖZÇELİK

Date of birth: c. 1997

Date joined YPJ: n/a

Age: c. 20

Sex: Female

Place of origin: Holloway, Britain

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: Yes

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Özçelik is of Kurdish descent and lived in north London. On 16 January 2015, at the age of 18, Özçelik was arrested as she returned from Brussels to Britain. She was 17 years old when she went to Belgium in October 2014, with the intention of joining the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).³¹⁹ Protests were organised by PKK-sympathetic activists against Özçelik's arrest.³²⁰

On 20 November 2015, Özçelik was convicted of “engaging in conduct in preparation for giving effect to an intention to commit acts of terrorism” under the 2006 Terrorism Act. She was sentenced to 21 months in a young offender institution. The judge described her as “a stupid, feckless and deeply dishonest young woman”. Özçelik had tried to claim that the video and letters in which she expressed her love for the PKK and her devotion to its cause were a cover so that she could meet a 28-year-old man in Belgium. While there is no evidence Özçelik directly contacted the PKK, she did get to Cologne, Germany, a centre of PKK activity in Europe.

Özçelik had been an admirer of the PKK since the age of 13, after watching *Comrade Beritan*, a 2006 film named for Gulnaz Karatas, a female guerrilla whose story is legendary in PKK circles. Karatas had thrown herself into militancy very quickly, and then committed

³¹⁹ Topping, A., ‘Kurds protest in support of British teenager at terrorism hearing’, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/01/kurds-protest-british-shilan-ozcelik-terrorism-old-bailey>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²⁰ ‘Picket Outside Holloway Prison for Shilan Ozcelik, Imprisoned for Allegedly Wanting to Join Fight Against ISIS’, *The Kurdistan Tribune*, 13 March 2015, available at: <http://kurdistantribune.com/picket-outside-holloway-prison-for-shilan-ozcelik-imprisoned-for-allegedly-wanting-to-join-fight-against-isis-13th-march-2015-6pm/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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suicide by jumping off a cliff in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1992 rather than be captured.³²¹ Both of these actions are held up as ideals of ideological purity, will and sacrifice for the organisation. Özçelik also visited the grave of Leyla Saylemez (Comrade Ronahi), one of three female PKK operatives – the other two were Sakine Cansiz and Fidan Dogan – who were assassinated in Paris in January 2013 and buried in Turkey.³²² “In the 25-minute video Özçelik left behind explaining her decision to her family, she said she had taken soil from Ronahi’s grave and made a promise, which she was now going to fulfil.³²³

JOE ROBINSON

Date of birth: c. 1994

Date joined YPG: June 2015

Age: c. 23

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Lancashire, Britain

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Robinson joined the Army when he was 18 and served in Afghanistan as part of the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment in 2012.³²⁴

In September 2014, Robinson was given 240 hours community service and a two-year suspended sentence for inflicting grievous bodily harm.³²⁵

Robinson said that he had been getting steadily more enraged since IS murdered Alan

³²¹ Davies, C., ‘Girl becomes first Briton convicted of trying to join fight against Islamic State in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/20/girl-becomes-first-briton-convicted-of-trying-to-join-fight-against-islamic-state-in-syria>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²² ‘PKK shooting: Kurds mass for women’s funerals’, *BBC News*, 17 January 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21050162>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²³ Davies, C., ‘Girl becomes first Briton convicted of trying to join fight against Islamic State in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/20/girl-becomes-first-briton-convicted-of-trying-to-join-fight-against-islamic-state-in-syria>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²⁴ Rkaina, S., ‘Ex-soldier spends 5 months fighting ISIS in Syria while on run from British justice over teen attack’, *The Mirror*, 26 November 2015, available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ex-soldier-spends-5-months-6903267>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²⁵ Rkaina, S., ‘Ex-soldier spends 5 months fighting ISIS in Syria while on run from British justice over teen attack’, *The Mirror*, 26 November 2015, available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ex-soldier-spends-5-months-6903267>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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Henning on 3 October 2014,³²⁶ and he quit his job and decided to go to fight IS with the YPG after the Sousse atrocity by IS in Tunisia on 26 June 2015. Telling his family he was going to France to join the Foreign Legion, Robinson went to Germany and then to Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq, close to the PKK's headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. Robinson linked up with a number of other foreigners and the Lions of Rojava unit.³²⁷ Robinson says he arrived in Syria and travelled to Kobani, two days after the IS infiltration operation that killed more than 100 people on 26–27 June 2015.³²⁸

Robinson describes himself as motivated by IS's atrocious conduct and the fact "[o]ur government were doing nothing about it. ... I thought, 'If our government's not going to do anything about it, then I will'. I've got the training, so why not use it to help people?" Robinson became keenly interested in the Kurdish people, and also became very critical of the Turkish government. Robinson "said he believes Turkey should be kicked out of NATO and claims to have witnessed Turkish soldiers handing weapons and ammunition to ISIS fighters in Jarabulus ... in August [2015]".³²⁹ Turkey's first act when it intervened in Syria in August 2016 was to expel IS from Jarabulus in about ten hours.

Describing his experience later, Robinson said, "We were not here with a standard military. We were about to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, with no body armor, beat up AK 47s from the cold war, no metal detectors for IEDs, no real intelligence on the ground, limited air support, and with an under-equipped, under-funded militia, using guerrilla warfare tactics, against the modern world's most well-funded and brutal terrorist organisation".³³⁰

Robinson, who was still under sentence when he left the country, returned to Britain on 26 November 2015, and was arrested at Manchester Airport under section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2000,³³¹ which deals with those who engage in preparations for terrorist acts.³³²

³²⁶ Halliday, J., 'Briton on fighting in Syria: "I was terrified the entire way"', *The Guardian*, 25 January 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jan/25/briton-on-fighting-in-syria-i-was-terrified-the-entire-way>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²⁷ Halliday, J., 'Ex-soldier who fought Isis criticises "harrowing" police investigation', *The Guardian*, 11 September 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/sep/11/ex-soldier-isis-police-investigation-joe-robinson-syria>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³²⁸ Rkaina, S., 'Ex-soldier spends 5 months fighting ISIS in Syria while on run from British justice over teen attack', *The Mirror*, 26 November 2015.

³²⁹ Halliday, J., 'Briton on fighting in Syria: "I was terrified the entire way"', *The Guardian*, 25 January 2016.

³³⁰ Robinson, J., 'A journey into the gates of hell', *Medium*, 6 June 2016, available at: <https://medium.com/@joerobinson/a-journey-into-the-gates-of-hell-f66547ba2a85>, last visited: 1 July 2017.

³³¹ Curtis, J., "'I don't agree with what he has done but I'm glad he's home": Mother of ex-soldier who has spent five months fighting ISIS while on the run from British police tells of her relief as he is arrested after arriving back in UK', *The Daily Mail*, 26 November 2015, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3334912/Ex-soldier-spent-months-fighting-ISIS-run-British-police-arrested.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³³² 'Terrorism Act 2006', available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/11/section/5>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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Robinson spent ten months on bail as he was investigated for terrorism offences. He was informed on 9 September 2016 that all restrictions associated with being on police bail had been dropped, though he – and all other YPG foreign fighters – remain under formal investigation.³³³

AIDEN ASLIN

Date of birth: c. 1994³³⁴

Date joined YPG: April 2015

Age: c. 23

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Nottinghamshire, Britain

Occupation: Care worker

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Aslin was a care worker in Newark before he went to join the YPG in April 2015, travelling to Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq, where the PKK has its headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. Aslin had been motivated by a belief that the UK government was not doing enough to defeat IS. He had been questioned by border authorities as he left and, having initially claimed he was going on a backpacking trip, conceded he intended to join the YPG. Nevertheless, he was allowed to leave.³³⁵

In Syria, Aslin was linked to the Lions of Rojava unit and was involved in the Coalition-backed offensive that expelled IS from al-Hawl. After approximately ten months in the YPG's ranks, Aslin returned to Britain on 3 February 2016, after negotiating with the British Consulate in Erbil because he had lost his passport.

The decision about handling YPG foreign fighters in Britain is a local matter, and the Nottinghamshire Police decided to prosecute. Aslin was arrested on his return to the UK and questioned for 30 hours on suspicion of violating the Terrorism Act 2000 by preparing to commit an act of terrorism (Section 5) and weapons training (Section 54).³³⁶

³³³ Halliday, J., 'Ex-soldier who fought Isis criticises "harrowing" police investigation', *The Guardian*, 11 September 2016.

³³⁴ 'Aiden Aslin returns to Syria', *Newark Advertiser*, 10 January 2017, available at: <http://legacy.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/articles/news/Aiden-Aslin-returns-to-Syria>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³³⁵ Nicol, M., 'Carer arrested after battling IS forces in Iraq: 22-year-old questioned over suspected terror offence after landing in Heathrow following ten-month deployment', *The Daily Mail*, 7 February 2016, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3435508/Carer-arrested-battling-forces-Iraq-22-year-old-questioned-suspected-terror-offence-landing-Heathrow-following-ten-month-deployment.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³³⁶ *ibid.*

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At Aslin's bail hearing on 5 April 2016, the PKK orchestrated civil agitation outside the court,³³⁷ and engaged in a broader political effort, through petitions. The activists and their sympathisers held to the line that the YPG and PKK were disconnected entities, so applying the laws on one to membership of the other was alleged to be "poorly informed and racist", demonstrating that British police "cannot tell the difference between Kurdish people from different countries".³³⁸ Aslin had several more hearings and was required to report to police three times per week. At the 20 July 2016 court hearing, the PKK and its front groups organised another protest in his favour.³³⁹

The charges and bail conditions, including the confiscation of his passport, were dropped against Aslin in October 2016. The case formally remained under review by local authorities in conjunction with the Crown Prosecution Service.³⁴⁰ His passport was returned to him, and in January 2017 Aslin went back to Syria, against the will of his family, and rejoined the YPG.³⁴¹

ROBERT CLARKE

Date of birth: c. 1993

Date joined YPG: n/a

Age: c. 24

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Carmarthenshire, Wales, Britain

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Clarke, then 23, was taken into police custody in September 2016 as he tried to board a flight from Heathrow to Jordan. Clarke, who served four years in the military, came to the authorities' attention in July 2016 on suspicion of planning to travel to Syria to join the YPG. He admitted to obstructing an examination under the Terrorism Act on 13 September 2016

³³⁷ 'Defend Aiden Aslin – Drop the Charges Now!', Facebook post, 5 April 2016, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/events/210983555931876/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³³⁸ Van Wilgenburg, W., 'Briton who joined Kurds to fight ISIS faces terrorism charges', *ARA News*, 21 May 2016, available at: aranews.net/2016/05/briton-joined-kurds-fight-isis-faces-terrorism-charges/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³³⁹ 'Stand up for Aiden Aslin on 20 July 2016', *Leicester Kurdish Solidarity Campaign*, 4 July 2016, available at: leicesterkurdishsolidaritycampaign.org.uk/stand-up-for-aiden-aslin-on-20-july-2016/, last visited: 6 August 2017.

³⁴⁰ 'Freedom fighter who battled ISIS won't face charges', *The Newark Advertiser*, 20 October 2016, available at: legacy.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/articles/news/FhssqwfbfO54nrnkO7XEjmKioEQgvhZwXVt7sbgKgumIE, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁴¹ 'Aiden Aslin returns to Syria', *The Newark Advertiser*, 10 January 2017.

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by refusing to give the PIN to his mobile telephone. In January 2017, Clarke was sentenced to a year-long community order; he is not allowed to leave the country during this period.³⁴²

JOSH WALKER

Date of birth: c. 1991

Date joined YPG: June 2016

Age: 26

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Wales, Britain

Occupation: Student

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Walker left school in 2009, at the age of 18. He worked in temporary jobs: construction, gardening and volunteering in the office of a politician. He enrolled at a university in Aberystwyth, Wales, in September 2014, where he studied international politics and strategic studies. Walker had followed the Arab revolts that swept the region beginning in late 2010, but by 2014 the original contests in these countries had either settled or morphed into something else entirely, as in Egypt where revolution and democracy had been replaced by counter-revolution and autocracy. Only in Syria was something like the original “Arab spring” still underway, albeit with the intrusion of various outside powers, both regional states and sub-state actors like IS and the PKK. It was the latter that had attracted Walker’s attention, with its promise of a “social revolution” in Rojava.³⁴³

Walker read, and was enchanted by, Abdullah Ocalan’s *Democratic Confederalism*, and saw in the YPG/PKK’s cause a modern version of the Spanish civil war, where, in his perception, a rag-tag group of far-left activists, including numerous anarchists and socialists from the nearby Welsh mines, had gone to Iberia to attempt to bar the road to fascism. Walker says that he saw parallels between what was happening in the YPG-held areas of Syria and the struggle recorded in George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*,³⁴⁴ a book that describes how a movement presented as a “popular front” was subverted by an exclusivist and totalitarian actor, though many – even many of those on the ground – could not see it until it was too late.

³⁴² Forster, K., ‘Former soldier sentenced under Terrorism Act after attempting to travel to Syria to fight Isis’, *The Independent*, 4 January 2017, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/robert-clarke-fight-isis-sentenced-terrorism-act-attempted-travel-syria-former-soldier-23-a7510026.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁴³ Gallagher, R., ‘To Syria and Back’, *The Intercept*, 10 July 2017, available at: <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/10/josh-walker-isis-uk-terrorism-charge-ypg-syria/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

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Walker saw in IS “the very worst aspects of the state and conservative order”, a combination of militarism, hierarchy, repression, prejudice and misogyny “rolled up into ... its most imperialist, genocidal form”. Walker also took to the Kurdish cause and felt some “solidarity” because of apparent historical similarities between the Kurdish experience and that of the Welsh: “mountain-dwelling people[s] with a history of resistance and their own strange language”.³⁴⁵

In late June 2016, Walker departed Britain for Istanbul and then flew on to Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq. He was transported, along with several other foreign fighters, by Joanna Palani, a Danish–Kurdish YPG operative. After a circuitous journey to avoid Iraqi Kurdish authorities, Walker arrived in Rojava. He said he understood that the YPG has “links” with the PKK, but claimed that such can be “overplayed”.³⁴⁶

In Syria, Walker was sent to the Academy for political-military preparation. He learned to speak Kurdish and operate automatic weapons. He also became good friends with Nazzareno Tassone, a Canadian YPG fighter. Walker operated around the Tishreen Dam and was involved in the Minbij offensive.

Walker was nearly killed by the Turkish airstrikes on 24 November 2016. The Turks bombed an area between Minbij and al-Bab that the YPG had assured the Americans and the Turks it would not conquer after it had captured Minbij with Coalition support. Walker had already been considering leaving. Shaken by this experience, he resolved to leave and in the interim moved into safer territory east of the Euphrates.

Walker was in a safe house in Sulaymaniya, awaiting the organisation of a plane home, when he received the news, on 25 December 2016, that Tassone had been killed.

When Walker arrived back in the UK in late December 2016, he was arrested by the Welsh counterterrorism unit, taken in for questioning, and subsequently found in possession of material that led to a prosecution under Section 58 of the Terrorism Act which outlaws making and collecting information “of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism”. Walker is due to go on trial in October 2017.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

3.2.2 *Australia*

JAMIE REECE WILLIAMS

Date of birth: c. 1986

Date joined YPG: n/a

Age: c. 31

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Melbourne, Australia

Occupation: Security guard

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Jamie Williams trained briefly with the French Foreign Legion before working as a security guard for public venues in Melbourne. In 2013, Williams began paying attention to the “horrendous stuff” the Islamic State was doing and became “extremely frustrated”, he later said. “I found it difficult to sit here every day, doing nothing.” Williams was attracted to the YPG by its seeming democratic character and was impressed by its all-female units. In late 2014, Williams reached out to the YPG through the Lions of Rojava Facebook page. The YPG operatives checked if Williams had a military background (“sort of”), whether he had killed anybody (“no”), and whether he had a criminal record (“no”). The YPG accepted him quickly and instructed him on what to bring for his trip.³⁴⁸

Williams was detained at Melbourne Airport in December 2014 as he attempted to leave to join the YPG. Williams, then 28 years old, told authorities when he was detained that he planned to join the YPG by first travelling to Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq. In July 2015, Williams was charged under Australia’s 2014 law on foreign fighters with preparing for an incursion into a foreign state with the intent to commit a hostile act.³⁴⁹ Williams’ defence team argued that the legislation did not apply to Williams. Their reasoning was that the legislation stipulates that a “defence applies to an act done ... as part of the person’s service in any capacity in or with ... the armed forces of the government of a foreign country”, and the YPG exerted de facto governing authority over the areas in which Williams intended to fight. In February 2016, Williams was cleared.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ Marshall, K., ‘Why Jamie Williams couldn’t fight ISIS’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 July 2016, available at: www.smh.com.au/good-weekend/why-jamie-williams-couldnt-fight-isis-20160707-gq0gmy.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁴⁹ ‘Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Foreign Fighters) Bill 2014’, *The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, September 2014, available at: <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov.au/MediaReleases/Documents/140923-EMCTForeignFightersBill2014.pdf>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵⁰ Oakes, D. and S. Clark, ‘Islamic State: Charges dropped against Australian man Jamie Reece Williams, who planned to join Kurdish militia’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, 9 February 2016, available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-09/prosecution-dropped-against-man-planned-to-fight-islamic-state/7151368>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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The verdict impacted two other Australians: Ashley Dyball and Matthew Gardiner. Both Dyball and Gardiner are believed to have joined the YPG and were under investigation by the Australian government at the time of Williams' acquittal. Though Williams was acquitted, suggesting that the Australian authorities would not be interested in punishing Dyball and Gardiner, the duo remained under investigation, which means that both men have remained quiet about their activities in the region. Michele Harding, the mother of Reece Harding, the sixth YPG foreign fighter to be killed, said, "In reality the Government won ... because by creating this limbo, Ashley and Matthew can't speak, they can't tell you what they've seen."³⁵¹

ASHLEY DYBALL

Date of birth: 1993³⁵²

Date joined YPG: May 2015

Age: c. 24

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Albany Creek, Queensland, Australia

Occupation: Olympian

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No³⁵³

Prior militant ties: None known

Dyball represented Australia as a junior in the Oceania Powerlifting and Bench Press Championships in 2013, and won a gold medal. He left his native Brisbane and travelled in France and the Netherlands prior to joining YPG. On 5 May 2015, he posted a picture of himself in Amman, Jordan, and is believed to have linked up with the YPG soon after this. Using the name "Mitchell Scott," Dyball announced that he was in Syria on 24 May.³⁵⁴ It seems he might have been planning his travel for some time: a friend shared a message from July 2014, in which Dyball said he had "a Business proposal", which

³⁵¹ Oaten, J., 'Reece Harding becomes "symbol of Kurdistan" after his death in fight against IS', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC), 26 June 2016, available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-26/reece-harding-becomes-symbol-of-kurdistan/7543852>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵² Callinan, R., 'Kurdish fighter Ashley Dyball tried to join the Australian Army', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December 2015, available at: www.smh.com.au/national/kurdish-fighter-ashley-dyball-tried-to-join-the-australian-army-20151210-glqk0.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵³ Oaten, J., 'Ashley Dyball: "If I'm the bad guy, charge me"', says foreign fighter questioned by AFP', *Australia Broadcasting Corporation*, 25 October 2016, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-25/ashley-dyball-challenges-afp-to-arrest-him-for-fighting-in-syria/7962118, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵⁴ Doorley, N., K. McKenna, and B. Vonow, 'Brisbane rebel "fighting against ISIS" in Middle East', *The Courier Mail*, 25 May 2015, available at: www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/brisbane-rebel-fighting-against-isis-in-middle-east/news-story/94ea2f276b9d18016ce78d52cac71cd5, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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transpired to be a suggestion to go and fight IS in the ranks of the YPG. The friend declined, and Dyball delayed.³⁵⁵

Dyball gained some media attention after he posted a photograph of himself to social media on 17 June 2015, which showed him bathing (and smoking) in an overturned refrigerator.³⁵⁶

While on a break in Germany on 4 December 2015, Dyball was arrested and held under terrorism laws because Australia had issued an Interpol notice for him. He was deported to Australia on 6 December.³⁵⁷ On arrival in Melbourne, he was held for four hours of questioning. Outside the airport, family, friends and pro-YPG Kurdish activists demonstrated in Dyball's favour. Dyball was met at the airport by Jamie Reece, another Australian who had fought in the ranks of the YPG. Joanna Palani, a Danish YPG fighter, wrote on Facebook, "U [sic] are not alone my friend."³⁵⁸

Though the Australian Federal Police kept their investigation of Dyball open, for possible breaches of the law that bans participation in any foreign conflict unless part of a state force, the AFP did not charge him, and in the first half of 2016 returned his passport to allow him to go on a family holiday to Fiji. But in June 2016, Dyball was detained at Brisbane Airport and his passport was confiscated again after he tried to travel to Sweden on a one-way ticket.³⁵⁹

In October 2016, Dyball was interviewed on the 7.30 show, the premier current affairs show on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and said, "I hope they charge me. ... [T]hen I can go to court, I can have my day, and I might actually win. ... If I'm the bad guy because of [what I did in Syria], charge me. I don't care. I will do my time."³⁶⁰ This high-profile challenge to the authorities received a lot of press attention.

