The Rojava Revolution

By Aram Shabanian
Over five years ago an uprising in Dara’a, Southern Syria, set into motion the events that would eventually culminate in the multi-front Syrian Civil War we see today. Throughout the conflict one group in particular has stuck to its principles of self-defense, gender equality, democratic leadership and environmental protectionism. This group, the Kurds of Northern Syria (Henceforth Rojava), have taken advantage of the chaos in their country to push for more autonomy and, just perhaps, an independent state. The purpose of this paper is to convince the reader that increased support of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) would be beneficial to regional and international goals and thus should be initiated immediately. Throughout this paper there will be sources linking to YouTube videos; use this to “watch” the Rojava Revolution from beginning to end for yourself. In the midst of the horror that is the Syrian Civil War there is a single shining glimmer of hope; Rojava, currently engaged in a war for survival and independence whilst simultaneously engaging in a political experiment the likes of which has never been seen before.

The Kurds are the second-largest ethnic group in the middle east today, spanning four countries (Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey) but lacking a home state of their own. Sometimes called the ultimate losers in the Sykes-Picot agreement, the Kurds have fought for a homeland of their own ever since said agreement was signed in 1916. The Kurds in all of the aforementioned nations are engaged
in some degree of insurrection or another. In Turkey, a full-blown insurgency is underway between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)\(^1\), a militant Kurdish group deemed a terrorist organization by the US State Department, the Turkish government, and many other countries. In Iran, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK)\(^2\) has been peacefully coexisting alongside the Iranian government more-or-less since 2004. PJAK is designated a terrorist organization by Iran, Turkey, and the United States, but notably not the UN or EU. Iraq has several Kurdish groups vying for power, but by far the most powerful (and current political leadership) in Iraq is the Kurdish Regional Government\(^3\), or KRG.

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Discrimination against Syrian Kurds dates back to the creation of modern-day Syria after WWII. This culminated in several events, namely the Jazira Census of 1962. On August 23rd, 1962, the government of the Syrian Arab Republic (Henceforth Syria) conducted a special population census that failed to include about 120,000 Kurds. As a result, they were stripped of their citizenship and categorized as aliens. Kurds in Syria thereafter were treated as second-class citizens, even if they happened to retain their Syrian citizenship. This resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the Damascus government and a desire for self-rule and an eventual place in an independent Kurdistan.

The Syrian Civil War started for Rojava in the city of Al-Hasakah when a local man, Hasan Ali Akleh, doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire. As a result of his self-immolation local activists called for a “Day of Rage” which, due to fear of government reprisal, was attended by few. Finally on March 7th, 2011, thirteen political prisoners of the Bashar al-Assad regime went on hunger strike, which gained much support for the steadily-growing revolution. Five days later, major protests broke out in the Rojavan cities of Al-Qamishli and Al-Hasakah, both celebrating Kurdish Martyr’s Day and simultaneously protesting against the Assad regime. In

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late May a summit was held in Antalya, Turkey, between various factions of the newly-proclaimed Free Syrian Army and other anti-government groups in Syria. This summit was skipped by a major coalition of 12 Kurdish political parties, who stated that they would not be party to a meeting in Turkey as it would be a detriment to Kurds in Syria. As a result, when the Syrian National Council was announced after the summit, most Kurdish political parties were left out. The Syrian National Council would later go on to merge with several other groups to form the National Council for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or the Syrian National Coalition.

On June 11, 2012, the two major Kurdish political parties in Rojava, the Kurdish Democratic Union party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) signed an agreement in the presence of Iraqi Kurdistan’s president, Massoud Barzani, in the Iraqi-Kurdish city of Erbil. This agreement fell through for various reasons, but about a month later (July 12) a new agreement was drawn up which formed the foundation of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, a body to govern all Kurdish-controlled territories in Syria (the cantons of Jazira, Kobanê, and Afrin).

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Elsewhere in Syria the revolution began picking up speed and intensity. Very rapidly protests in cities like Dara’a, Hama, and Homs went from peaceful, unarmed protests to full-blown armed insurrection as government forces cracked down with bullets and bombs.\(^\text{10}\) As the revolution gained strength, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) began pulling forces from less-threatened parts of the country and began consolidating forces along the coastline and in several major cities in particular (Tartus, Latakia, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo).\(^\text{11}\) In the absence of SAA forces, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) took control of the city of Kobanê on July 19, 2012.\(^\text{12}\) The following day their control expanded to the cities of Amuda and Afrin and, by the end of the month, included several other key cities. In fact, the only sizable Kurdish majority cities that remained under government control at that time were the cities of Al-Hasakah and Al-Qamishli.

On the morning of August 2nd, 2012, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, a large umbrella organization under which most Syrian rebel groups fell, declared that, with the notable exceptions of Al-Hasakah and Al-Qamishli, most Kurdish cities and towns in Syria were thus under the control


of Kurdish political parties and not the Syrian government. In Al-Qamishli, soldiers and police officers were given orders not to leave their barracks and police stations, and the red, white, green and yellow colors of the Kurdish flag were seen flying over the city. With that, the Rojava revolution was all but inevitable, and in the years since then the world has watched as an unprecedented social experiment has unfolded in what has become the most deadly country on the planet.

![Flag of the KCK](image)

*Flag of the KCK*

It is important to understand the vast number of actors in the Rojava conflict. In terms of Kurdish groups, most of those in Syria and Iraq (along with many in Turkey and Iran) answer to, at the top of the food chain, the Koma Civakên Kurdistan, or in English the Group of Communities in Kurdistan. The KCK is led by Abdullah Öcalan, who is currently imprisoned in Turkey on İmralı island, in the Sea of Marmara. The KCK was founded in

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2005 with the goal of promoting the ideology of democratic confederalism Öcalan advocated for following his 2009 arrest. In theory the organization is supposed to provide guidance and authority over the PKK, but in reality that power lies with the leaders of the PKK itself and the various organizations which will be described shortly. Alongside the KCK is the KJK, or the Komalên Jinên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Communities of Women), another umbrella organization designed to coordinate the various Kurdish women’s rights groups which are affiliated with the PKK.