³⁵⁵ Best, M., 'Brisbane man's participation in battle against ISIL confirmed', *9News*, 26 May 2015, available at: www.9news.com.au/national/2015/05/26/20/14/brisbane-mans-participation-in-battle-against-isil-confirmed, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵⁶ Geary, B. G. and L. Radulova, 'Fighting the war against ICE-IS: Australian who travelled to Iraq to fight ISIS takes a bath in a disused fridge as he gives a bizarre glimpse into life on the front line', *The Daily Mail*, 17 June 2015, available at: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3127548/No-bathtub-no-problem-Former-Australian-bench-press-champion-travelled-Iraq-fight-against-ISIS-gives-bizarre-glimpse-life-line.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵⁷ 'Germany Deporting Australian Who Fought Against Islamic State', *Radio Free Liberty/Radio Europe*, 6 December 2015, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/germany-deporting-australian-islamic-state/27409880.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵⁸ Travers, B., 'Anti-Islamic State fighter Ashley Dyball released after arriving at Melbourne Airport', *Herald Sun*, 6 December 2015, available at: www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/antiislamic-state-fighter-ashley-dyballs-parents-call-for-amnesty-upon-melbourne-airport-arrival/news-story/3665f29254a3cc2fcea595f602989de5, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁵⁹ Le Grand, C., 'Fighting for Kurds against Islamic State "may be legal"', 2 June 2016, *The Australian*, available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/legal-affairs/fighting-for-kurds-against-islamic-state-may-be-legal/news-story/b4f14f73ea714e6038361a218bd7fb64>, last visited: 3 August 2017; Doherty, B., 'Ashley Dyball, Australian who fought Isis, tells police: charge me or leave me alone', *The Guardian*, 25 October 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/oct/26/ashely-dyball-australian-who-fought-against-isis-tells-police-charge-me-or-leave-me-alone>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶⁰ Oaten, J., 'Australian man who fought Islamic State challenges AFP to charge him', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 25 October 2016, available at: www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2016/s4563199.htm, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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Dyball was arrested on 31 March 2017 and charged with the murder of a 22-year-old childcare worker, Samuel Thompson, who was found in a shallow grave in Beerburrum State Forest on 3 April. Dyball and his alleged accomplice are also charged with interfering with a corpse. It appears there was an attempt to dissolve Thompson's body with acid.³⁶¹ Dyball briefly appeared in a magistrate's court on 1 April.³⁶² The case is ongoing.

MATTHEW GARDINER

Date of birth: 16 May 1971

Date joined YPG: January 2015

Age: 46

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Northern Territory, Australia

Occupation: Politician

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Gardiner was deployed as a combat engineer during Australia's military expedition to Somalia in 1993, and subsequently became a medic. On 15 January 2015, Gardiner joined the YPG after contact with Kader Kadandir through the Lions of Rojava Facebook page and travelled through Asia, Dubai and then Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq. In Syria, Gardiner met Jamie Bright, another Australian YPG fighter whom Gardiner had known from the military many years before.³⁶³ An investigation was opened into Gardiner after the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported on his trip to Syria.³⁶⁴

At the time Gardiner joined the YPG, he was president of the Northern Territory Labour Party. Gardiner was stripped of that job and his positions in the trade unionist movement. He returned to Australia on 5 April 2015, following which he was briefly detained and questioned. Gardiner then retained his silence because he was being

³⁶¹ Branco, J., 'Body found in shallow grave confirmed as Sam Thompson' *Brisbane Times*, 7 April 2017, available at: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/body-found-in-shallow-grave-confirmed-as-sam-thompson-20170406-gvfma6.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶² 'Ashley Dyball, anti-IS fighter, in custody over suspected murder of Samuel Thompson', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, 1 April 2017, available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-01/ashley-dyball-in-custody-over-suspected-murder-samuel-thompson/8406912>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶³ Szego, J., 'Matthew Gardiner's War', *SBS*, 22 September 2016, available at: www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/feature/matthew-gardiners-war-alp-figure-who-helped-kurds-fighting-syria, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶⁴ Oaten, J. and X. La Canna, 'Matthew Gardiner: How Kurds recruit, why they want the Australian and what his legal position is', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 28 January 2015, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-28/recruitment-moves-by-kurds-and-what-may-happen-to-matt-gardiner/6051596, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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investigated on suspicion of associating with terrorists, a crime that carries a three-year prison sentence. The sentence is ten years if an individual is found to have been a member of the organisation and 25 years if the person recruits for the group, receives training from them, acquires funds for them, or otherwise supports them. On 25 April 2015, after a *Four Corners* episode on female YPJ fighters – a similar programme had aired on *60 Minutes* the night before – Gardiner broke his silence via Twitter, responding to somebody who said the programme was “heavy going but interesting” by saying, “It’s even heavier being there.” Asked for subsequent clarification, Gardiner said he was seeking legal advice and, “I hope you noticed that the tweets did not mention any of my activities.”³⁶⁵

Gardiner was left in a legal limbo – seemingly intentionally. Prosecuting Gardiner was politically difficult because of the body of opinion that views the conflict simply as for or against IS. That decision could be avoided – and simultaneously Gardiner could be prevented from engaging in the propagandist-recruitment role other Western YPG fighters have delved into after returning to their home countries – for as long as the investigation against him remained open, because Gardiner knew that speaking on the matter would damage his legal defence. The February 2016 clearance of Jamie Reece Williams for *trying* to join the YPG buoyed Gardiner somewhat, but Gardiner’s case is different because he had left the country.³⁶⁶

Gardiner gave an interview in September 2016 that – albeit elliptically – gave some details of his journey to Syria. “I know what I did was right,” Gardiner says. “I made a difference; but I’m not going to get recognition, not in my lifetime. If you go to Lake Burley Griffin [in Canberra] there’s a memorial for people who fought in the Spanish civil war. But the thing is, it took sixty years to get there. ... [P]rogressives always win. I just wanted to speed up the timeframe.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ La Canna, X., ‘NT political figure Matthew Gardiner breaks silence on Kurdish groups’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 29 April 2015, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-28/nt-political-figure-matthew-gardiner-breaks-silence/6428608, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶⁶ Hope, Z., ‘Syria travel of Matthew Gardiner still under AFP investigation’, *NT News*, 25 July 2016, available at: www.ntnews.com.au/news/northern-territory/syria-travel-of-matthew-gardiner-still-under-afp-investigation/news-story/9f579369d15fd7a16c549ce1446961ba, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶⁷ Szego, J., ‘Matthew Gardiner’s War’, *SBS*, 22 September 2016.

3.2.3 Denmark

JOANNA PALANI

Date of birth: 1993

Date joined YPJ: November 2014 (though joined the PKK in Europe beforehand)

Age: c. 24

Sex: Female

Place of origin: Denmark

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: Yes

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: PKK

Female fighters of the YPJ have been an important part of the YPG’s presentation of secular liberalism to Western audiences. This has fused with the anti-Islamic State messaging in some memorable cases, notably the false claim³⁶⁸ that Islamic State jihadists run away from YPJ fighters because they believe that death at their hands means they cannot go to paradise.³⁶⁹ Palani became an example of this sensationalist coverage: picked up by the tabloid press and named “Lady Death”,³⁷⁰ Palani was said to have felled 100 Islamic State fighters with a sniper rifle.³⁷¹

Palani was born in 1993 in a refugee camp in Ramadi to Iranian Kurdish parents, and moved to Denmark at three years of age.³⁷²

Palani left Denmark in the second half of 2014 and spent time training in Ukraine, Finland and Russia. In November 2014, she landed in Iraq and was facilitated into Syria to join the ranks of the YPJ. “I wasn’t taking it seriously when I first came there,” Palani says. “But after the first attack” – an Islamic State sniper shot dead a Swedish YPG fighter

³⁶⁸ Touchard, L., ‘Are the IS jihadists afraid to fight women? No’, *CONOPS*, 30 May 2017, available at: <http://conops-mil.blogspot.co.uk/2017/05/les-jihadistes-de-lei-ont-ils-peur-de.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁶⁹ Dearden, L., “‘Isis are afraid of girls’: Kurdish female fighters believe they have an unexpected advantage fighting in Syria”, *The Independent*, 9 December 2015, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-are-afraid-of-girls-kurdish-female-fighters-believe-they-have-an-unexpected-advantage-fighting-a6766776.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁷⁰ Fagge, N. and L. Whyte, ‘EXCLUSIVE – “ISIS want to kill me, capture me and turn me into a sex slave”: Danish student branded a terrorist after training as “Lady Death” sniper to fight jihadis in Syria reveals she has lost everything’, *The Daily Mail*, 7 February 2017, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4170840/Joanna-Palani-admits-sniper-fights-Isis.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁷¹ Robson, S., ‘Danish student “who killed 100 ISIS militants has \$1million bounty on her head but is treated as terrorist”’, *The Mirror*, 9 February 2017, available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/danish-student-who-killed-100-9776839>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁷² Whyte, L., ‘Danish woman who fought against Isis faces jail sentence’, *The Guardian*, 19 December 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/19/danish-woman-who-fought-against-isis-faces-jail-sentence>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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next to her on her first night on duty – “I took it seriously indeed”.³⁷³ Palani says she was in Kobani in late 2014, when the Islamic State offensive against the city was ongoing, and trained female fighters. This is an odd task for a 22-year-old novice to be given, but according to Palani this “wasn’t [her] first time over there”, and it appears she had connected with the PKK in Europe long before. Despite the media having “made out that [she] was this young girl, running away from high school to fight ISIS, ... it was not like that at all”.³⁷⁴ Palani says she worked alongside the Russian special forces who have embedded with the YPG.³⁷⁵ In early 2015, Palani began operating in the areas of Iraq held by the PKK, working with Yazidi women liberated from Islamic State captivity who had been raped and otherwise abused.³⁷⁶

Palani fought with the YPJ for approximately six months, until around May 2015, and then moved back into Iraq and joined the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Palani returned to Denmark on a 15-day break from the Peshmerga in September 2015. While in Denmark, she was impacted by a travel ban for violating the foreign fighter laws and had her passport confiscated. “How can I pose a threat to Denmark and other countries by being a soldier in an official army that Denmark trains and supports directly in the fight against the Islamic State?” Palani wrote on Facebook.³⁷⁷ Palani has been very open on social media about her experiences in Syria and Iraq.³⁷⁸

On 6 June 2016, Palani travelled to Qatar. While there is some dispute about what happened next, it has been reported that she went back to Syria and fractured her skull in a fall in October 2016 during a battle in Minbij.³⁷⁹ Upon return, the Danish authorities charged Palani with violating her travel ban, and she was set to appear in court in December 2016.³⁸⁰

Palani was arrested on 7 December 2016 in Denmark. She was ordered to be released on 23 December, but stripped of her passport. Denmark has a similar case working through its courts related to a man who joined the Peshmerga, but his case is likely to be treated differently because, unlike the PKK, no Iraqi Kurdish organisation is on the terrorism blacklist.³⁸¹

³⁷³ Whyte, L., ‘The Girl Who Ran Away to Fight ISIS’, *Vice News*, 25 May 2016, available at: https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/qvd483/joanna-palani-syria-iraq-ran-away-fight-isis, last visited: 3 August 2017

³⁷⁴ Billing, L., ‘The student branded a terrorist despite risking her life to fight Isis in Syria’, *Metro*, 7 February 2017, available at: <http://metro.co.uk/2017/02/07/the-student-branded-a-terrorist-despite-risking-her-life-to-fight-jihadis-in-syria-6230972/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁷⁵ ‘Russia admits to training Syria Kurds’, *NOW Lebanon*, 29 March 2016, available at: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566785-russia-admits-to-training-syria-kurds>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁷⁶ Whyte, L., ‘The Girl Who Ran Away to Fight ISIS’, *Vice News*, 25 May 2016.

³⁷⁷ ‘Danish woman loses passport for fighting Isis’, *The Local*, 26 October 2015, available at: <https://www.thelocal.dk/20151026/danish-woman-who-fought-isis-has-passport-taken>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁷⁸ Billing, L., ‘The student branded a terrorist despite risking her life to fight Isis in Syria’, *Metro*, 7 February 2017.

³⁷⁹ Billing, L., ‘The student branded a terrorist despite risking her life to fight Isis in Syria’, *Metro*, 7 February 2017.

³⁸⁰ Dearden, L., ‘Danish woman faces jail after violating travel ban for fighting against Isis with Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq’, *The Independent*, 13 December 2016, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/joanna-palani-danish-kurdish-woman-ypg-peshmerga-iraq-syria-fighting-isis-faces-jail-passport-police-a7471266.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸¹ ‘New effort will try to take foreigners’ passports’, *Ekstra Bladet*, 20 June 2017, available at: <http://ekstrabladet.dk/112/nyt-forsog-vil-atter-proeve-at-inddrage-udlandskrigers-pas/6714380>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

3.3 Current and Former YPG Foreign Fighters

BRIAN WILSON

Date of birth: c. 1971–72

Date joined YPG: c. June 2014³⁸² (though he has self-reported it as September 2014³⁸³)

Age: 45 or 46

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Ohio, United States

Occupation:

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Wilson is a military veteran, having served in the US Air Force,³⁸⁴ and fought in DESERT STORM, the US-led operation in 1990-91 to reverse Saddam Husayn’s annexation of Kuwait.³⁸⁵

In October 2014, Wilson became the second American – after Jordan Matson – to publicly identify himself as being in the ranks of the YPG, though Wilson was in fact the first to do so, and served as the inspiration for Matson’s decision.³⁸⁶ Despite Wilson (also known as “Zagros”) not having seen any combat,³⁸⁷ he became a spur to a number of other Americans joining the YPG, such as Jeremy Woodard (“Sipan”), another American military veteran.³⁸⁸

Wilson claims that serving as a policeman for 16 years in his native Ohio was good preparation for joining the YPG. He said shortly after he joined the YPG, “I knew of the Kurds’ plight from long ago, and not just that of those in Syria. ... These guys are not only fighting ISIS but, unlike other armed groups in the region, they also talk about democracy and human rights.”³⁸⁹ Wilson has disappeared from public view since late 2014.

³⁸² Percy, J., ‘Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 September 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸³ Wilson, B., ‘Help Rojava by donating to trusted volunteers’, *FundRazr*, 10 October 2015, available at: <https://fundrazr.com/813IGd>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸⁴ Omar, Z., ‘Exclusive: American Joins Kurds’ Anti-IS Fight’, *Voice of America*, 16 October 2014, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/exclusive-american-explains-why-he-joined-syrian-kirds-against-is/2486034.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸⁵ D’Amato, P., ‘Meet the 43-year-old Desert Storm Air Force veteran who joined up with Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS’, *The Daily Mail*, 7 October 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2783455/American-fighter-joins-Kurds-battle-against-Islamic-State.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸⁶ Percy, J., ‘Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 September 2015.

³⁸⁷ Said, R., ‘American fighter joins Kurds in battle against Islamic State’, *Reuters*, 7 October 2014, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-fighter-idUSKCN0HW0WT20141007>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸⁸ Muir, J., ‘Islamic State: The US volunteers who fight with Syria’s Kurds’, *BBC News*, 21 October 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29705167>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁸⁹ Haltiwanger, J., ‘These American Veterans Joined Forces With The Kurds To Fight ISIS’, *Elite Daily*, 23 October 2014, available at: elitedaily.com/news/world/american-veterans-fighting-against-isis/810185/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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JORDAN MATSON

Date of birth: c. 1986–87

Date joined YPG: June 2014

Age: 30 or 31³⁹⁰

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Wisconsin, United States

Occupation: Meat-packer (factory work)

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

A native of Sturtevant, Matson had never been outside the United States before he joined the YPG. Matson joined the Army in May 2006 and served at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Standard Army enlistments are between two and six years. Matson was discharged after 18 months, in November 2007, having been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Matson says this was incorrect: he was going through a divorce at the time. Matson “later decided he had an emptiness in his life because he hadn’t deployed”.³⁹¹

Matson was pulled over by police in the evening of 6 November 2012 and found to have been driving drunk. A handgun was found in the car. Matson stated that “he planned to shoot himself that night”, according to the police report. Indeed, Matson says he tried to kill himself as he was being pulled over but the weapon malfunctioned. “Matson stated that he had been depressed since he was ‘railroaded out’ of the military in 2007”, and added that “he was upset about the election results and could not live under a socialist president”, a reference to the victory of Barack Obama in the US Presidential Election that night. Matson was sentenced to eight months in prison and served 15 days with one year of probation. This was despair, not criminality, from Matson.³⁹²

Matson attended a video game conference in April 2014 where he had the chance to play *Warhammer*, a game still in its testing phase. Matson had been increasingly involved in the online gaming community for several years before this. He was working the “third shift” (the “graveyard” or midnight-to-dawn shift) at a meat-packing plant in Wisconsin called Gordon’s Foods at this time.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Salama, V. and B. Janssen, ‘Why this 28-year-old veteran from Wisconsin is fighting ISIS in Iraq’, The Associated Press, 4 February 2015, available at: www.businessinsider.com/why-this-28-year-old-from-wisconsin-is-fighting-isis-in-iraq-2015-2/?IR=T, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁹¹ Tuysuz, G., J. Rizzo and C. J. Carter, ‘3 Americans fighting alongside Kurds in Syria against ISIS, official says’, CNN, 3 October 2014, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/02/world/meast/isis-american-syria-kurds/index.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.; Percy, J., ‘Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS’, The New York Times Magazine, 30 September 2015.

³⁹² Siegel, J., ‘The U.S. Veteran and Wisconsin Boy Who Went to Fight ISIS in Syria’, The Daily Beast, 3 October 2014, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-us-veteran-and-wisconsin-boy-who-went-to-fight-isis-in-syria>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁹³ *ibid.*

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Matson first voiced his intention to join the YPG in September 2011, and would become the second American to join (after Brian Wilson, whose example inspired Matson), in June 2014. He travelled to Poland and then to Turkey and was then taken across the border into northern Iraq, where the PKK has its headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. Matson was the first American to gain wide public notice for being in the ranks of the YPG, on 30 September 2014.³⁹⁴ He has explained his motives primarily in terms of carrying out a duty he felt it was the US government's responsibility to fulfil.³⁹⁵

Matson was injured by shrapnel on 1 October 2014, and soon became the most recognisable non-Kurdish YPG operative. During his recovery period, Matson set up the Lions of Rojava Facebook page, which recruited a lot of the early Westerners to the YPG, many of whom were, like Matson, military veterans. The Facebook page was also a key contact point between the YPG and Western journalists, which meant Matson gained exposure.³⁹⁶ The page was later handed over to a female YPG operative.³⁹⁷

Matson was in Sweden by late June 2015 and was engaged in pro-YPG (and anti-Turkey) agitation in Gothenburg, attending a rally³⁹⁸ and a question-and-answer-style event.³⁹⁹ Matson claimed to have “personal experience of Turkey supporting Daesh”, with Turkish border guards having fired on the YPG after IS jihadists fled into Turkey to prevent the YPG pursuing them. Matson contended that the negative attention the YPG and PKK had been receiving was an effort by Turkey to gain international support for an intervention against the YPG in order to “keep their supply line to ISIS” through the last IS-held border town, Jarabulus. Matson claims that the June 2015 raid by IS in Kobani was conducted by IS coming in from Turkey.⁴⁰⁰

A month later, Matson was in Britain disseminating YPG messaging, including an appearance on the BBC where he denied that the YPG was connected to the PKK.⁴⁰¹ In

³⁹⁴ *ibid.*

³⁹⁵ Jordan Matson: Over the winter the US citizens inside YPG will be Hundreds', *You Tube*, 11 November 2014, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMGJux3i_Pw, last visited: 3 August 2017; 'Back from Battle', *You Tube*, 16 February 2016, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMNw_t92hN0, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁹⁶ Percy, J., 'Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS', *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 September 2015; D'Amato, P., 'Meet the 43-year-old Desert Storm Air Force veteran who joined up with Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS', *The Daily Mail*, 7 October 2014.

³⁹⁷ Aston, H., 'Mother of killed Australian Ashley Johnston did not know he was on the frontline against Islamic State', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2015, available at: www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/mother-of-killed-australian-ashley-johnston-did-not-know-he-was-on-the-frontline-against-islamic-state-20150303-13tnk5.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁹⁸ Kobane, S., 'American YPG fighter Jordan Matson, on a visit to Sweden today', *Facebook post*, 28 June 2015, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/297459630456872/videos/433951713474329/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

³⁹⁹ Jordan Matson's Interview in Gothenborg, Sweden 2015', *You Tube*, 14 July 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aB9EZhAmB8>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 18:00–21:30.

⁴⁰¹ 'American YPG Fighter Jordan Matson On BBC 29.07.2015', *You Tube*, 30 July 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DW97TFrmp1A>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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late August 2015, Matson, “Macer Gifford” and others attended a memorial service for Konstandinos “Kosta” Scurfield, the first British foreign fighter to be killed fighting for the YPG.⁴⁰²

Matson married a Kurdish woman from Istanbul while in Sweden in the summer of 2015.⁴⁰³ He returned to the United States in February 2016.⁴⁰⁴ Matson returned to Syria in late July or early August 2016.

Turkey launched Operation EUPHRATES SHIELD on 24 August 2016, intervening directly into Syria for the first time, just a few days after a terrible suicide bombing by IS at a Kurdish wedding in eastern Turkey. The Turkish operation expelled IS from the town of Jarabulus in a few hours and soon swept the terrorists from a swathe of land along the Syria–Turkey border. The intervention also put an end to the maximalist programme of the YPG.⁴⁰⁵

Matson was among those put forward by the YPG as a spokesman against Turkey’s actions in Syria. Matson noted that he had been back in Syria for the Minbij operation – and “the push to Jarabulus,” which the YPG had said it would not do and which was the immediate trigger for the long-planned Turkish intervention. Matson said that Turkey had blocked the YPG advance on Jarabulus by capturing the town through its own forces and groups “linked to al-Qaeda”, a rote manner in which the YPG (and the pro-Assad coalition) refer to all elements of the rebellion. Matson said IS was “being supplied” with food, ammunition and logistical support by Turkey, and the appearance that Turkey was now fighting IS was a mirage.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² ‘Comrades honor British YPG fighter Kosta Erik Scurfield’, YouTube, 2 August 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEUSyRDU84>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁰³ ‘US veteran fights against ISIS, weds Kurdish woman’, The Daily Sabah, 16 July 2015, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/life/2015/07/16/us-veteran-fights-against-isis-weds-kurdish-woman>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁰⁴ Handelman, B., ‘Back from the battlefield: Sturtevant man returns home from fighting ISIS in Syria’, Fox News, 17 February 2016, available at: fox6now.com/2016/02/16/back-from-the-battlefield-sturtevant-man-returns-home-from-fighting-isis-in-syria/, last visited: 3 August 2017; ‘Back from Battle’, YouTube, 16 February 2016.

⁴⁰⁵ Itani, F., ‘Why Turkey Went to War in Syria’, Foreign Policy, 24 August 2016, available at: foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/24/why-turkey-finally-went-to-war-in-syria-jarabulus-invasion-kurds/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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JEREMY WOODARD

Date of birth: c. 1986–87

Date joined YPG: 16 September 2014⁴⁰⁷

Age: 30 or 31⁴⁰⁸

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Mississippi, United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Woodard, also known as “Sipan Ahmed,” served eight years in the US military, undertaking tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq with the Second Infantry Division of the US Army. He was one of the earliest YPG foreign fighters to come to public attention in late October 2014.⁴⁰⁹

Woodard came to attention because the YPG brought him to attention. He was interviewed, and this was disseminated over YouTube and social media and eventually picked up by the mainstream press. The YPG did this with a number of foreigners as part of its political warfare to bind the Americans, who had begun providing airstrikes around Kobani, to its cause. The YPG messaging had three key themes: that it was the most politically acceptable actor in Syria, that its project was anti-IS, and that it needed more help. Woodard stuck to this perfectly. Woodard testified to being motivated to join the YPG by a sense of moral outrage at the Islamic State’s perpetration of massacres, sexual violence and displacement. His Christian faith meant the suffering of Christians at IS’s hands specifically moved him, according to family.⁴¹⁰ He said that the YPG had put a stop to some of this by fighting IS and installed a more decent form of government, but the YPG needed help. Woodard’s suggestion was more airstrikes, more weapons, and American troops on the ground.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁶ ‘American member of YPG: Turkey’s intervention in Syria aimed at impeding our advance against ISIS’, *YouTube*, 5 September 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi2LgwhoVFY>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁰⁷ ‘American YPG Fighter Jeremy Woodard: Everybody Should Step Up!’, *YouTube*, 27 October 2014, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_jLWwS0eeg, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁰⁸ Apel, T., ‘Mississippi man travels to Syria to fight ISIS’, *The Clarion-Ledger*, 21 October 2014, available at: <http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2014/10/21/mississippi-man-fights-isis/17652007/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁰⁹ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹¹ ‘American YPG Fighter Jeremy Woodard: Everybody Should Step Up!’, *YouTube*, 27 October 2014.

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Woodard had entered into combat straight away, and by the end of October 2014 he had narrowly averted serious injury, and had a tooth chipped in a grenade explosion.⁴¹² In February 2015, Woodard claimed to have killed two IS jihadists in battle.⁴¹³ By April 2015 he had left the YPG and joined the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, which he noted was a lot better equipped. Woodard was part of a programme under which the Peshmerga began to accept a limited number of Western fighters.⁴¹⁴ Woodard was still in the region as of July 2015.⁴¹⁵

GILLIAN ROSENBERG

Date of birth: 12 November 1983⁴¹⁶

Date joined YPJ: November 2014

Age: 33

Sex: Female

Place of origin: Canadian immigrant to Israel; dual citizen

Occupation: Unemployed

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Gill Rosenberg was born and raised in the Vancouver area of Canada. She was the valedictorian – the speaker at the graduation ceremony – for her class at the Maimonides Jewish High School in 2001. Rosenberg went on to study airport operations management in British Columbia.⁴¹⁷

In 2006, escaping a disrupted home life, Rosenberg, then aged 22, emigrated to Israel, where she joined the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) through the MAHAL programme for overseas volunteers. She initially enlisted with the Carakal Battalion, one of two full combat units in the IDF that contains both men and women, and the only one that is majority female. But she was soon reassigned: as an only child, she was not allowed in a

⁴¹² Muir, J., 'Islamic State: The US volunteers who fight with Syria's Kurds', *BBC News*, 21 October 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29705167>, last visited: 6 August 2017.

⁴¹³ 'US Veteran Joined YPG to Fight ISIS', 10 February 2015, *Military.com*, available at: <http://www.military.com/video/operations-and-strategy/terrorism/us-veteran-joined-ypg-to-fight-isis/4041526690001>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴¹⁴ Van Wilgenburg, W., 'New programme recruits Americans to fight against IS', *Middle East Eye*, 10 April 2015, available at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/new-program-recruits-americans-fight-against-1166542678>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴¹⁵ 'Why some Americans are volunteering to fight the Islamic State', *PBS Newshour*, 21 July 2015, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/americans-volunteering-fight-islamic-state/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴¹⁶ Logan, N., 'Canadian-born Gill Rosenberg joins Kurds to fight ISIS: reports', *Global News*, 11 November 2014, available at: <http://globalnews.ca/news/1665784/canadian-born-gill-rosenberg-joins-kurds-to-fight-isis-reports/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴¹⁷ Hartman, B., 'The Curious Case of Gill Rosenberg', *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 August 2015, available at: www.jpost.com/Middle-East/ISIS-Threat/The-curious-case-of-Gill-Rosenberg-412120, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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combat unit. Rosenberg served as a civil aviation pilot in a search-and-rescue unit of the IDF Home Front Command. She served just over a year and two months in the army.⁴¹⁸

After her time in the military, Rosenberg engaged in a very grand criminal financial enterprise, which is believed to have had links to Israeli organised crime. Apparently led into it by an American friend at an *Ulpan* Hebrew class, the basic set-up was that Rosenberg and her associates would trick elderly Americans into sending them money, usually tens of thousands of dollars and in some cases hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁴¹⁹ Some of the elderly people targeted by Rosenberg and her collaborators lost their homes or their medical care, and the scam “hastened some elderly victims’ deaths”, according to the assistant US attorney in the Southern District of New York.⁴²⁰

In July 2009, 11 people, including Rosenberg, were arrested after an indictment was filed in New York, and it led to the largest extradition there has been from Israel to the United States. Rosenberg would be held in jail for more than four years.⁴²¹

When Rosenberg was released from jail in November 2013 she remained under house arrest, and says she spent it in Kiryas Joel, a Hassidic village in New York, in the home of a Satmar rabbi who had posted her bail.

Rosenberg pleaded guilty at her sentencing on 14 July 2014 to three counts of fraud and swindles. While not as culpable as some involved, she was also more culpable than others. The sentence was: time served, six years of probation or supervision (two years for each the three convictions), and restitution costs of \$8.2 million, to be paid by the confiscation of 10% of monthly earnings.

Rosenberg says she was required to leave the United States within 30 days of her sentence – though she had to keep in contact with her probation officer. In August 2014, she flew to Israel.⁴²²

Rosenberg was subsequently recruited through the Lions of Rojava Facebook page.⁴²³ She left Israel and travelled to Amman and then Erbil on 2 November 2014.⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁸ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ *ibid.*

⁴²⁰ *ibid.*

⁴²¹ ‘Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Extradition of Four Israeli Defendants Charged in Multi-Million-Dollar Phony “Lottery Prize” Schemes’, *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, 4 January 2012, available at: <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2012/manhattan-u.s.-attorney-announces-extradition-of-four-israeli-defendants-charged-in-multi-million-dollar-phony-lottery-prize-schemes>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴²² Hartman, B., ‘The Curious Case of Gill Rosenberg’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 August 2015.

⁴²³ Bender, D., ‘Canadian-Israeli Woman Fighting With Kurds Against ISIS’, *Algemeiner*, 10 November 2014, available at: <https://www.algemeiner.com/2014/11/10/canadian-israeli-woman-fighting-with-kurds-against-isis-audio/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴²⁴ ‘Israeli-Canadian woman returns from fighting with Kurds in Syria’, *The Times of Israel*, 12 July 2015, available at: www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-woman-returns-after-fighting-with-kurds-in-syria/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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In describing her motives for joining the YPG, Rosenberg mentioned the IS assault on the Sinjar area in August 2014. “From what I saw, it was like a genocide was taking place,” Rosenberg would later say. “We say as Jews ‘never again’ ... and that means not just for Jews, it means for anybody. We don’t stay silent and watch a genocide take place anywhere, to anyone. For me, I felt like there was something I could do and I wanted to help. I saw that they had women fighting on the frontlines and I thought, ‘Why not me’.”⁴²⁵ Rosenberg has also said that joining the YPJ, or more specifically joining the war against IS, was “seeking redemption ... for my past”.

It was on 10 November 2014 that Rosenberg came to public notice – though her name remained secret – when she conducted a telephone interview from near the Iraq–Syria border with a radio station of the Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA).⁴²⁶ Rosenberg claimed that she was “given an RPG by the Kurdish army”. She says she began the training process with the YPG the day before that interview.

Rosenberg came to even greater attention later in the month after wide media speculation that she had been kidnapped by IS near Kobani, where the tide had begun to turn against IS, after such claims were made on “websites ... known to be close to, or even serving as a front for [IS]”.⁴²⁷ Rosenberg quashed the rumours 24 hours later with a post on her Facebook page on 1 December 2014.⁴²⁸

Around February 2015, after three months with the YPG, “the bitter cold and dire conditions on the Syrian front became too much and [Rosenberg] left for Erbil”, where she connected with the Dwekh Nawsha, an Assyrian Christian militia that has taken in some Westerners. Rosenberg stayed in the house with the other foreign fighters in Batnaya, just over a mile from the front line with IS. Rosenberg did not tell Dwekh Nawsha that she was a Jew or Israeli.⁴²⁹

Rosenberg returned to Israel, having flown first from Iraq to France, on 12 July 2015. She was detained for several hours on returning to Israel and questioned by the Israeli Security Agency (SHABAK or SHIN BET).⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ ‘Gill Rosenberg, a Canadian-Israeli woman, speaks about joining the YPJ/PKK’, *YouTube*, 29 June 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgcL-bRh-Xg>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴²⁶ The IBA was Israel’s public broadcaster between 1968 and its dissolution in May 2017.

⁴²⁷ Melman, Y., ‘Israeli-Canadian Says ISIS Kidnapping Reports Untrue: “I’m Totally Safe And Secure”’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 1 December 2014, available at: www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Israeli-Canadian-woman-reportedly-kidnapped-by-ISIS-makes-contact-Im-totally-safe-and-secure-383371, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴²⁸ ‘Canadian Gill Rosenberg “safe” after reports of ISIS kidnapping’, *Global News*, 2 December 2014, available at: globalnews.ca/news/1700257/canadian-israeli-woman-reportedly-captured-by-isis/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴²⁹ Hartman, B., ‘The Curious Case of Gill Rosenberg’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 August 2015.

⁴³⁰ ‘Israeli-Canadian woman returns from fighting with Kurds in Syria’, *The Times of Israel*, 12 July 2015.

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When speaking about her experiences, one question that naturally came up was whether she had experienced any difficulties making her way in the Middle East as a Jewish Israeli. Rosenberg said that while her Israeli and Jewish identities were known to senior YPG commanders, it was concealed from the rank and file because although “the Kurds love Israel, they love the Jewish people”, the YPG was working with Arabs who “might not be so fond of Jews and Israelis, so they said, ‘It would be better if you just tell people you’re Canadian.’” Rosenberg encouraged Israel to provide support, in the form of training and weapons, to the YPG.⁴³¹

The YPG has portrayed itself not only as pro-Western, but also as pro-Israel, and has used Jewish volunteers like Rosenberg and Robert Amos to reach out, at least politically, to the Jewish state. Doubtless, the YPG would accept support from Israel, but it is, historically – in ideology and organisation – hostile to Israel.

After returning to Israel, Rosenberg continued to agitate on behalf of the YPG, and to push the effective parts of their messaging with Western audiences. In one interview, she claimed that “in Syria, women are the ones that are winning the war”. Rosenberg was also insistent that the YPG’s campaign was “the world’s fight”, and thus they should receive more support from Western states. Rosenberg said she left Syria because of advances by Iran – which is “just as great a threat, if not greater [than IS]” – and planned to go into work in the humanitarian sphere,⁴³² with which she had already forged connections.⁴³³

⁴³¹ ‘Gill Rosenberg, a Canadian-Israeli woman, speaks about joining the YPJ/PKK’, *YouTube*, 29 June 2017.

⁴³² *ibid.*

⁴³³ Hartman, B., ‘The Curious Case of Gill Rosenberg’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 August 2015.

JAMES HUGHES and JAMIE READ

Date of birth: Hughes born c. 1988 and Read born in 1990⁴³⁴

Date joined YPG: November 2014

Age: 29 and 31

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Britain

Occupation: Security company

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Hughes was publicly identified as being in Rojava in November 2014.⁴³⁵ Then 26 years old, he had been living in Malvern, Worcestershire, and had travelled to Syria with Read. Read, 24 at the time and living in Newmains, Lanarkshire, in Scotland, was, like Hughes, a former soldier and had done three tours in Afghanistan.⁴³⁶ Read said that the Islamic State's beheading of Alan Henning on 3 October 2014 had been "the final straw".⁴³⁷ Hughes and Read joined the Lions of Rojava unit within the YPG, whose most prominent member was Jordan Matson. The Lions used Facebook to entice people to "send terrorists to hell and save humanity" from the Islamic State by joining the YPG.⁴³⁸

Read served in the army until 2010, and then moved into the private sector.⁴³⁹ In August 2014, Read and Hughes founded a security company, The Pathfinder Group – Terrorism & Conflict Research Center (TCRC), which aimed to collect information about terrorist groups and provide "specialist intelligence and surveillance services". TCRC's motto was, "We will go where the rest fear to go."⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁴ Tomlinson, S., "'Killing Alan Henning was the final straw': British soldier duo who travelled to Syrian front line to fight ISIS reveal they are avenging beheading death of aid worker", *The Daily Mail*, 5 December 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2861906/Killing-Alan-Henning-final-straw-British-soldier-duo-travelled-Syrian-line-fight-ISIS-reveal-avenging-beheading-death-aid-worker.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴³⁵ Jordan, K., 'Family "very proud" of former soldier from Reading fighting against ISIS in Syria', *Get Reading*, 25 November 2014, available at: <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/family-very-proud-former-soldier-8172828>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴³⁶ Townsend, M., 'Revealed: UK "mercenaries" fighting Islamic State terrorist forces in Syria', *The Guardian*, 22 November 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/22/uk-mercenaries-fighting-islamic-state-terrorist-syria>, last visited: 7 August 2017.

⁴³⁷ Tomlinson, S., "'Killing Alan Henning was the final straw': British soldier duo who travelled to Syrian front line to fight ISIS reveal they are avenging beheading death of aid worker", *The Daily Mail*, 5 December 2014.

⁴³⁸ Swindon, P., 'Scot tells of joining Syria fight', *Evening Times* (Glasgow), 24 November 2014, available at: http://www.eveningtimes.co.uk/news/13297248.Scot_tells_of_joining_Syria_fight/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴³⁹ Smith, A., 'Ex-British Soldiers Held at Heathrow After Returning Home From Fighting ISIS', *Newsweek*, 11 December 2014, available at: www.newsweek.com/ex-british-soldiers-held-heathrow-after-returning-home-fighting-isis-291056, last visited: 7 August 2017.

⁴⁴⁰ Tomlinson, S., "'Killing Alan Henning was the final straw': British soldier duo who travelled to Syrian front line to fight ISIS reveal they are avenging beheading death of aid worker", *The Daily Mail*, 5 December 2014.

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Read and Hughes' trip was part-funded by a security consultancy, the director of which said that "they told him they had travelled to the region for business, not to fight", and the firm cut ties with the pair after they claimed to be motivated by the murder of Alan Henning.⁴⁴¹

DEAN PARKER

Date of birth: c. 1965–66

Date joined YPG: November 2014⁴⁴²

Age: 51 or 52

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Born in Florida, had been living in Colorado, United States

Occupation: Surf instructor

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Parker has no military background and describes himself as a "surfer and a traveller". He claims to have been motivated to join the YPG after seeing the scenes of Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar by IS's siege, starving and dehydrating. Parker describes being reduced to tears by the news coverage and buying a plane ticket "right then". This was "God's call," says Parker. After recovering some composure, Parker pushed his trip back for 30 days so he could set his affairs in order.⁴⁴³

A month after his arrival, Parker described his decision to join the YPG as "the best thing that's ever happened to me in my life". He was being trained slowly and eased into the YPG's military campaign. Parker says he spent a lot of time with Jordan Matson, and was "taken ... under his wing". Parker was also associated with the other Americans in Rojava at that time, notably Brian Wilson and Jeremy Woodard.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Murphy, S., 'Jihadi hunters... or fantasists? They said they risked their lives to battle ISIS in Syria. So why do witnesses insist these UK fighters were miles from action... and only in it for money?', *The Daily Mail*, 27 December 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2888715/Jihadi-hunters-fantasists-said-risked-lives-battle-ISIS-Syria-witnesses-insist-UK-fighters-miles-action-money.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁴² Civiroglu, M., 'American YPG Fighter Dean Parker Tells His Interesting Story', *Blog*, 19 December 2014, available at: <https://civiroglu.net/2014/12/19/american-ypg-dparker/>, last visited: 3 August 2017. Parker said he had been in Rojava for 38 days, which would be 11 November 2014.

⁴⁴³ 'American YPG Fighter Dean Parker Tells His Story', *YouTube*, 18 December 2014, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP5Tj8oZ8OA>, last visited: 3 August 2017.; Wyke, T. and T. MacFarlan, "'God was calling me to fight ISIS": Surf dude ditches watersports job on Costa Rica beach to become a jihadi hunter with Kurds fighting extremists in Syria', *The Daily Mail*, 1 January 2015, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2862608/American-grandfather-Dean-Parker-joins-Kurds-fight-ISIS-Syria-abandoning-idyllic-life-surf-instructor-Costa-Rica.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁴⁴ 'American YPG Fighter Dean Parker Tells His Story', *YouTube*, 18 December 2014.

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In an interview in December 2014, Parker transmitted – seemingly in all sincerity – the YPG’s messaging. He maintained that the YPG are “fighting for humanity ... for freedom and democracy ... for everybody in America, they’re fighting for everybody in Europe, they’re for everybody in the world. So the people [in the West] need to get behind YPG ... these are the allies that the West needs.” And Parker accused the Turkish government of supporting terrorism and said it should be expelled from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization: “Turkey has taken sides with Daesh ... it’s an ally of Daesh, and why they’re still in NATO is beyond me.”⁴⁴⁵

Parker left Rojava two months later and has not returned.⁴⁴⁶

“MACER GIFFORD”

Date of birth: c. 1986-87

Date joined YPG: December 2014⁴⁴⁷ or January 2015⁴⁴⁸

Age: 30 or 31⁴⁴⁹

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Cambridgeshire, Britain

Occupation: Currency trader

Kurdish descent: No

Military background:

Prior militant ties: None known

“Gifford” is a pseudonym; only the man’s first name is publicly known: Harry. Gifford was working in the City of London as a currency trader before he decided to join the YPG.⁴⁵⁰

Gifford has said that he was motivated to join the YPG by images of the suffering caused by IS in Sinjar and Kobani in the summer and autumn of 2014.⁴⁵¹ He describes being

⁴⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ Jensen, K. T., ‘This Guy Went From Telling Jokes On Twitter To Driving A Tank In Syria’, *Dose*, 24 January 2017, available at: <https://dose.com/this-guy-went-from-telling-jokes-on-twitter-to-driving-a-tank-in-syria-a4c24920a052>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁴⁷ Foreign Volunteers in YPG’s Tactical Medical Unit (TMU), *YouTube*, 30 March 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1b3M77q5IU>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁴⁸ ‘British YPG volunteer returns home to the U.K.’, *YouTube*, 14 June 2015, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCL_jDu6V80, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁴⁹ Simpson, J., ‘We must do more, says City trader who fought ISIS in Syria’, *The Times*, 12 June 2015, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-must-do-more-says-city-trader-who-fought-isis-in-syria-pptk3nbvmbf>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁵⁰ Simpson, J., ‘We must do more, says City trader who fought ISIS in Syria’, *The Times*, 12 June 2015.

⁴⁵¹ Gifford, M., Facebook video, 4 January 2017, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/macergiffordfan/videos/456809764442640/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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given a week of basic military training and ideological instruction in the mountains of northern Iraq before he was sent into Syria.⁴⁵²

Gifford returned to Britain in June 2015 after five months in Syria. This was a “logical” point to draw a line, Gifford says,⁴⁵³ coming just after the YPG takeover of Mount Abdulaziz in May 2015,⁴⁵⁴ which had served as an important base for the jihadists. Gifford was not stopped at the airport, but police did call to his home a week after his return to ask what he had done in Syria.

Gifford has said he is “not ... a member of any party”,⁴⁵⁵ but he has since said he is a “proud foreign fighter of the YPG” and a “proud supporter of KNK and PYD”.⁴⁵⁶ The KNK is the Kurdish National Congress, the political wing of the PKK’s operations in Europe. The KNK was founded in Amsterdam in May 1999, months after the PKK’s leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was arrested, as a means of influencing the European Union.

Once back in Britain, Gifford was determined to “shine a light” on the YPG’s cause.⁴⁵⁷ He began working as an advocate for the YPG, spreading its message throughout Europe.⁴⁵⁸ The YPG themes he helped to promote include the notion that the YPG is a democratic movement,⁴⁵⁹ and that Turkey is an adversary of the West.⁴⁶⁰ Gifford has suggested that Turkey is supplying weapons to IS.⁴⁶¹ Gifford has worked with other pro-YPG activists and their outlets, notably “Kurdish Question”,⁴⁶² which has helped amplify Gifford’s message.⁴⁶³ Gifford has also engaged with other “alternative” media, notably RT (formerly Russia Today),⁴⁶⁴ the Russian government-funded, English-language television channel

⁴⁵² ‘British YPG volunteer returns home to the U.K.’, *YouTube*, 14 June 2015.

⁴⁵³ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ ‘Kurdish fighters expel ISIS radicals from major stronghold in Syria’, *ARA News*, 21 May 2015, available at: aranews.net/2015/05/kurdish-fighters-expel-isis-radicals-from-major-stronghold-in-syria/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁵⁵ Gifford, M., Twitter post, 17 March 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/842798883923247105>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁵⁶ Gifford, M., Twitter post, 15 June 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/875381789778481152>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁵⁷ ‘British YPG volunteer returns home to the U.K.’, *YouTube*, 14 June 2015.

⁴⁵⁸ Gifford, M., Twitter post, 22 September 2016, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/779040003498401793>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁵⁹ Gifford, M., ‘The Unknown American Heroes of Syria’s Civil War’, *National Review*, 6 February 2017, available at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/444626/rojava-revolution-syrian-civil-war-american-heroes-fighting-democracy>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶⁰ Van Wilgenburg, W., ‘British anti-ISIS volunteers condemn UK support for Turkey, demand support for Kurds’, *ARA News*, 31 January 2017, available at: <http://aranews.net/2017/01/british-anti-isis-volunteers-condemn-uk-support-turkey-demand-support-kurds/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.; Gifford, M., Twitter post, 4 June 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/871219950391889920>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶¹ ‘How to thwart ISIS/With British YPG Fighter Macer Gifford’, *YouTube*, 17 July 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77-kFBIX5ho>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶² Gifford, M., Author profile, available at: kurdishquestion.com/author/69, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶³ ‘A Message From YPG Volunteer Macer Gifford in Manbij’, *Kurdish Question*, 5 August 2016, available at: kurdishquestion.com/article/3333, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶⁴ ‘“It’s not a religious war, it’s war against fascism” – Briton who fought Islamic State’, *RT*, 9 November 2015, available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/321309-kurds-gifford-uk-isis/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.; ‘Brits travelling to Syria to fight ISIS should not be treated as terrorists, says foreign fighter’, *RT*, 6 January 2017, available at: <https://www.rt.com/uk/372737-kurds-isis-foreign-macer/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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founded in 2013 to provide “propaganda in the good sense of the word”, i.e. pro-state.⁴⁶⁵

Gifford created the “Friends of Rojava Foundation”, which continued his activism work and also raised money, ostensibly to support humanitarian activities within the YPG-held areas. The first project in January 2016 was the establishment of a Tactical Medical Unit (TMU), a combat medics brigade.⁴⁶⁶ Gifford returned to Rojava in December 2015,⁴⁶⁷ and gained some publicity for the TMU in March 2016.⁴⁶⁸ Shortly after this, the TMU became an official *tabur* (battalion) within the YPG.⁴⁶⁹ Gifford was among the YPG forces that captured Minbij in August 2016.⁴⁷⁰ The TMU was disbanded in October 2016 by YPG senior command, amid complaints from foreign fighters that the YPG had never properly funded or equipped the TMU and had indeed used it in an abusive and discriminatory way in the Minbij campaign to assert YPG control and exclude Arabs.⁴⁷¹

Gifford returned to Britain in early January 2017. During the trip, he travelled through Europe engaged in YPG activism.⁴⁷² Gifford used part of this time away from the battlefield to reach out to the Russian government to ask for assistance in funding the Friends of Rojava Foundation and in moving equipment around in Rojava itself, where the Russians have a presence.⁴⁷³ By late February 2017, he was back in Rojava.⁴⁷⁴

Gifford was utilised in YPG messaging after the Manchester Arena attack by IS on 22 May 2017. “I hope the shock of the Manchester attacks wakes Britain up,” Gifford wrote, adding that the UK’s “response should include ... [providing] military equipment to the

⁴⁶⁵ ‘Russia Needs More Propaganda, Putin Spokesman Says’, *The Moscow Times*, 19 December 2013, available at: <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russia-needs-more-propaganda-putin-spokesman-says-30646>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶⁶ ‘Past Projects’, Friends of Rojava Foundation, available at: friendsofrojavia.com/past.html, last visited: 3 August 2017; ‘Western volunteers set up Medical Unit in Rojava to help Syrian Kurds in war on ISIS’, *ARA News*, 30 April 2016, available at: <http://aranews.net/2016/04/foreign-fighters-set-medical-unit-help-syrian-kurds/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶⁷ Gifford, M., Twitter post, 16 November 2015, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/666345426317111297>, last visited: 3 August 2017; Gifford, M., Facebook post, 17 August 2016, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/macergiffordfan/posts/374082372715380:0>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶⁸ Stanton, J., ‘EXCLUSIVE – “The other way round and I’d be burned alive or beheaded”: British medic TREATING wounded ISIS jihadis in Syria’, *The Daily Mail*, 18 March 2016, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3494633/The-way-round-d-burned-alive-cage-beheaded-British-medic-TREATING-wounded-ISIS-jihadis-Syria.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁶⁹ ‘Foreign Volunteers in YPG’s Tactical Medical Unit (TMU)’, *YouTube*, 30 March 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1b3M77q5IU>, last visited: 3 August 2017; ‘Western volunteers set up Medical Unit in Rojava to help Syrian Kurds in war on ISIS’, *ARA News*, 30 April 2016.

⁴⁷⁰ Ensor, J., ‘Women rip off their burqas as Syrian residents of Manbij celebrate rescue from Isis’, *The Telegraph*, 13 August 2016, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/13/women-rip-of-their-burqas-as-residents-of-syrian-city-of-manbij/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷¹ Orton, K., ‘American YPG Fighter Complains About Group’s Lack of Medical Care’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 26 May 2017, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2017/05/26/american-ypg-fighter-complains-about-groups-lack-of-medical-care/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷² Gifford, M., Twitter post, 7 January 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/817866942136586242>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷³ ‘Banker turned Kurdish fighter launches Syrian aid charity’, *YouTube*, 1 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHP06Pq3UHK>

⁴⁷⁴ Gifford, M., Twitter post, 21 February 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/834103033822744576>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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SDF”, an organisation he describes as “secular [and] democratic”.⁴⁷⁵

In June 2017, Gifford announced he was going to Raqqa.⁴⁷⁶ On 21 June, he put out an appeal for money on the Canadian crowdfunding site, *FundRazr*, after he lost much of his equipment.⁴⁷⁷ No action was taken to prevent this, even though the PKK remains on Canada’s terrorism blacklist, and funding its operations is a criminal offence.⁴⁷⁸

Gifford announced in early July 2017 that he had switched to fighting with a Christian militia, likely referring to the Syriac Military Council, a YPG proxy group that is under the SDF umbrella.⁴⁷⁹

JAC HOLMES

Date of birth: c. 1992–93

Date joined YPG: January 2015

Age: 24 or 25

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Bournemouth, Britain

Occupation: Information technology sector

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Holmes was an IT worker before he joined the YPG. He flew to northern Iraq before being transferred to Syria. Holmes was at one point injured on the upper right arm by a sniper during a battle near Tel Tamer.⁴⁸⁰ He featured in a YPG interview video in early 2015 that called for more Western citizens to join the YPG and for Western governments to offer more support to the organisation.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁵ Gifford, M., ‘British YPG volunteer calls for stronger UK action against ISIS after Manchester attack’, *ARA News*, 2 June 2017, available at: aranews.net/2017/06/british-ypg-volunteer-calls-for-stronger-uk-action-against-isis-after-manchester-attack/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷⁶ Gifford, M., Twitter post, 13 June 2017, available at: <https://twitter.com/macergifford/status/874634032604164096>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷⁷ ‘Urgent resupply for Macer Gifford’, *FundRazr*, 21 June 2017, available at: https://fundrazr.com/51Ffb2?ref=tw_65Ehe0, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷⁸ Brewster, M., ‘Canadian volunteers fighting with Kurds in Iraq might violate anti-terror law’, *The Globe and Mail*, 28 January 2016, available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadian-volunteers-fighting-with-kurds-in-iraq-might-violate-anti-terror-law/article28426800/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷⁹ ‘Message from British Citizen Fighting Against ISIS In Syria’, YouTube, 5 July 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdr5UKCjyLA>, last visited: 11 July 2017.

⁴⁸⁰ Gallagher, L., ‘“A few days’ training – then it was tracers, tank fire and flashes of light”: Astonishing Boy’s Own adventures of the Brits who joined Anti-ISIS Foreign Legion’, *The Daily Mail*, 30 April 2016, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3567418/Boy-s-adventures-Brits-joined-Anti-ISIS-Foreign-Legion.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁸¹ ‘British YPG Fighter Jack Interview with ANHA’, YouTube, 31 March 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PLGBhDnLA>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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EVGENY SEMENOV

Date of birth: c. 1989–90

Date joined YPG: February 2015⁴⁸²

Age: 27 or 28⁴⁸³

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Moscow, Russia

Occupation: Corporate lawyer

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Also known as “Anton”, Semenov was a corporate lawyer in Moscow before he joined the YPG. Semenov spent a few months in Syria with the YPG and then returned to Moscow.

Semenov was not an ideological recruit. “It was all the same to me who I fought for,” he said, noting that it could have been the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga or the Assad regime. Semenov, though describing himself as a “leftist” at one point, said he hasn’t been an ideological anarchist since he was 18 years old, and he eschewed any adherence to “orthodox socialism”, let alone the YPG’s idiosyncratic blend of Marxism, nationalism and leader worship. The YPG’s antagonism to bad language and branded drinks irked Semenov, and was among the cultural gaps that kept the foreigners largely isolated from the YPG proper. “Besides, they talked so often about Mr. bees’ knees Ocalan and the revolution that it could drive you insane,” said Semenov. “As a bonus, we had Turkish Stalinists in our detachment, which was just complete hell.”⁴⁸⁴

“I have no faith in people as a matter of principle,” said Semenov. “I think chicks, music, booze, and drugs are the core values of civilization.” Semenov saw himself as “defending the right of boys and girls to get wasted, [have sex], go to the disco, play sports, brawl in the streets, study in university, wear short skirts and hipster shorts, and to read Kropotkin and Machiavelli”. He concluded, “In my conception, everything is very simple: we must drive the evil from Rojava and open nightclubs and party at raves. I’m defending what I care about. Hardcore techno is the audible translation of freedom. But when I try to explain this to people, they think I’m kidding.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸² ‘How they combat ISIL: Confession of a Russian volunteer’, *Bigmir*, 22 May 2015, available at: news.bigmir.net/world/902433-Kak-vojujut-s-IGIL--ispoved--russkogo-dobrovol-ca, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁸³ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁴ *ibid.*; ‘Kuznetsov, D., ‘A Russian Volunteer in Syria’, *Russkaya Planeta* (The Russian Planet), 15 May 2015, available at: rusplt.ru/society/russkiy-dobrovolets-v-sirii-17032.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁸⁵ ‘How they combat ISIL: Confession of a Russian volunteer’, *Bigmir*, 22 May 2015.

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Semenov testified to severe limitations in the YPG's military capabilities during the time he was there. "If you want to talk about the organization of the [YPG's] military, there's only one word you can use to describe it: a shitshow," he said. "Sometimes they remind me of the Orcs from the Warhammer 40K computer game. The Kurds have a serious lack of military know-how. ... [T]hey're better than the Arabs, but not by much."⁴⁸⁶ Semenov also noted that the YPG uses child soldiers, though they "try to protect the younger ones," those under about 15 years of age, but it is not always successful. "[W]ar is war," as Semenov puts it.⁴⁸⁷

Semenov said there are a few hundred non-Kurdish foreign fighters with the YPG, many of them Turkish communists – though there are, of course, he says, many more Turkish Kurds in the YPG, veterans of the PKK.⁴⁸⁸ He did not meet any other Russians in the ranks of the YPG, though he did meet a Kurdish YPG fighter who had been an engineer in Moscow, and he believes other Kurds living or working in the post-Soviet space have joined the YPG.⁴⁸⁹

ROBERT AMOS

Date of birth: c. 1986–87

Date joined YPG: February 2015

Age: 30 or 31⁴⁹⁰

Sex: Male

Place of origin: West Virginia, United States

Occupation: Student

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Amos worked as a tour guide at the Governor's Mansion in Charleston, later at the House of Delegates (the state's House of Representatives), and then as an assistant to the President of the State Senate. In October 2013, Amos, who is Jewish, moved to Israel to study a masters in sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the Rothberg School.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ 'Kuznetsov, D., 'A Russian Volunteer in Syria', *Russkaya Planeta* (The Russian Planet), 15 May 2015.

⁴⁸⁹ 'Interview of a Russian volunteer who fought for Kurdistan 3 August 2017.

⁴⁹⁰ Enzima, W., 'This American Fought ISIS. Now He's Trying to Get Washington to Untangle Its Syria Policy', *Mother Jones*, 26 December 2016, available at: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/12/turkey-syria-kurds-isis-american-volunteers/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁹¹ Keighley, P. S., 'The American Jew Who Fought ISIS, And Was Then Exiled From Israel', *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 July 2015, available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/The-American-Jew-who-fought-ISIS-and-was-then-exiled-from-Israel-409981>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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It was the images from Sinjar as the Islamic State closed in against the Yazidis that motivated Amos to join the YPG. He had not wanted to join the YPG specifically; he just wanted to fight the Islamic State. “My motives weren’t ideological, they were moral,” he said.⁴⁹²

On 10 February 2015, Amos flew from Tel Aviv to Amman, Jordan, and then to Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq, close to the PKK’s headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. In the training camp, Amos met with a dozen or so other foreigners who became a friendship group and called themselves “The Chai Boys”, a self-deprecating reference to boys too young to fight who served tea on the bases. Among the group was Mohammad Hossein Karimi, a non-Kurdish Iranian philosophy graduate, who was killed at Ras al-Ayn on 9 May 2015 after a small injury to his ankle.⁴⁹³

Amos left Rojava soon after Karimi’s death. Returning to Jordan, he found that his visa had expired. After being denied entry to Israel from a second entry point, Aqaba, he travelled to Egypt and stayed in the Sinai for a few months, before returning to the US in late 2015.

Amos would later complain that as the composition of the foreign fighter flow to the YPG changed, the military veterans were giving way to “preachy hipsters from the U.S. and Europe” who were motivated “by socialist or anarchist ideology”. They were of no use on the battlefield, said Amos, and their political efforts did not fare much better.⁴⁹⁴

In late 2016, Amos formalised his activist work by creating an organisation, the “American Veterans of the Kurdish Armed Forces”, to lobby the US government to provide more support to the YPG. The trigger for Amos setting up this organisation was a speech made by then US Vice President Joseph Biden in Ankara on 24 August 2016, which called on the YPG to adhere to the agreement it had made with the Americans and the Turks prior to the YPG-led operation to expel IS from Minbij, and to withdraw its troops from Minbij and return to the east of the Euphrates River.⁴⁹⁵ The YPG did not do that and used Minbij as a launch pad for expansion west and north, toward the Turkish border, precipitating the long-mediated Turkish intervention in Syria.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹² *ibid.*

⁴⁹³ *ibid.*; ‘Foreign Fighters in Syria’, *Columbia Political Review*, 14 June 2017, available at: www.cpreview.org/blog/2017/6/foreign-fighters-in-syria, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁹⁴ McKay, H., ‘Social justice “warriors” jump into Kurdish-Syrian struggle’, *Fox News*, 24 March 2017, available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/03/24/social-justice-warriors-jump-into-kurdish-syrian-struggle.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁹⁵ Enzinna, W., ‘This American Fought ISIS. Now He’s Trying to Get Washington to Untangle Its Syria Policy’, *Mother Jones*, 26 December 2016.

⁴⁹⁶ Entous, A., G. Lubold and D. Nissenbaum, ‘Turkish Offensive on Islamic State in Syria Caught U.S. Off Guard’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 August 2016, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-offensive-on-islamic-state-in-syria-caught-u-s-off-guard-1472517789>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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Amos, dressed in his military gear, heckled Biden at a speech in Parma, Ohio, on 1 September 2016. “Why did you tell the YPG to go back across the Euphrates?” he shouted, before adding, “My friend died,” meaning Levi Jonathan Shirley.

Amos’ primary message was lost when Biden responded, “So did my son,” referring to Beau Biden, an Iraq war veteran, who had died of brain cancer on 30 May 2015.⁴⁹⁷ Biden said, “If you’re serious, come back after and talk to me about this. You have my permission.” Biden then left the venue, so Amos protested outside Biden’s house.⁴⁹⁸

Unlike many of the other Western YPG fighters who return home to do advocacy work for the YPG, Amos does not deny that the PYD/YPG is under the KCK command structure with the PKK and PJAK. Rather, he argues that the PKK should be taken off the terrorism list and the Turkish government should be shunned by its Western partners.⁴⁹⁹

MICHAEL ENRIGHT

Date of birth: c. 1964

Date joined YPG: March 2015

Age: 53⁵⁰⁰

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Manchester, Britain; lived in America

Occupation: Actor

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Enright moved to the United States when he was 19 years old to live in Hollywood and work as an actor. He has played small parts in several films, most prominently *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006).⁵⁰¹

Enright, who has no military background, says he was motivated initially by the sight of Mohammed Emwazi (“Jihadi John”) beheading journalists, and the “final straw” to join

⁴⁹⁷ Abdulla, N., ‘American YPG volunteer tells Rudaw why he heckled VP Biden’, *Rudaw*, 9 May 2016, available at: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/world/05092016>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁹⁸ Lucente, A., ‘Meet the American YPG volunteer protesting outside of Biden’s house’, *Al-Bawaba*, 18 September 2016, available at: <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/meet-american-ypg-volunteer-protesting-outside-biden%E2%80%99s-house-884004>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁴⁹⁹ Amos, R., ‘I Fought ISIS with the Kurds In Syria. This Is What It Was Like’, *The Tower*, January 2017, available at: <http://www.thetower.org/article/i-fought-isis-with-kurds-in-syria-this-is-what-it-was-like/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁰⁰ Pasha-Robinson, L., ‘British actor Michael Enright quits Hollywood to fight Isis in Syria’, *The Independent*, 6 July 2017, available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/british-actor-isis-fight-michael-enright-quit-hollywood-syria-kurdish-forces-militia-a7826376.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁰¹ ‘Michael Enright’, Internet Movie Database, available at: www.imdb.com/name/nm2123563/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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the YPG came after IS burned alive the Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, in a video released on 3 February 2015. “For me, the biggest regret of my life was not going to Afghanistan when 9/11 happened,” he says. He was apparently talked out of it by friends. Enright added, “I really feel a debt to the [United States]. You know, they welcomed me with open arms, and then what added to it all was that it was an Englishman [Emwazi], that he had an English accent. And ... it just touched me personally, in a very deep way.”⁵⁰²

In June 2015, the American YPG fighter Jordan Matson claimed, via Facebook, that Enright was “mentally unstable” and “in danger of being killed by one of many Westerners and Kurds who want to bury him”. According to Matson, “Immediately after coming here, [Enright] tried selling his story to the media. He has been kicked out of four different fighting units and asked to leave twice by the YPG to which end he ... put the barrel of his rifle in his mouth and threatened to kill himself if he was sent home.” Matson added that Enright “is still working on his movie script”. “The Generals have even told us they try keeping him away from everyone for fear that their own men will kill him,” Matson concluded. “We have taken the bolt from his AK-47 quite some time ago, so he runs around taking pictures of himself in the rear saying he killed Daesh with a weapon he can’t even fire.”⁵⁰³

Matson said that at least five other YPG foreign fighters could tell the same version of events, and at least one of them did to CNN. Enright rejected these claims as “tittle-tattle”, but felt he had to respond once the media covered Matson’s statement, for the sake of his family.⁵⁰⁴ “The only people who have said anything negative were the people I came with from The Academy,” Enright said later, referring to the YPG training ground.⁵⁰⁵ “I had no military background, I’m an actor – and I didn’t realise they really looked down on that – and I’m old, as far as they’re concerned.”⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰² Taher, A. and R. Keck, ‘Hollywood’s Jihadi Hunter: The only action this British actor has seen is in movies. But here he is in the killing fields of the deadly war on IS. So is he a hero or a fool? Read his amazing story... and you decide’, *The Daily Mail*, 10 May 2015, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3074978/Hollywood-s-Jihadi-Hunter-action-British-actor-seen-movies-killing-fields-deadly-war-hero-fool-Read-amazing-story-decide.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017; Smith-Spark, L., ‘Actor volunteering with Kurdish fighters in Syria appeals for help fighting ISIS’, *CNN*, 15 June 2015, available at: edition.cnn.com/2015/06/10/world/syria-kurds-actor-michael-enright/index.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁰³ Orton, K., ‘Calls for U.S. Government to Recover “Mentally Unbalanced” YPG Foreign Fighter’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 9 June 2015, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/06/09/ypg-foreign-fighters-matson-enright-facebook-dispute/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁰⁴ Smith-Spark, L., ‘Actor volunteering with Kurdish fighters in Syria appeals for help fighting ISIS’, *CNN*, 15 June 2015.

⁵⁰⁵ When non-Kurdish foreign YPG recruits arrive inside Syria, they go through about a month of ideological instruction and basic language and weapons training at “The Academy”, which actually refers to several camps inside Syria. One such camp is Qaracho, very close to the YPG camp on Qarachok Mountain, near Malikiya (Derik), which Turkey bombed on 25 April 2017. Author conversation with American YPG fighter, 4 June 2017. The location of the camp the Turks struck can be seen here: <http://wikimapia.org/#lang=es&lat=37.064248&lon=42.160753&z=17&m=bs>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁰⁶ Michael Enright: Hollywood actor who went to fight IS’, *YouTube*, 3 August 2016, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_4yHh8Ju3E, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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Another American foreign fighter who has “spoken with [Enright] and many mutual friends” says that the charges made by Matson and his allies against Enright are “completely baseless”.⁵⁰⁷

Enright left Syria at some point in late 2015 or early 2016 and was arrested on return to the United States, where he was detained for six weeks before being deported to Britain.⁵⁰⁸ In late July 2016, he returned to Syria to take part in the YPG-led operation to expel IS from Raqqa city. Asked whether he would be doing this forevermore, Enright said “no”: “Either I will die over there fighting this time, I guess in that case it would be. [Or] if, God willing I don’t ... then it won’t be a long fight anyway. ISIS are not going to be around in that area very long, in my opinion.”⁵⁰⁹

JOE AKERMAN

Date of birth: c. 1979

Date joined YPG: March 2015

Age: 38

Sex: Male

Place of origin: West Yorkshire, Britain

Occupation: Roof repairman

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Akerman is a former member of the British Army and worked as a roof repairman in Halifax before he went to join the YPG. He flew to northern Iraq, where the YPG’s facilitators met him and moved him into Rojava. Akerman was friendly with Reece Harding, an Australian who fought with the YPG for six weeks before he was killed in June 2015.⁵¹⁰ While there, Akerman says he worked with a behind-enemy-lines unit known as “Sabotage”, whose main task was mine clearance.⁵¹¹ Akerman returned to the UK in April 2016 after spending a week in jail for illegally crossing through the territory of Iraq

⁵⁰⁷ Author conversation with American YPG fighter, 26 June 2017.

⁵⁰⁸ Sommers, J., ‘Michael Enright, Actor Who Travelled To Syria, Discusses Why He’s Returned To Fight Islamic State’, *Huffington Post*, 3 August 2016, available at: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/michael-enright-actor-travelled-syria-reveals-hes-returning-fight-islamic-state_uk_57a2344e4b02c018083d36f, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁰⁹ ‘British actor returns to Syria to fight ISIS’, *Channel 4*, 3 August 2016, available at: <https://www.channel4.com/news/british-actor-returns-to-syria-to-fight-isis>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵¹⁰ Oaten, J., ‘Reece Harding becomes “symbol of Kurdistan” after his death in fight against IS’, *ABC News*, 26 June 2016.

⁵¹¹ Gallagher, I., “‘A few days’ training – then it was tracers, tank fire and flashes of light”: Astonishing Boy’s Own adventures of the Brits who joined Anti-ISIS Foreign Legion’, *The Daily Mail*, 30 April 2016.

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Kurdistan.⁵¹² Since returning, Akerman has contributed to the YPG's strategic messaging campaign, specifically its political warfare aimed at weakening Turkey's alliances with Western states.⁵¹³

JOHN HARDING

Date of birth: c. 1963

Date joined YPG: Early 2015

Age: 54

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Northeast England, Britain

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Yes

Prior militant ties: None known

Harding is a military veteran from northeast England. As one of the older YPG volunteers, he acquired the nickname "Pops".

Describing his journey to the YPG, Harding said:

Initially I became interested because I felt my government was not doing enough to fight ISIS and I became aware of the opportunity to volunteer through the Lions of Rojava Facebook page. In 2015, I made contact with the page administrators and volunteered my services to the cause. Prior to this I had no knowledge of the Kurds or the Kurdish cause. It was the brutal execution of the Jordanian pilots who were captured by ISIS which sparked my interest. ... [A]lthough I was sympathetic to the cause, I did not feel that it was my fight – my primary reason was to go and fight ISIS and stack bodies. It wasn't until I spent some time in Rojava that I got to know the Kurdish cause and found myself identifying with it increasingly. I have always considered myself as someone with Left-wing beliefs, but I realised I fell in love with the Kurdish struggle and the Kurds themselves during my time in Rojava.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² 'Two Britons freed in Iraq on way home from fighting Isis', *The Guardian*, 24 April 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/24/two-britons-freed-in-iraq-after-arrest-on-way-home-from-fighting-isis>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵¹³ 'Foreigners Member of YPG Freedom Fighters Condemns UK supporting of Turkey' [sic], *YPG Rojava*, 30 January 2017, available at: <https://www.ypgrojava.org/-Foreigners-Member-of-YPG-Freedom-Fighters-Condemns-UK-supporting-of-Turkey>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵¹⁴ 'Interview with UK YPG volunteer and medic John Harding', *Kurdish Question*, 24 April 2017, available at: www.kurdishquestion.com/article/3900-interview-with-uk-ypg-volunteer-and-medic-john-harding, last visited: 3 August 2017; Higginbottom, J., 'Foreign volunteer unit fights to save lives in Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2016, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/northern-syria-foreign-medical-volunteers.html>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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During this last tour with the YPG, Harding became increasingly involved with the Tactical Medical Unit (TMU), and would in fact come to command it by the summer of 2016.⁵¹⁵

HANNA BÖHMAN

Date of birth: c. 1969

Date joined YPJ: 2015

Age: 48

Sex: Female

Place of origin: Canada

Occupation: Motorcycle salesperson

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Böhman worked briefly as a model and then went into motorcycle sales. Böhman says she has so far done two tours with the YPJ, first in a defensive unit and then as a sniper, and claims to have been involved in the fighting in Tel Abyad. She is apparently considering joining a Yazidi militia. Böhman says that in fighting for the YPJ she was “being the change we want to see in the world”.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁵ ‘Interview with UK YPG volunteer and medic John Harding’, *Kurdish Question*, 24 April 2017; Higginbottom, J., ‘Foreign volunteer unit fights to save lives in Syria’, *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2016.

⁵¹⁶ Corbin, C., ‘Hanna Böhman: Meet the Canadian woman joining forces with other women to fight ISIS’, *Fox News*, 21 June 2017, available at: www.foxnews.com/world/2017/06/21/hanna-b-hman-meet-canadian-woman-joining-forces-with-other-women-to-fight-isis.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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JESPER SÖDER

Date of birth: c. 1991

Date joined YPG: 19 May 2015⁵¹⁷

Age: 26⁵¹⁸

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Sweden

Occupation: Teacher

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Also known as “Heval Agid”, Söder was a high-school teacher in Sweden. He has described himself as “a normal Swedish guy who wanted to do something against ISIS”.⁵¹⁹

Söder was injured on 11 June 2015 by an IS bombing in Tel Abyad. Five of his comrades were killed and Söder nearly lost his right ear.⁵²⁰ He returned home to recover in July 2015.⁵²¹

During his time away from the front, Söder engaged in media work for the YPG. He suggested that the Turkish government was abetting IS and should be expelled from NATO, and gave voice to the conspiracy theory that Gulf donors fund IS.⁵²²

By mid-2016, Söder was serving as the leader of “the Scandinavian Brigade” within the YPG. He had formed this Nordic-only unit to try to avoid infighting that had attended some of the other foreign fighter outfits. “Ones who come to have their own crusade, we don’t want them,” said Söder, who estimated that “maybe one in twenty come for the right reasons”.⁵²³

⁵¹⁷ Jesper, 25: I couldn’t watch any more – so I fought against IS’, Nyheter24, 9 September 2016, available at: <https://nyheter24.se/debatt/860584-jesper-24-darfor-akte-jag-ner-och-krigade-mot-is>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵¹⁸ *ibid.*

⁵¹⁹ Interview with YPG Jordan Matson & Jesper Soder’, *YouTube*, 18 July 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trSAca61Vmg>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²⁰ Mohammed, A. and J. Behrozy, ‘YPG’s foreign “freedom fighters” talk tactics in Erbil’, *Rudaw*, 8 February 2015, available at: www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?pageid=148500, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²¹ Malmgren, K., ‘Jesper, 24, is home after fighting against IS’, *Expressen*, 20 July 2015, available at: <http://www.expressen.se/gt/jesper-24-hemma-efter-striderna-mot-is/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²² Ahmed, A. S., ‘European Fighter Just Back From Front Lines Against ISIS Says West Should Stay Vigilant’, *Huffington Post*, 20 November 2015, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/european-fighter-isis-jesper-soder_us_564e6e55e4b0879a5b0a6548, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²³ MacDiarmid, C., ‘Foreign Fighters, Dreaming Of Battling ISIS, Go Stir Crazy In Iraq’, *Vocativ*, 2 June 2016, available at: <http://www.vocativ.com/322085/foreign-fighters-dreaming-of-battling-isis-go-stir-crazy-in-iraq/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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Söder was given space in the Swedish “webzine” *Nyheter 24* in September 2016 to explain his journey to the YPG, and used the appearance to offer tips for Westerners joining the organisation. “If you decide to move down [here]: good luck and be careful ... Bring sturdy shoes and safety goggles, the rest you can get on site – cheap and well!” he wrote. “Should a crisis emerge and you get into trouble when you’re down there, contact the Swedish Embassy in Iraq or try to reach me through Facebook or Instagram. Listen to those who have been there longer than you, they’ll become like mentors for the newly arrived”.⁵²⁴

After the 7 April 2017 vehicle-ramming attack in Stockholm, an atrocity carried out by Rakhmat Akilov, a guided operative of the Islamic State,⁵²⁵ Söder said:

The blood of the victims is on the hands of Daesh and Swedish political leaders. ... I believe this is a wake-up call for the political leaders in Sweden who haven’t done much to make sure that Daesh [IS] members in Sweden get imprisoned or deported for being part of a terror organisation. Instead we believe they are traumatized and need help to overcome their ‘horrible’ experience with Daesh. ... Sweden can do more and needs to do more. Sweden is not officially backing the YPG, YPJ, and the SDF ... [T]hey should help us in the fight.⁵²⁶

Söder was appointed as one of the spokesmen for the YPG-controlled SDF on 30 April 2017.⁵²⁷

Söder was arrested with three other YPG foreign fighters – a fellow Swede and two British citizens – on 24 June as they attempted to illegally traverse the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government.⁵²⁸ The KRG held the four men for 13 days for violations of visa laws.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁴ Jesper, 25: I couldn’t watch any more – so I fought against IS’, *Nyheter24*, 9 September 2016.

⁵²⁵ Osborne, S., ‘Stockholm suspect Rakhmat Akilov “exchanged Whatsapp messages with Isis supporter before and after attack”’, *The Independent*, 10 April 2017, available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/stockholm-attack-rakhmat-akilov-suspect-isis-whatsapp-messages-sweden-lorry-truck-before-after-a7676011.html, last visited: 8 August 2017.

⁵²⁶ ‘Swedish SDF volunteer in Syria condemns ISIS attack in Stockholm, blames Swedish political leaders for lack of action’, *ARA News*, 13 April 2017, available at: <http://aranews.net/2017/04/swedish-sdf-volunteer-in-syria-condemns-isis-attack-in-stockholm-blames-swedish-political-leaders-for-lack-of-action/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²⁷ Söder, J., Twitter post, 30 April 2016, available at: https://twitter.com/soder_jesper/status/858676146405339136, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²⁸ ‘KDP detains 4 internationalist fighters’, *ANF News*, 24 June 2017, available at: <https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/kdp-detains-4-internationalist-fighters-20635>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵²⁹ Söder, J., Twitter post, 11 July 2017, available at: https://twitter.com/soder_jesper/status/884886682276941825, last visited: 3 August 2017.

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PATRICK RYAN KASPRIK

Date of birth: 21 September 1991⁵³⁰

Date joined YPG: Late 2015

Age: 25

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Florida, United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

A graduate of North Fort Myers High, Kaspruk was arrested in Lee County on 1 September 2015 for battery of a police officer – spitting in his face – and resisting arrest. Kaspruk was supposed to go to court on 4 February 2016, but by that time had travelled to Syria and joined the YPG.⁵³¹

Kaspruk, raised by his grandparents, had taught himself German and told them when he left for Berlin in January 2016 that he was going for free college education. Instead Kaspruk travelled – allegedly through six countries – to Syria.⁵³²

Despite no prior medical training, Kaspruk served as a combat medic in the Tactical Medical Unit (TMU) of the YPG. The TMU was unofficially founded in January 2016 with money donated to the Friends of Rojava Foundation⁵³³, a YPG fundraising enterprise set up by Macer Gifford that ostensibly funds medical and educational services in Rojava. The TMU became an official *tabur* (battalion) within the YPG soon after.⁵³⁴

Kaspruk served in the TMU during the Minbij offensive between May and August 2016. He said that the YPG “refused to let *Heyva Sor a Kurdistan* [Kurdish Red Crescent] ambulances treat Arab civilians, even though they had effectively commandeered them for military use in Manbij”. Kaspruk said that the YPG also “told American SOF [Special Operations Forces] we worked with in Manbij to treat Arab *hevals* [comrades] as lesser”. Kaspruk became “disillusioned” with the YPG after Minbij fell into its hands: the YPG called him a

⁵³⁰ ‘Booking Details’, Lee County Sheriff’s Office, 21 January 2017, available at: www.sheriffleefl.org/main/index.php?r=crimeActivity/inmatePrior&id=18991981078820, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵³¹ ‘Wanted N. Fort Myers man travels to Syria, joins fight against ISIS’, *NBC News*, 13 February 2016, available at: www.nbc-2.com/story/31213413/wanted-n-fort-myers-man-smuggled-to-syria-joins-fight-against-isis#.VsNVC0A9qOH, last visited: 1 July 2017.

⁵³² ‘Wanted N. Fort Myers man travels to Syria, joins fight against ISIS’, *NBC News*, 13 February 2016, available at: www.nbc-2.com/story/31213413/wanted-n-fort-myers-man-smuggled-to-syria-joins-fight-against-isis#.VsNVC0A9qOH, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵³³ ‘Past Projects’, Friends of Rojava Foundation, available at: friendsofrojava.com/past.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵³⁴ ‘Past Projects’, Friends of Rojava Foundation, available at: friendsofrojava.com/past.html, last visited: 3 August 2017; ‘Western volunteers set up Medical Unit in Rojava to help Syrian Kurds in war on ISIS’, *ARA News*, 30 April 2016.

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spy for the US-led Coalition because he collected data on the Minbij medical facilities and the prior Islamic State operatives who ran them. The YPG also refused to properly supply medical equipment that was needed. The YPG have “no concern for battlefield trauma care and have more desire to print out gaudy yellow photos of young dead people for propaganda,” says Kasprik. The TMU was “shut down” on 11 October 2016, according to Kasprik, and he was arrested by the YPG after he “pretty violently protested”.⁵³⁵

On 29 November 2016, Kasprik left Syria and was arrested by the Kurdistan Regional Government, held for three weeks, and then deported to the United States.⁵³⁶

Kasprik was arrested on his return to America and put in jail awaiting trial. On 28 February 2017, as part of a plea bargain, he pleaded guilty to battery of a law enforcement officer and resisting arrest non-violently. He was sentenced to 90 days imprisonment, of which he had, by that point, served 71 days (from 19 December 2016). Kasprik was also ordered to pay court fines and reimbursement that totalled more than \$1,000 and to serve 100 hours of community service; he was also given a probationary period lasting two years.⁵³⁷

FREEMAN STEVENSON

Date of birth: c. 1993

Age: c. 24

Sex: Male

Date joined YPG: December 2015⁵³⁸

Place of origin: Utah, United States

Occupation: Journalist⁵³⁹

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Stevenson studied journalism and the Middle East at university. He was motivated by humanitarian concern for people suffering at the hands of IS, a concern he connected

⁵³⁵ Orton, K., ‘American YPG Fighter Complains About Group’s Lack of Medical Care’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 26 May 2017.

⁵³⁶ Dorsey, D., ‘North Fort Myers man freed from Iraq, arrested in Boston’, *News Press*, 22 December 2016, available at: www.news-press.com/story/news/2016/12/22/north-fort-myers-man-freed-iraq-arrested-boston/95753452/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵³⁷ Henson, S., ‘Man who fought ISIS pleads guilty in Lee County officer assault’, *News Press*, 28 February 2017, available at: www.news-press.com/story/news/crime/2017/02/28/man-who-fought-isis-pleads-guilty-lee-county-officer-assault/98316172/, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵³⁸ Chen, D., “‘I wanted to fight the Islamic State’: Utahns volunteer for combat alongside Kurdish militia”, *Deseret News*, 4 December 2016, available at: www.deseretnews.com/article/865668586/I-wanted-to-fight-the-Islamic-State-Utahns-volunteer-for-combat-alongside-Kurdish-militia.html, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵³⁹ According to Stevenson’s Facebook profile he is a content editor at KSL, a Utah-based outlet. See: <https://www.facebook.com/cole.stevenson.10>. Last visited: 7 August 2017.

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to his Mormon faith. He was finally moved to act, however, by the scenes of cultural vandalism in Mosul and Palmyra. He was inspired by the example of Jordan Matson, and knew that YPG recruiters operated through Facebook.

Soon after taking the decision to join the YPG, Stevenson was able to get in contact with a facilitator and took the trip through Sweden to the PKK's base in northern Iraq and thence to Syria. Stevenson was injured by grenade shrapnel during the Minbij operation and was shot two weeks later. He returned home, purportedly temporarily, in October 2016.⁵⁴⁰ He has assisted in PYD/YPG messaging and media.⁵⁴¹

KIMBERLEY TAYLOR

Date of birth: c. 1989

Date joined YPJ: March 2016

Age: 28⁵⁴²

Sex: Female

Place of origin: Blackburn, Britain

Occupation:

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Known also as “Zilan Dilmar”, Taylor first came to light in an interview with *The Guardian* in February 2017 as the YPG prepared to move against Raqqa city itself.⁵⁴³

“Taylor ... grew up in Darwen, near Blackburn, until the family moved to Merseyside in her teens. She studied maths at the University of Liverpool before spending her early 20s travelling the world, hitchhiking wherever she could, always alone,” *The Guardian* reported. Taylor was drawn into activism, began writing for left-wing outlets, and discovered the YPG's cause during a reporting trip to Iraq in the aftermath of the Islamic State's genocidal assault on the Yazidis.

⁵⁴⁰ Hatch, H., ‘Utah volunteer survives fighting ISIS in Syria to tell his story’, *KUTV*, 8 December 2016, available at: kutv.com/news/local/utah-man-returns-from-syria-after-fighting-isis-to-tell-his-story, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁴¹ ‘American volunteer in Rojava: Suffering of Yazidis sparked my passion to join Kurds in fight against ISIS’, *ARA News*, 27 January 2016, available at: <http://aranews.net/2016/01/american-volunteer-in-rojava-to-ara-news/>, last visited: 3 August 2017.

⁵⁴² Townsend, M. ‘“Hundreds of us will die in Raqqa”: the women fighting Isis’, *The Guardian*, 30 April 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/30/hundreds-of-us-will-die-in-raqqa-the-women-fighting-isis>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁴³ Blake, M., ‘Blackburn activist becomes first British woman to join fight against ISIS in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 9 February 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/09/blackburn-activist-kimberly-taylor-becomes-first-british-woman-join-fight-isis-syria>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

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Taylor returned to the UK for a few months, then moved to Sweden to study political science at Stockholm University. From there she travelled to the YPG-held areas and “immediately ‘fell in love’ with the ideology – anti-capitalist and feminist” that the YPG calls “Democratic Confederalism”. Taylor quit her degree and stayed in “Rojava”. “Life is losing its meaning because of the capitalist system,” says Taylor, who wishes for a “revolution” to sweep away the consumerist, capitalist system in the West.⁵⁴⁴

Taylor is part of the YPJ’s “combat media team” and has been around Raqqa where “[h]er primary job is to record the militia’s operations, writing battlefield reports and taking photographs and video of the action”, *The Guardian* reports.

BRACE BELDEN

Date of birth: 13 October 1989⁵⁴⁵

Date joined YPG: October 2016

Age: 27

Sex: Male

Place of origin: California, United States

Occupation: Florist

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Belden had a troubled upbringing in the Madera area of California. When he was six years old his mother committed suicide. Belden’s teens were distinctly volatile. He went to five high schools, one of which was an out-of-state boot camp from which he ran away. Belden started a punk band, *Warkrime*, in 2005, at the age of 15, which disbanded in 2008. By the following year Belden was identifying as a communist, and soon after that he descended into what he calls a “dark period” – of drug dependency and criminality. Belden had developed a heroin habit that would eventually land him in jail for possession of narcotics. A second warrant against Belden was for assault. In August 2014 he would finally declare himself sober, after various stints in rehab and a near-fatal overdose. He had been radicalised in the process, however.

“When you’re in rehab, you’re looking for an organizing principle around your life – whether it’s God, or Marx, or [PKK leader Abdullah] Ocalan,” says Belden’s father,

⁵⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ ‘The Birth of Brace Robert Belden’, California Birth Index, available at: https://www.californiabirthindex.org/birth/brace_robert_belden_born_1989_19005781, last visited: 4 August 2017.

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Joe.⁵⁴⁶ While in rehab, Belden immersed himself in Marx and others and solidified his hard-left politics. In late 2012, Belden discovered Ocalan and his ideology, and would follow events in Rojava from afar for a number of years.

Belden started emailing the administrators of *YPG International* in August 2016, and eventually they emailed back. The YPG were mostly keen to test Belden's ideological inclinations and emotional stability. He was accepted as a recruit and instructed how to get to Syria via Sulaymaniya and the mountains of northern Iraq. At an ideological-military training camp before he was deployed, Belden met with fellow American, Lucas Chapman.⁵⁴⁷

Belden's day job for the better part of the last decade was working as a flower arranger in the San Francisco Bay Area, though he had recently transitioned to managing a boxing gym. Alongside this, Belden had already developed a significant following on Twitter – before he went to Syria.⁵⁴⁸ His stock-in-trade was an “ironic” and outrageous commentary on current events aimed at a faction of the far-left. It was in this vein that Belden announced his presence in Syria, after a delay when the YPG blacked out his communications. “To misquote Celine, when you're in, you're in,” Belden tweeted on 24 October 2016, with a picture of himself smoking and holding a rifle in one hand and a puppy in the other.⁵⁴⁹

It had been expected that Belden and Chapman would stay away from the front line for some time, but the formal onset of the Raqqa Operation on 6 November 2016 changed that plan. In time, Belden and Chapman separated. Chapman was somewhat disillusioned with the Islamophobia displayed by the YPG and joined a medical unit where politics was less prevalent. Belden joined the United Freedom Forces (BOG), a unit of communist Kurds from Turkey, as part of his quest to get nearer to the front line.⁵⁵⁰

Belden holds to political views that are sternly anti-American. “I do oppose all American presence in Syria,” he has said. “The U.S. Army and Marines represent something totally reprehensible to me.”⁵⁵¹ Belden made those remarks while based in the YPG-held areas of Syria that have been enabled to expand, and have been protected from the unremitting aerial bombardment visited on other non-regime zones, by the US military.

⁵⁴⁶ Wiedeman, R., ‘The Dirtbag Left's Man in Syria’, *New York Magazine*, 3 April 2017, available at: nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/04/brace-belden-pisspiggranddad-syria-isis.html, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁴⁷ Harp, S., ‘The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017, available at: www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/american-anarchists-ypg-kurdish-militia-syria-isis-islamic-state-w466069, last visited: 4 August 2017; Wiedeman, R., ‘The Dirtbag Left's Man in Syria’, *New York Magazine*, 3 April 2017.

⁵⁴⁸ Belden's Twitter handles were “@LENIN_LOVER69” and then, most (in)famously, “@PissPigGranddad”.

⁵⁴⁹ Hartery, D., ‘This “Irony Twitter” guy has gone to fight ISIS’, *The Buzz*, 27 October 2016, available at: <https://www.buzz.ie/weird/this-irony-twitter-guy-has-gone-to-fight-isis-199297>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁵⁰ Sly, L., ‘How two U.S. Marxists wound up on the front lines against ISIS’, *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/how-two-us-marxists-wound-up-on-the-front-lines-against-isis/2017/03/30/3c722344-c79e-11e6-acda-59924caa2450_story.html, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁵¹ *ibid.*

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Belden found an environment hospitable to his worldview. The YPG is bitterly hostile to NATO and relations between the YPG rank and file and the US Special Forces that are bolstering the YPG war effort are “tense”, Belden says, because “we get ideology lessons a lot, and they are not exactly pro-American”.⁵⁵²

Belden is of Jewish descent, but he is antagonistic to Israel. He covered a tattoo of a Star of David on the knuckle of his middle finger before he went to Syria⁵⁵³ in order, he said, to avoid anybody thinking he was Israeli.⁵⁵⁴

Belden’s social media antics continued in Syria. At one point he tweeted a picture of himself with a tank and the caption, “Your Uber driver here ... am outside.” The ironic tone remained, even when Belden admitted, “Technically, I did a war crime, because I peed on a dead person,”⁵⁵⁵ something usually treated rather seriously.⁵⁵⁶

In a February 2017 podcast, Belden gave one of his most detailed statements on what life is like under the YPG.⁵⁵⁷ Belden spoke of public self-criticism sessions or struggle sessions, and a cult of sexual abstinence, both of which are long-standing features of PKK practice.⁵⁵⁸ Belden also noted that while the YPG calls its rule “libertarian socialism”, it’s “pretty much a Stalinist state”. In the aftermath, Belden would take refuge in the claim that that his statement was ironic, but other Western fighters with the YPG have said that in categorising the YPG regime, “Just think [of the] Soviet Union”.⁵⁵⁹

Belden’s appearance on Chapo Trap House podcast came just days after his first major mainstream exposure in *Rolling Stone*, where the magazine profiled a number of leftist militants who had journeyed to Syria to join the YPG.⁵⁶⁰ Belden expressed qualms about moving into the realm of celebrity, and even considered quitting social media entirely. He was told by the YPG leadership to continue on Twitter and other platforms because “it makes good propaganda”. Belden was also inspiring fresh recruits, who were mostly used for the same purpose (Belden complained of being kept away from the actual fighting).⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵² ‘Episode 82 – War Is Heck feat. @PissPigGranddad’, Chapo Trap House, 13 February 2017.

⁵⁵³ Harp, S., ‘The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017.

⁵⁵⁴ Belden, B. [@PissPigGrandma], Twitter post, 9 June 2017. Account now suspended; author has a screenshot.

⁵⁵⁵ Wiedeman, R., ‘The Dirtbag Left’s Man in Syria’, *New York Magazine*, 3 April 2017.

⁵⁵⁶ Martínez, L., ‘Punishments Handed Down For Marines in Urinating Video’, *ABC News*, 27 August 2012, available at: abcnews.go.com/Blotter/punishments-leveled-marine-urinating-video/story?id=17088559, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁵⁷ ‘Episode 82 – War Is Heck feat. @PissPigGranddad’ (40:40–41:50), Chapo Trap House, 13 February 2017.

⁵⁵⁸ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 229–232.

⁵⁵⁹ ‘Talking with Kurds and a Volunteer who fought against ISIS’, YouTube, 19 November 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t11ObgObX9k>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁶⁰ Harp, S., ‘The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017.

⁵⁶¹ Wiedeman, R., ‘The Dirtbag Left’s Man in Syria’, *New York Magazine*, 3 April 2017.

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As part of the fallout from the *Rolling Stone* piece, a month later it was announced that a film was in the works centred on Belden, to be directed by Daniel Espinosa and starring Jake Gyllenhaal.⁵⁶² Belden was displeased by this movie proposal, feeling, among other things, that it would be “anti-revolutionary”.⁵⁶³

In late March 2017, Belden left Rojava and returned to the United States. He has dropped out of the public eye since his return home, not least because he has been banned from Twitter for harassing behaviour.⁵⁶⁴

Belden said upon leaving Syria that he was going to get involved in US domestic politics and try to unite the far-left. But there were signs he might not be finished with war in the Levant. “I’m selfish and want to participate in real revolution,” Belden said. “It’s just this real amazing feeling ... like you’re actually living.”⁵⁶⁵

LUCAS CHAPMAN

Date of birth: 1995–96

Date joined YPG: October 2016

Age: 21⁵⁶⁶

Sex: Male

Place of origin: Georgia, United States

Occupation: Student

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: No

Prior militant ties: None known

Chapman was born in Dahlonga, a town of 6,000 people. Though he claims to remember nothing before his sixteenth birthday, Chapman has testified to having hated school and not having had a great deal of fondness for the town overall. “I just wanted to get the hell out,” he says.

⁵⁶² Kit, B., ‘Jake Gyllenhaal, Daniel Espinosa Team Up for Middle Eastern Drama “Anarchists vs. ISIS”’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 23 March 2017, available at: www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/jake-gyllenhaal-daniel-espinosa-team-up-isis-drama-anarchists-isis-988384, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁶³ Hughes, J., ‘Jake Gyllenhaal’s Anarchist War Movie Draws Criticism from Subject Brace Belden’, *Exclaim!*, 24 March 2017, available at: exclaim.ca/film/article/jake_gyllenhaals_anarchist_war_movie_draws_criticism_from_subject_brace_belden, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁶⁴ Belden was suspended in late May 2017 for violating Twitter’s rules against the “targeted abuse or harassment of others”. He reappeared on the platform as @PissPigGrandma. See: Wiedman, R., ‘PissPigGranddad Is No More’, *New York Magazine*, 21 May 2017, available at: nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/05/pisspiggranddad-is-no-more.html, last visited: 4 August 2017. On 16 June 2017 Belden was suspended again, and so far has not returned.

⁵⁶⁵ Wiedeman, R., ‘The Dirtbag Left’s Man in Syria’, *New York Magazine*, 3 April 2017.

⁵⁶⁶ Sly, L., ‘How two U.S. Marxists wound up on the front lines against ISIS’, *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2017.

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Chapman went to Washington, D.C., to attend American University, and graduated in Jewish history. He is a practising Jew. During this time, he was studying socialist theory. “As long as I can remember, I’ve been interested in Leftism,” Chapman says. He worked part-time for a start-up company.⁵⁶⁷

Chapman left the United States in September 2016, travelled to Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq, and then into the mountains⁵⁶⁸ where the PKK has its headquarters. It was here that Chapman became friendly with fellow American Brace Belden. They “bonded over their shared lack of experience in all things military, and their befuddlement at finding themselves riding into battle equipped with weapons they barely knew how to use”.⁵⁶⁹

Chapman and Belden moved over the border into Syria – on Chapman’s twenty-first birthday – and began attending The Academy, the politico-military centres where new recruits are trained for a month or so after arriving in Rojava.⁵⁷⁰

Interviewed in Ayn Issa in northern Raqqa Province a month after arrival, Chapman said he “came [to Rojava] for many reasons”, including to help “the Kurds”, but also because of his “political beliefs: I’m a communist”, and thus he found a distinct compatibility with the YPG.⁵⁷¹

Chapman and Belden had expected to do months of menial duties; however they arrived on the eve of the Raqqa operation and within days were swept into the battle for IS’s Syrian “capital”.⁵⁷²

Of the United States – which has provided the weapons, direct military support and de facto no-fly zone that has allowed the YPG statelet to expand and survive – Chapman says, “They’re occupiers and imperialists.”⁵⁷³

By April 2017, seven months after arrival, Chapman said he had not fired a shot against IS.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁶⁷ Harp, S., ‘The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017.

⁵⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁶⁹ Sly, L., ‘How two U.S. Marxists wound up on the front lines against ISIS’, *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2017.

⁵⁷⁰ Harp, S., ‘The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017.

⁵⁷¹ ‘Lucas Chapman, an American communist, joins the YPG/PKK in Syria’, *YouTube*, 29 June 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8MaNZjxiXw>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁷² Harp, S., ‘The Anarchists vs. the Islamic State’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017.

⁵⁷³ Sly, L., ‘How two U.S. Marxists wound up on the front lines against ISIS’, *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2017.

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid.*

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“HEVAL RESIT JAPANYA”

Date of birth: Unknown

Date joined YPG: c. January 2017

Age: Unknown

Sex: Male

Place of origin: United States

Occupation: Unknown

Kurdish descent: No

Military background: Unknown

Prior militant ties: None known

Heval Resit, a fighter of Japanese descent, was revealed to be in Syria in April 2017 when the YPG press office put out a video featuring an interview with him. His message was that the operation to expel the Islamic State from Tabqa was “going very well”. He also claimed that, though there were “minimal issues”, the YPG had done “an excellent job co-operating with the Arab fighters” under the SDF umbrella.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷⁵ ‘Japanese YPG fighter: Kurds, Arabs and foreign volunteers work together against ISIS in Syria’, ARA News, 23 April 2017, available at: aranews.net/2017/04/japanese-ypg-fighter-kurds-arabs-and-foreign-volunteers-work-together-against-isis-in-syria/, last visited: 4 August 2017.

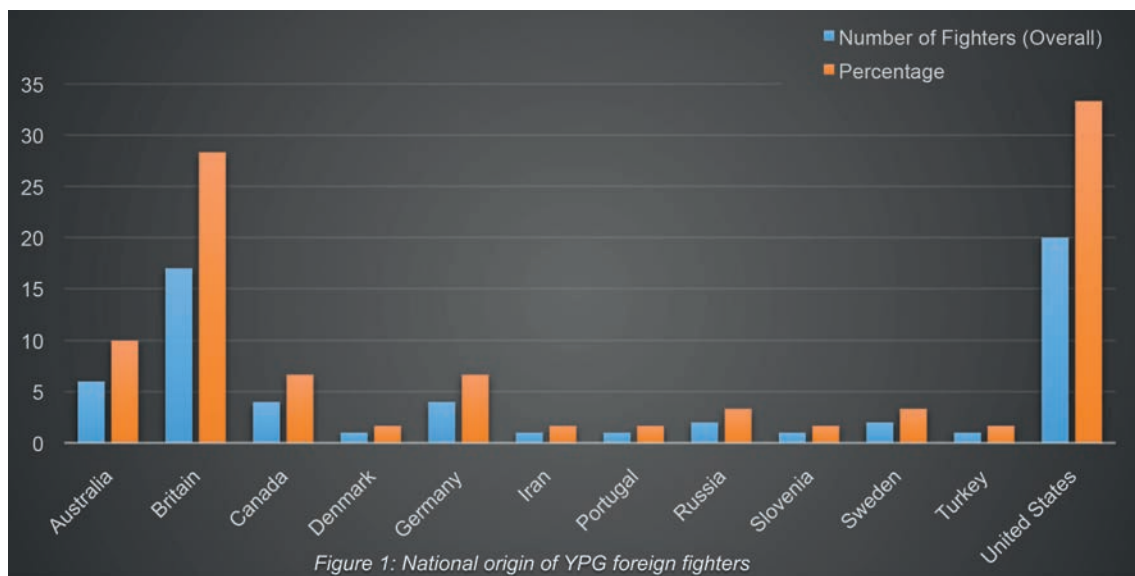
4. Data Analysis

4.1 By the Numbers

There is no reliable estimate available for the number of foreign fighters who have joined the YPG. Even regional officials struggle to give an estimate, with most settling on several hundred.⁵⁷⁶ This report has documented the profiles of 60 foreign fighters with the YPG/PKK. This sample includes the 29 who have been killed, those who have run into legal difficulties, and a sample of those who either remain in the YPG or have returned home. This sample size makes it difficult to draw definitive analysis from the results. Nevertheless, some interesting findings and key trends do emerge.

The assessed YPG foreign fighters originated in 12 countries (see Figure 1).

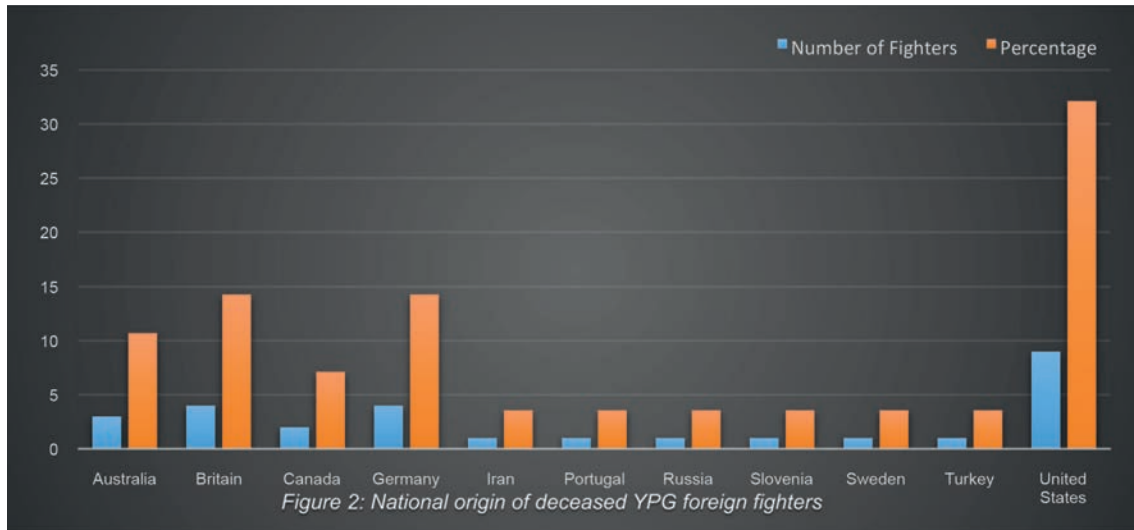
It is noticeable that the Anglosphere states – Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States – were disproportionate contributors of foreign fighters to the YPG. The United States, with 20 documented fighters (33%), was the largest individual contributor state, closely followed by Britain with 17 (28%). Together, the four Anglosphere states contributed more than three-quarters (78%) of the fighters profiled in this report.



Undoubtedly there has been a bias towards English-speaking YPG foreign fighters breaking into public view, both because of the PKK’s messaging strategy, which tends to emphasise its Western fighters, and because of the predominance of English in the global media environment. However, the national breakdown of all the YPG foreign fighters who have been killed – a statistic available by following the YPG’s messaging and unaffected by these factors – shows a similar result, with the Anglosphere making up 66% of the slain (see Figure 2).

⁵⁷⁶ Author interviews, May–June 2017.

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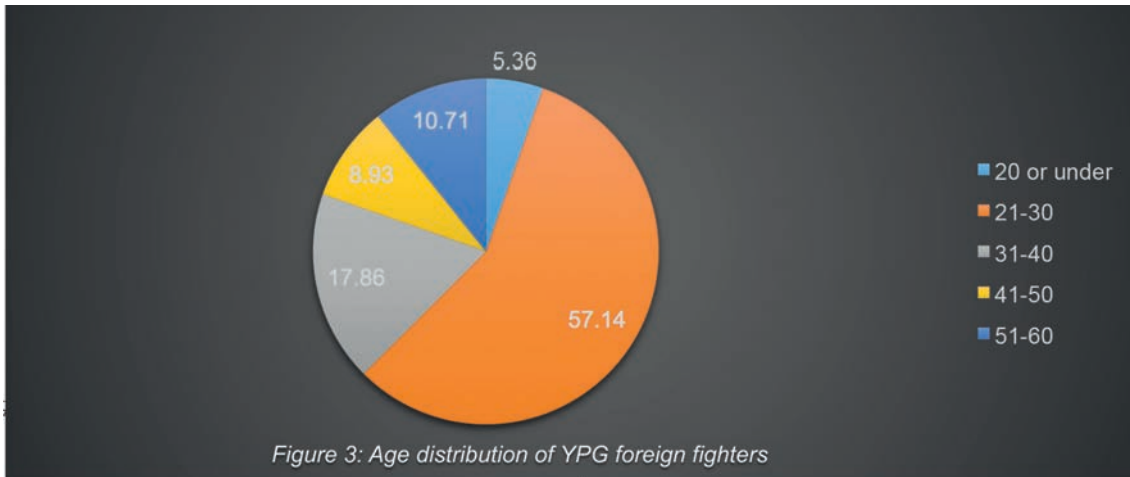
The main discrepancies between the totals for national origin are Germany, which represents about 7% of the total report sample and 14% of the deceased, and Britain, which represents 28% of this report's total and 14% of those killed. This suggests that, proportionally, there may be similar numbers of British and German citizens in the ranks of the YPG, but the Germans have not been as visible.

A significant outlier is Turkey: it is known that an important component of Turkish Leftists have long collaborated with the PKK, and there are strong indications they have a significant presence in Syria. The named components of the Internationalist Freedom Battalion (EOT), the umbrella group the YPG formed in 2015 for its foreign fighters, include a majority of Turkish leftist groups. Even if it is assumed, as is likely true, that the EOT units are small, it is still a significant number. Local journalists have reported the visible presence of Turkish communists at PKK positions on both sides of the border that separates Sinjar and Hasaka.⁵⁷⁷ YPG volunteers themselves, such as Evgeny Semenov, have noted this presence, and Ivana Hoffmann was actually a member of one of these groups. Why there are not more non-Kurdish Turkish citizens among the YPG/J fatalities is thus unclear.

Among the notable demographic facts is that there is a strong trend towards younger recruits. More than 60% of the YPG foreign volunteers were under 30 and 80% were under 40 (Figure 3).

⁵⁷⁷ Author interview, November 2015.

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The numbers of young people, including minors, being recruited to terrorist groups in Europe has been increasing in recent years, with signs from late 2016 of a directly targeted campaign by the Islamic State to direct people at refugee centres on the Continent to committing acts of domestic terrorism.⁵⁷⁸ The YPG/PKK does make wide use of child soldiers, but they are locally conscripted. There is little doubt that people in their twenties are more impressionable than older people, and the testimony of many of the YPG foreign fighters bears this out. They speak of having been outraged at the conduct of the Islamic State and having acted impulsively when setting out to join the YPG. While many make mention of the “Kurdish cause” or some such formulation, they will often simultaneously note that they were unaware or only vaguely aware of it until *after* they had joined the YPG.

In terms of employment, the variation was considerable, from physical work in the security sector such as bouncers and policemen, blue-collar workers in factories and on farms, and engineering and construction (welders, roof repairmen, decorators), all the way across the non-physical spectrum as care workers, chefs, corporate lawyers, currency traders, florists and teachers. The only places of employment that showed any concentration among the foreign YPG volunteers were the Army and students at universities.

The recruitment of students to terrorist organisations has been documented as a rising challenge. Though radicalisation of young people is popularly presented in terms of online interactions, real-world facilitation remains very important, and universities, along with other places such as prisons, provide spaces where extremists can disseminate their message and consolidate networks.⁵⁷⁹ The direct evidence for face-to-face interactions between YPG/PKK operatives and their European and American recruits is thin.

⁵⁷⁸ Author interview with police official from Germany, March 2017.

⁵⁷⁹ Webb, E., ‘Spotting the Signs: Identifying Vulnerability to Radicalisation Among Students’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 27 April 2017, available at: henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Student-Fighters-Project.pdf, last visited: 4 August 2017.

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There have been some indicators of it, such as returnee foreign fighters spreading the organisation's narrative on campus.⁵⁸⁰ There is also the fact that Britain was, before Germany, the strategic centre for the PKK in Europe, with the organisation laying down deep roots in the diaspora community that it used to underwrite its war against Turkey.⁵⁸¹ It is highly likely that this infrastructure has played a role in facilitating the movement of British citizens to the YPG. *Mutatis mutandis* this would apply in other Western states with significant Kurdish diaspora populations and PKK networks. Still, the most clear-cut part of the recruitment pipeline with the YPG is the online component, which connects those who wish to join the YPG with the organisation itself, providing instructions on what intelligence officials say are the two primary recruitment pathways: (1) landing in Sulaymaniya in northern Iraq, transferring to the Qandil Mountains and thence to Syria; or (2) by smuggling themselves – apparently with the complicity of officials in the eastern part of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and sometimes under the cover of journalistic enterprise – into the areas around Fishkabour and Sinjar, and crossing into Syria from there.⁵⁸²

A salient finding is that the YPG/J foreign fighters were overwhelmingly male: 55 out of 60 surveyed (92%). This suggests that the YPG messaging, which has featured female fighters and claims to promote gender equality in the ranks very prominently, has not been effective in enticing Western women to flock to its banner. The YPG's view of the role of women is not quite as expansive as its media output suggests. The number of YPJ fighters is small. The PKK's main historic use for women was to mobilise recruitment among men by challenging their manhood with the image of female Kurdish warriors.⁵⁸³ In the mid-1990s, the PKK leadership also made a special point of utilising female suicide bombers: of 16 suicide bombings by the PKK between 1994 and 1998, 11 were carried out by young women. Only one volunteered; the others were selected by Abdullah Ocalan.⁵⁸⁴

Interestingly, however, though only three of the surveyed foreign fighters had any Kurdish background, two of them – Shilan Ozcelik, and Joanna Palani – were women. (The third individual was Badeen al-Imam.)

⁵⁸⁰ Yeomans, E., 'Macer Gifford: Ex-YPG fighter addresses UCL students on personal fight against Islamic State', London Student, 3 December 2015, available at: londonstudent.coop/news/2015/12/03/macer-gifford-ex-ypg-fighter-addresses-ucl-students-personal-fight-islamic-state/, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁸¹ Sozer, M. A. and K. Yilmaz, 'The PKK and its evolution in Britain (1984–present)', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 7 July 2016, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2016.1194269>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁸² Author interview, 19 July 2017.

⁵⁸³ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York University Press, 2007), pp. 272-274.

⁵⁸⁴ Laqueur, W., *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century* (Continuum, 2003), pp. 90-91.

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Özçelik had been inspired very directly by the PKK's propaganda. The details of Palani's relationship with the PKK are shrouded in secrecy and deliberate obfuscation, but it is nonetheless clear that her journey to Syria to join the YPJ in 2014 was not her first contact with the PKK, and she had been to at least one other battlefield, in Ukraine.⁵⁸⁵

Additionally, Palani was one of just four people – the other three being Ivana Hoffmann, Rifat Horoz and Maksim Trifonov – who demonstrated any prior connection with any form of militancy before joining the YPG/J. Horoz was, like Palani, joined with the PKK in the years before the Syrian war, and Hoffman was a member of the Marxist–Leninist Communist Party (MLKP), a party tied to the PKK for many years. In the murky case of Trifonov, he had, like Palani, been in Ukraine. Whereas Palani's activities in Ukraine – and indeed in Finland and Russia – remain opaque, it is clear that Trifonov engaged in activity on the insurgent-separatist side of the war in Ukraine.

These figures underline how exceptional are intuitive connections that could draw Westerners to Rojava. There has not been a mass movement of Kurds resident in Western states to join the YPG/J, for example. This leaves the question of why people with no historic or ethnic ties to the PKK have joined its cause.

⁵⁸⁵ Whyte, L., 'The Girl Who Ran Away to Fight ISIS', *Vice News*, 25 May 2016, available at: https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/qvd483/joanna-palani-syria-iraq-ran-away-fight-isis, last visited: 4 August 2017; Billing, L., 'The student branded a terrorist despite risking her life to fight Isis in Syria', *Metro*, 7 February 2017, available at: <http://metro.co.uk/2017/02/07/the-student-branded-a-terrorist-despite-risking-her-life-to-fight-jihadis-in-syria-6230972/>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

4.2 Disaggregating Motives

4.2.1 *Military Veterans*

The flow of Western ex-military servicemen into the ranks of the YPG has been a salient feature of the organisation since 2014, and indeed was most salient in 2014. It appears to have been less of a feature of the YPG since then, and the data presented here confirms that trend. Nearly 40% of profiled fighters had military backgrounds,⁵⁸⁶ and the pattern of their recruitment is clear. Of the foreign fighters surveyed who joined the YPG in 2014, 64% were military veterans; that figure declined to 36% in 2015 and 11% in 2016, the other years for which complete figures are available.

The reasons for which Western servicemen join the YPG overlap with other motives discussed below, such as a desire to protect persecuted populations and a sense that Western governments were not doing enough against IS. Yet there were and are factors that are particular to this category of volunteer, notably missing the military life – the camaraderie and the combat – and difficulty adapting to a civilian environment.⁵⁸⁷

Jeremy Woodard expressed this when he said, “It was hard to get a job. ... They look at you ... like you’re a hazard, you know, you’re going to hurt somebody. ... It’s an escape [to join the YPG]. It’s like a vacation here. It’s kind of sick to say. After I graduated, I went straight to the Army. I was 17 when I went in. And I just know war. That’s it. I’m still searching. Searching for what, I don’t know, searching for a part of myself, where I belong. I belong in a place like this.”⁵⁸⁸

Soldiers who had served in the post-9/11 conflicts, Iraq particularly, had the unique pull factor to the YPG, which stresses its mission as being anti-IS, of feeling a personal responsibility to “finish the job” and/or to ensure that their sacrifices, and those of their friends and colleagues, were not wasted.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁶ The exact figure is 22 out of 57 (39%).

⁵⁸⁷ Patin, N., ‘The Other Foreign Fighters: An Open-Source Investigation into American Volunteers Fighting the Islamic State’, Bellingcat, 26 August 2015, available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/08/26/the-other-foreign-fighters/>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁸⁸ ‘Why some Americans are volunteering to fight the Islamic State’, *PBS Newshour*, 21 July 2015, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/americans-volunteering-fight-islamic-state/>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁸⁹ Tuck, H., T. Silverman, and C. Smalley, “‘Shooting in the right direction’: Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 10 August 2016, available at: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ISD-Report-Shooting-in-the-right-direction-Anti-ISIS-Fighters.pdf>, last visited: 9 August 2017.

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There was also another aspect, expressed by Jordan Matson,⁵⁹⁰ and by John Gallagher, who felt guilty about leaving the army just before 9/11 and thus missing deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq. This was a feeling shared by a number who had joined the YPG, according to Gallagher. “There’s more that we could be doing,” he said. “We feel like we haven’t done enough.”⁵⁹¹

4.2.2 Chancers and Killers

The chaotic early stream of foreign fighters, when the YPG was back on its heels against the Islamic State and needed Western voices to relay its pleas for Western government support, opened a lot of opportunities for people whose motives were more self-serving to join the YPG and to live in the areas it controlled.

The case of James Hughes and Jamie Read documented in this report is a classic case: both former members of the military who came to the nascent Rojava in an attempt to capture documentary footage in order to establish credibility in founding a security firm.⁵⁹² Motives of fame and monetary gain were not absent among the foreign volunteers to the YPG in this early stage.

Patrick Maxwell, a YPG operative and Marine veteran from Austin, Texas, highlighted an even more sinister form of opportunism that attracted some early YPG recruits, namely the desire to kill other people.⁵⁹³ This interlinked, in places, with a contingent of mentally ill people who made their way into the YPG’s ranks.

Reports of that period spoke of “drifters and lunatics”: “A British man who petted the dead ISIS bodies. Another who used his psychic abilities to hear ISIS fighters speak. One man requested to go home because of a bad case of attention-deficit disorder. Another said he understood what ISIS wanted and sympathized with their cause. Another was known for looking around and saying, ‘Did the CIA send you?’”⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹⁰ Tuysuz, G., J. Rizzo, and C. J. Carter, ‘3 Americans fighting alongside Kurds in Syria against ISIS, official says’, *CNN*, 3 October 2014, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/02/world/meast/isis-american-syria-kurds/index.html>, last visited: 4 August 2017.; Percy, J., ‘Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 September 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁹¹ John Gallagher, a Canadian join Kurdish YPG to fight ISIL’, YouTube, 5 November 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHif9UZDCBw>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁹² Murphy, S., ‘Jihadi hunters... or fantasists? They said they risked their lives to battle ISIS in Syria. So why do witnesses insist these UK fighters were miles from action... and only in it for money?’, *The Daily Mail*, 27 December 2014.

⁵⁹³ Philipps, D. and T. J. Brennan, ‘Unsettled at Home, Veterans Volunteer to Fight ISIS’, *The New York Times*, 11 March 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/us/disenchant-ed-by-civilian-life-veterans-volunteer-to-fight-isis.html>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁹⁴ Percy, J., ‘Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 September 2015.

Speaking of this contingent, Brace Belden said, “At first there was just mostly, like, psychopaths that wanted to come kill people. ... There was this one guy named Tim the Cannibal ... Once during an operation they had blown up an ISIS guy with an RPG and the guy was pretty well cooked so he just picked up his foot and just started ... eating it. ... And, yeah, he would drink blood and once a comrade was wounded and he ended up eating a little bit of that guy while he was still alive and after that was arrested”.⁵⁹⁵

Robert Amos echoed this. “There were some people that came that didn’t get weeded out,” he said. “People that you probably wouldn’t want to sleep next to”.⁵⁹⁶

4.2.3 Adventure and Self-Actualisation

There were a number of fighters, some in the early contingent, but also some later on, who joined the YPG for reasons that were self-centred, albeit less harmful than avarice, insanity or homicide.

Louis Park, a former Marine from Houston who joined the Dwekh Nawsha militia, noted, “Some people are called by morals or conviction, some do it for fame or to get away, some miss the action from before or want the action. Some want the purpose and reason.”⁵⁹⁷ This “seeking” can be seen as a motivational thread in itself.

For obvious reasons, those whose motives are self-satisfaction tend not to be frank about it. There are exceptions. Evgeny Semenov, the Russian YPG volunteer, minced no words in his description of what he was fighting for in Rojava: “I’m defending what I care about,” he said, and explained it in terms of hedonism – and hardcore techno music, the “audible translation of freedom” in his conception. Another exception was the above-mentioned Patrick Maxwell, who in March 2015 stated bluntly that he had served his country while enlisted, but, “As a private citizen, I’m going to have an adventure, essentially, and that’s my own business.”⁵⁹⁸ This kind of adventurous self-fulfilment by battle can overlap with soldiers who cannot adapt to civilian life.

There was little pattern of dislocation among those profiled. They tended to have lived stably in one place, and any moves preceding the journey to Rojava, such as the case of Ashley Dyball who moved from Australia to Jordan, were generally to enable passage to this final destination. Among the exceptions is Gillian Rosenberg, who was displaced

⁵⁹⁵ ‘Episode 82 – War Is Heck feat. @PissPigGranddad’ (22:00–23:00), *Chapo Trap House*, 13 February 2017.

⁵⁹⁶ Petti, M., ‘Foreign Fighters in Syria’, *Columbia Political Review*, 14 June 2017, available at: www.cpreview.org/blog/2017/6/foreign-fighters-in-syria, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁹⁷ Hartman, B., ‘The Curious Case of Gill Rosenberg’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 August 2015, available at: www.jpost.com/Middle-East/ISIS-Threat/The-curious-case-of-Gill-Rosenberg-412120, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁵⁹⁸ Raphael, T. J., ‘American veterans choose to head back to Iraq to fight against ISIS’, *Public Radio International (PRI)*, 13 March 2015, available at: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-03-13/american-veterans-choose-head-back-iraq-fight-against-isis>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

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and wandering and seeking direction. Rosenberg was also seeking atonement. In her background was a record of extensive criminality, an exploitation of the vulnerable on a fairly grand scale.

Of the many forms the “seekers” who joined the YPG took, the desire for redemption was a recurring one. Patrick Kasprick and Joe Robinson both had records of violent crime. Belden had been arrested for, among other things, his narcotics habit. Jordan Matson was entangled in a legal process for drink-driving. Both Belden and Matson committed these crimes as part of a broader downward spiral that seems to have ended when they joined the YPG.

4.2.4 Ideologues

Kevin Howard, a US Marine veteran from San Francisco who joined the YPG, said that he thought there were three categories of fighters remaining at this stage: the “people that are running away from their past”; the “people that are legitimately crazy”; and the “starry-eyed dreamers”, the anarchists and communists who have come to build utopia in the Jazira.⁵⁹⁹

In the earlier stages of the YPG’s recruitment of foreign fighters, most were, as mentioned, military veterans, and they tended to be apolitical. Nonetheless, they often gave voice to moral or quasi-ideological motives for joining the YPG. Repeated themes were the necessity of fighting the Islamic State because of its shocking cruelty, usually framed in terms of defeating evil on behalf of all humanity, and often said to be necessary because Western governments were not doing enough. Jack Holmes was typical of this genre, speaking of being moved to action by Kobani, adding, “The rest of the world, especially the governments, need to send people here ... and see that we need to help [the YPG] in every way we can.”⁶⁰⁰ Another theme was assisting “the Kurds” or “the Kurdish cause” – often expressed with no more specificity than that. This is expressed by every YPG foreign fighter who appears in YPG messaging, but in some cases, such as Grodt, it appears to be a genuine factor.

The only truly ideological motivation that drove Western recruits to Rojava in the early stages was Christianity, whether defined wholly religiously or in the form of solidarity with co-religionists being persecuted by the Islamic State. Most of the Christian-inspired anti-IS foreign fighters went to Iraq and joined either the Peshmerga directly, or, more prominently, its Assyrian Christian dependency, the Dwekh Nawsha, where US citizen

⁵⁹⁹ Hennessy-Fiske, M., ‘Dozens of US Civilians Are in Syria Fighting ISIS With Local Forces’, *Military.com*, 17 July 2017, available at: <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/07/17/dozens-us-civilians-are-syria-fighting-local-forces-isis.html>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶⁰⁰ ‘British YPG Fighter Jack Interview with ANHA’, *YouTube*, 31 March 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1PLGBhDnLA>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

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Matthew VanDyke, who fought in the revolution in Libya, set up a unit, the “Sons of Liberty International”.⁶⁰¹ The hard-left politics of the YPG led to tensions with some Western Christian recruits, who had not understood the ideological inclination of the militia they had joined. One such recruit famously declared that the YPG were a “bunch of damned Reds”, and this was not what he had signed up for.⁶⁰² Many of these recruits then left, often to Dwekh Nawsha.

After the YPG had regained its footing, with the help of American airstrikes, and began to invest more heavily and carefully in its image management, it instituted a screening process in early 2015 that expelled problematic recruits from its ranks and imposed barriers to joining for those who were emotionally unstable or criminally inclined. The YPG at this point began to consciously reorient its recruitment pitch for foreign fighters to elements of the extreme left. The founding of the “Internationalist Freedom Battalions” in June 2015 was a symbol of this greater order and selectivity in the recruitment process.

There are uncomplicated cases of men and women who have taken the pitch of “Democratic Confederalism” seriously. These volunteers either adhere to the PKK’s ideology wholesale or some other form of hard-left politics, usually anarchism and communism. They have come to Syria to be present at the dawn of a revolution – one that is social as well as political. Lucas Chapman is an obvious such case, as is Kevin Joachim. Robert Grodt clearly originates in the ideological milieu to which the YPG is appealing.

Among the leftist contingent, however, there are variances, even contradictions. Brace Belden is the best example of this. Belden claims adherence to the revolutionary programme of the YPG. Simultaneously, Belden himself said that part of his motive was “wanting to actually fight and see if I can”, and he not only doesn’t practise the YPG’s ideology, he also openly mocks elements of it, such as the sexual asceticism.⁶⁰³ Belden clearly has an ideological affinity for the YPG’s system as a “progressive” project, and at the same time is seeking adventure, self-actualisation and redemption.

These complexities occur time and again, and the YPG accommodates them because of a tacit bargain: these individuals will enable the YPG’s strategic messaging to reach audiences it otherwise could not, and the YPG will allow these volunteers to fulfil whatever need it was that brought them to Rojava – and might even make a convert of them via ideological instruction.

⁶⁰¹ McLaughlin, J., ‘This Guy From Baltimore Is Raising a Christian Army to Fight ISIS ... What Could Go Wrong?’, *Mother Jones*, 28 May 2015, available at: www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/05/matthew-vandyke-isis-assyrian-army/, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶⁰² MacDonald, A., ‘Christian foreign fighters deserting Kurdish YPG in Syria because they’re “damn Reds”’, *Middle East Eye*, 19 February 2015, available at: www.middleeasteye.net/news/christian-foreign-fighters-deserting-kurdish-ypg-syria-because-theyre-damned-reds-1976493133, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶⁰³ ‘Episode 82 – War Is Heck feat. @PissPigGranddad’ (13:40–14:15; 21:05–21:45), *Chapo Trap House*, 13 February 2017.

5. Conclusion

5.1 *The Evidence Points to YPG Returnees as a Security Concern*

Returning YPG fighters pose a domestic security risk, irrespective of whether their motivation for joining the war in the Levant was ideological or not.

Some Western volunteers to the YPG, attracted by ideology, are fully aware that they are joining the PKK; that the only difference, as one put it, is the uniform.⁶⁰⁴ Such individuals, whether they adhere to the PKK's ideology or some other form of left-wing militancy, are likely to remain engaged with the PKK's front organisations in Britain and Europe, posing the danger that they will participate in the PKK's criminal-terror activities at home, whether it is vandalism against Turkish state property, involvement in violent demonstrations, or attacks on Turks and non-PKK Kurds. The likelihood that such returnees would get involved in terror finance, even if disguised as humanitarian work, also cannot be overlooked. Diaspora-funded insurgencies occur all around the world,⁶⁰⁵ and it is not unknown, as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ("The Tamil Tigers", or LTTE) in Sri Lanka showed, for the diaspora to be as fundamental to an insurgency's cause as is the case with the PKK.⁶⁰⁶

The ideological leftists who did not join the YPG as individuals but as members of pre-existing militant groups pose a related but distinct threat. In 2017, there were 27 terrorist attacks by anarchist and left-wing groups in Greece, Italy and Spain, a sharp increase over the previous year. These extremist groups continued to engage in street-level violence and recruitment efforts online and on university campuses.⁶⁰⁷ Greece is the epicentre of this phenomenon, where leftist terrorists retain the greatest capabilities. Greece has long been one of the PKK's most important nodes in Europe,⁶⁰⁸ a status enabled by significant popular and official sympathy.⁶⁰⁹ Left-wing terrorism as a serious internal challenge is localised to Southern Europe for the time being, but there is no guarantee that will remain the case. International links between the differing leftist groups are being forged within

⁶⁰⁴ Nissenbaum, D., 'The American Veterans Who Fight ISIS', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 September 2015, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-american-veterans-who-fight-isis-1441362601>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶⁰⁵ Fair, C.C., 'Diaspora Involvement In Insurgencies: Insights From The Khalistan And Tamil Eelam Movements', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2005, available at: <http://www.christinefair.net/pubs/Diasporas.pdf>, last accessed: 21 July 2017.

⁶⁰⁶ Sozer, M. 'The PKK and its evolution in Britain (1984–present)', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 7 July 2016, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2016.1194269>, last accessed: 20 July 2017.

⁶⁰⁷ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report', *EUROPOL*, 15 June 2017, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁰⁸ Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 156.

⁶⁰⁹ 'Ocalan: Greeks supplied Kurdish rebels', *BBC News*, 2 June 1999, available at: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/358115.stm, last visited: 4 August 2017; Horner, W., 'PKK flags and Ocalan's face: Inside Greece's self-ruling Kurdish enclave', *Middle East Eye*, 2 November 2016, available at: www.middleeasteye.net/news/inside-kurdish-refugee-camp-run-its-residents-1798704513, last visited: 4 August 2017.

the PKK-held areas in Syria.⁶¹⁰ Allowing the strengthening of transnational networks that facilitate the provision of military training and battlefield experience to European left-wing terrorist groups is an obvious danger.

The concern from the non-ideological recruits is of lone-actor atrocities upon return. As mentioned, a number of disturbed individuals joined the YPG primarily attracted by the prospect of inflicting violence; their acquisition of training in the use of firearms and explosives presents a risk. There is some suggestion that such individuals are more susceptible to being socialised into an ideology and eventually into terrorism.⁶¹¹ There is also the risk that these individuals are more vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups other than the PKK.

5.2 There Is Some Recognition of this Potential Problem

The challenge of dealing with returning YPG foreign fighters has been clear to the British government for some time. The House of Commons held a debate on the subject in April 2016. It was noted that the involvement of British subjects in the American civil War led to the passage of the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870, which makes it illegal for citizens to enlist in an army warring against a state that is at peace with the United Kingdom. The law was never properly enforced in previous conflicts, from the British citizens who joined the international brigades in Spain in the 1930s through to those who joined militias in the Balkans as Yugoslavia collapsed in the early 1990s.⁶¹²

Robert Jenrick, Conservative MP for Newark and Bingham, told the Chamber that he had found an entirely inconsistent approach by the law: “two were arrested under the Terrorism Act; four were questioned, but not arrested; fourteen came and went at will, unquestioned, three of whom have been on a second or third tour of duty overseas”.

⁶¹⁰ The Internationalist Freedom Battalion that gathers together the YPG foreign fighters includes “Reconstruccion Comunista” (Communist Reconstruction) from Spain and the “Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity” from Greece. It also includes the Bob Crow Brigade, which has a significant number of British citizens in its ranks.

⁶¹¹ Corner, E. and P. Gill, ‘A False Dichotomy? Mental Illness and Lone-Actor Terrorism’, *Law and Human Behaviour*, February 2015, available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25133916>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶¹² ‘UK Citizens Returning From Fighting Daesh’, *Parliament of the United Kingdom*, 19 April 2016, available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-04-19/debates/16041942000002/UKCitizensReturningFromFightingDaesh>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

5.3. More Can Be Done

5.3.1 Rationalise the Legal Process for Returning YPG Foreign Fighters

At present there is no agreed nation-wide process to handle those who return from Rojava. It is in the national interest that a clear mechanism be established that can screen returnees to assess whether they require further state attention, either from the criminal justice system or social services. Given the very hazy situation of the law with regard to those who join the YPG, and the illegitimacy of applying any new legislation retroactively, the criminal actions this process would be designed to detect are war crimes and other breaches of the laws of war committed while in the ranks of the YPG. The law can be used to prevent future recruits.

5.3.2 Establish a Clear Legal Basis to Prevent Any More British Citizens from Joining the YPG

It would make sense for Britain to have a consistent legal position on the returnees to avoid a legal no-man's-land of the kind that has come about in Australia. The most obvious means of doing this is enforcing the Foreign Enlistment Act. The complication is that the Act bans enlistment in an army warring on a state the UK is at peace with, and it is not clear whether this applies to the YPG/PKK. The YPG has conciliatory relations with the Assad regime (a state London is not at war with) and the YPG is at war with IS (an entity not recognised as a state that London is at war with in any case). The Act could perhaps be amended to establish a clear legal basis for preventing fighters from Britain joining the YPG.

The reasons for the British government endeavouring to stop its nationals joining the YPG are not just to avoid the moral hazard of allowing British subjects to join a violent non-state actor like the YPG. There are reasons of national self-interest for preventing British citizens filling out the ranks of the YPG.

The most obvious is minimising the security risks outlined above. If extremist or unbalanced individuals are moved to carry out a domestic terrorist attack, it is not desirable that such individuals pass through PKK training camps, where they are taught how to use weapons and bombs, and gain experience in urban warfare.

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There are also risks in terms of foreign terrorism. There is a suggestion that “those with mental illness may be susceptible to ideological influences in their immediate social environment”.⁶¹³ Many terrorist groups follow the pattern of recruiting an individual by first gaining their trust and befriending them, and then gradually pulling the individual into radicalism by using this social attachment in a manner that might be compared to an abusive spousal relationship.⁶¹⁴ Many people by now maintain the relationships that provide their primary sources of companionship and comfort online, where it is known that trust and openness develop more quickly, sometimes recklessly so, even for the cognitively normal.⁶¹⁵ The Islamic State has pioneered a model of guiding attacks in the West by remote control that works with this reality, and this online infrastructure will be in operation for the foreseeable future.⁶¹⁶ There are already signs that other terrorist groups are imitating this method,⁶¹⁷ and the targeting of more vulnerable, impressionable populations like children has already become apparent.⁶¹⁸ Increasing the number of disturbed people with military training by allowing more to join the YPG provides a potential opening for foreign terrorist organisations.

A fundamental responsibility of any government is the protection of its citizens. Four British citizens have already been killed in the ranks of the YPG/PKK, and it should be London’s intention that no more suffer this fate. A decision by the British government to send its armed forces into battle against the Islamic State, a force able to effectively protect itself and innocents in theatre, is one kind of ethical case. By contrast, vigilantes joining a militia with a record of human rights abuses, who are likely to be immediately vulnerable in a wartime theatre, is entirely different. The government has a duty of care to discourage further foreign fighter flows, given the dangers.

Preventing further British recruitment by the YPG will also minimise what is a likely impending diplomatic crisis. The Turkish government – a NATO treaty ally – is already furious at the US-led Coalition, of which Britain is a part, for providing close-air support for the YPG/PKK because the strengthening of the group in Syria strengthens its capabilities in Turkey. Ankara has claimed several times that the YPG played an operational role in

⁶¹³ Corner, E. and P. Gill, ‘A False Dichotomy? Mental Illness and Lone-Actor Terrorism’, *Law and Human Behaviour*, February 2015

⁶¹⁴ Author interview with Nicola Benyahia, whose son was killed while fighting for the Islamic State, 27 April 2017.

⁶¹⁵ Aktaş, C., ‘Interpersonal Communication Through The Internet’, *Selçuk University*, 2005, available at: <http://josc.selcuk.edu.tr/article/view/1075000285>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶¹⁶ Orton, K., ‘Foreign Terrorist Attacks By The Islamic State, 2002–2016’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 24 March 2017.

⁶¹⁷ Lobel, O., ‘Is al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate adopting Islamic State tactics in Russia?’, *The New Arab*, 4 July 2017, available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/7/5/is-al-qaedas-syrian-affiliate-adopting-is-tactics-in-russia>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶¹⁸ Huggler, J., ‘Syrian teenager arrested in Germany “was planning Isil bomb attack”’, *The Telegraph*, 22 September 2016, available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/22/syrian-teenager-arrested-in-germany-was-planning-isil-bomb-attack/, last visited: 4 August 2017.

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a PKK terrorist attack inside Turkey.⁶¹⁹ So far, Western states have been unconvinced by the evidence, though it should be noted that this is a very technical issue. The desire of the YPG to take its war into Turkey was expressed clearly by a member of the KCK, the transnational body through which the PKK controls its departments: “The PYD is now conducting the revolution in Western Kurdistan [Rojava] to build a democratic society. Afterwards will come the time of northern Kurdistan [southern Turkey]”.⁶²⁰ The foreign YPG fighters have been especially vocal in expressing their wish to take the YPG’s war into Turkey,⁶²¹ and there is little doubt that Rojava is serving as a logistics and training base for the PKK.⁶²² It is largely irrelevant in any practical sense: Western support to the YPG has bolstered the PKK politically and militarily. Should a PKK terrorist attack occur in future that demonstrates a direct Syrian link, it would be helpful for the UK to have as much distance as possible from that, i.e. no British weapons or citizens among the attackers.

The data shows that the overwhelming majority of those who join the YPG are engaging for the first time with militancy, so detecting their intentions to join the organisation is likely to prove difficult, but in those instances where such plans are uncovered – and certainly with respect to those who have already fought with the YPG and returned to the UK – the confiscation of passports is an obvious way of interdicting this foreign fighter flow.

There is no right to a passport: the issuance – or withdrawal – of passports is wholly at the discretion of the Home Secretary.⁶²³ The government’s counter-extremism CONTEST strategy could be applied to remove travel documents from those who want to join the YPG.⁶²⁴ Adding the YPG alias to the PKK’s terrorism designation would be the easiest legal means of enforcing a ban on people joining the YPG. The political resistance to this is likely to prove formidable, however, not least because the United States is now directly arming the YPG, granting it a significant measure of international legitimacy.

⁶¹⁹ Arango, T. and C. Yeginsu, ‘Turkey Blames Kurdish Militia for Ankara Attack, Challenging U.S.’, *The New York Times*, 18 February 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/world/europe/turkey-car-bombing.html>, last visited: 4 August 2017; Tuysuz, G., ‘Ankara bombing: Female suicide bomber spent time in Syria’, CNN, 15 March 2016, available at: edition.cnn.com/2016/03/15/middleeast/ankara-bombing-female-suicide-bomber/index.html, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶²⁰ ‘Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria’, *International Crisis Group*, 8 May 2014, available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶²¹ ‘Revolutionaries! Join the resistance of Bakûr!’, *YouTube*, 23 January 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5jA7EiXQsc>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶²² Gurcan, M., ‘The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arm’s-Length Proxy of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’, *CTC Sentinel*, 27 July 2016.

⁶²³ May, T., ‘The issuing, withdrawal or refusal of passports’, *Statement to the House of Commons*, 25 April 2013, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-issuing-withdrawal-or-refusal-of-passports>, last visited: 4 August 2017.

⁶²⁴ ‘Understanding CONTEST: The Foundation and The Future’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 2017, available at: henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FINAL-CONTEST.pdf, last visited: 4 August 2017.

5.3.3 Reduce the Propaganda Space for the PKK

Given the political barriers already in place to counteract the PKK's criminal-terrorist activity in Britain and Europe, this dose of legitimacy from the anti-IS war is unhelpful, and it is important that the PKK is not given any more space to build additional political constituencies and leverage within the West. A key component of this should be to curb the PKK's propaganda-recruitment activities, which can be done in two ways: directly and indirectly.

The direct means of countering the PKK's messaging is to close down its propaganda outlets, both traditional media like television stations and newspapers, such as *Yeni Özgür Politika*, which recently celebrated the PKK's campaign of targeted killings against teachers, and social media, particularly Facebook, where the Lions of Rojava page has been significant in recruitment and where the YPG is able to present a distorted and romanticised view of the Syrian battlefield.

The removal of content glorifying the PKK would fall within the purview of the CONTEST strategy, as would deterring, by threat of legal sanctions where necessary, the PKK's operatives, such as returnee foreign fighters, disseminating such propaganda and inviting support for the PKK, particularly in public institutions such as universities. Ensuring that administrators, such as PREVENT officers, apply these regulations to the PKK is vital.

This is, again, likely to prove highly politically controversial, not least because the PKK already has such entrenched and powerful networks of influence in Brussels and many other European capitals. It will also be difficult in a legal sense around free speech laws for as long as Western states recognise a difference between the YPG and the PKK.

The indirect method of countering the PKK's propaganda and recruitment is to undermine it through counter-messaging. This does not have to be offensive counter-propaganda, but should merely ensure that factual information is easily and widely available. The publicising of the PKK's history, its authoritarian nature and its raft of crimes, would be one method. Another method would be to give a platform to more critical perspectives. Kurdish opposition sources, who have been persecuted by the YPG, and some of the minority populations that have found life under the YPG a struggle could be given space and prominence to share their experiences. Likewise, allowing former YPG fighters who have been disillusioned by what they saw to give their testimony in visible venues could help to undo some of the romanticism. The lack of concern the YPG

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has for providing adequate medical care is notorious. This problem, and the YPG's lack of concern with fixing it, has been testified to by several YPG foreign fighters, and it has even been suggested that the YPG is happy for foreigners in its ranks to be "martyred" because it helps their strategic messaging.⁶²⁵

⁶²⁵ 'Talking with Kurds and a Volunteer who fought against ISIS', *YouTube*, 19 November 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t11ObgObX9k>, last visited: 4 August 2017; Orton, K., 'American YPG Fighter Complains About Group's Lack of Medical Care', *The Syrian Intifada*, 26 May 2017.

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