![Flag of the PYD](https://example.com/flag_pyd)

Within Syria itself are several other organizations. The first and foremost is the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party), or the PYD. The PYD was founded in 2003 after the PKK withdrew from Syria in the late 1990s. The

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PYD represents the most dominant political force in Rojava and exerts influence over the YPG and other Kurdish militias, which will be discussed shortly.\textsuperscript{16}

The TEV-DEM, Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (or Movement for a Democratic Society) is a coalition of the PYD along with other ideologically-similar groups created to manage and govern Rojava following the withdrawal of the SAA. This organization is de facto under the control of the PYD.\textsuperscript{17} The Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria or KDPS) is the Syrian affiliate to the Iraqi KDP. They stand ideologically opposed to the PYD's autonomous federal cantons and instead advocate for all-out independence and unification with Iraqi Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{18} The KDPS initially refused to take part in the Syrian National Council (SNC), the official representatives of the Syrian opposition, as they could not secure a guarantee of

Kurdish cultural rights. However, should those rights be guaranteed the KDPS would join the SNC and stands opposed to the federalization program in Rojava. The KDPS falls under the ENKS/KNC, or Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê (Kurdish National Council). This group was created in part by Iraqi Kurdish president Barzani and does not participate in the autonomous federal system being enacted in Rojava.¹⁹

The armed wings of the PYD are the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/People's Protection Units) and the YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê/Women's Protection Units).²⁰ The YPG was initially founded after the Al-Qamishli riots of 2004 resulted in the deaths of at least 30 Syrian Kurds at the hands of

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government forces and existed as a secretive guerrilla force until around 2011/2012, when its existence became known to a wider audience. The YPJ is the women’s arm of the YPG and acts with the same level of authority and autonomy as the YPG. It is important to note the discrepancies between the equipment of the YPG/J and their enemies in the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS/ISIL/IS, henceforth Daesh). The YPG/J are mostly light militias armed with American and Soviet assault rifles and machine guns. They are also equipped with several types of anti-tank weapon (Namely the Soviet RPG-7 and the American FGM-148 Javelin) and less than 100 mortars. In terms of armored fighting vehicles (AFVs) the YPG has captured a few main battle tanks\(^1\) (At least two T-72 and two T-55, one of which was heavily modified with a machine gun turret in place of the main gun) and a few dozen captured American Humvees which were looted from the Iraqi army by Daesh following the collapse of Mosul. These are supplemented by a generous helping of homemade armored fighting vehicles, from simple Toyota pickup trucks with DShK heavy machine guns in them to armored garbage trucks painted to look like a lion. Combined the YPG/J number about 65,000-70,000 people, but these numbers are unreliable at best and fluctuate from time to time.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) YPG Tank Taburu & Düşmanlar Korkun. YouTube. August 8, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXSs5R5Ydzc

Contrast this level of equipment with the equipment possessed by Daesh and one can quickly come to understand why the YPG has come to depend on Coalition air strikes to help combat Daesh. Along with the same assault rifles and machine guns as the YPG has in their possession, Daesh also has various light machine guns, squad automatic weapons, hand grenades, grenade launchers (namely the Soviet AGS-17), rocket propelled grenades (RPG), man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), which are capable of taking down low-flying aircraft and helicopters (including the notorious American FIM-92 Stinger), and anti-tank missiles (such as the BGM-71 TOW). In addition to this, Daesh has captured several types of towed artillery such as the Soviet Type 59-1 and D-30 field guns, the Soviet ZU-23-2 and AZP-S-60 anti-aircraft guns, and the American M198 howitzer, of which they own up to 50. While the YPG does own several dozen American Humvees, Daesh captured at least 2,300 from the Iraqi army in their early days of advances, and these are supplemented by the same pickup truck-mounted machine gun contraptions (technicals) that have been seen in use by the YPG. The real power in terms of Daesh equipment comes from their heavier armored vehicles. Daesh captured the following armored personnel carriers from the Iraqi military: BMP-1 (20 captured), MT-LB (50 captured), various American-made Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles (MRAP, about 15-20 captured), M1117 (50 captured), and the venerable American M113
(unknown number, at least 50). In addition to this, Daesh has captured at least two American M1A1M Abrams main battle tanks (which have since been destroyed), approximately 10 T-72s of various types, and at least 30 T-55s. These are supplemented with several 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers, a few ZSU-23-4 Shilka self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, and some BM-21 Grad Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), all captured from the SAA.23

On September 23rd, 2014, President Barack Obama confirmed rumors that had been circulating of an American air strike on targets in Syria. The president said, in part, “Last night, on my orders, America’s armed forces began strikes against ISIL targets in Syria.”24 The strikes were launched against four Syrian cities; Raqqa (three strikes)25 Deir ez-Zor (four strikes), Al-Hasakah (two strikes), and Abu Kamal (four strikes).26 The strikes were carried out by aircraft from the United States along with support and aircraft from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Qatar, and in particular Bahrain.272829

23 Ibid.
These airstrikes were missiles from the US Navy, including at least two vessels, which fired Tomahawk Cruise Missiles at targets in Syria. It is worth noting that the majority of these strikes took place in areas with Kurdish forces nearby. Thus began American and Coalition support for Rojava.

The Coalition refers to a broad collection of nations providing different levels of support to the various factions in the wars in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, military support for Rojava comes from the United States, Australia, France, the Netherlands, Jordan, Morocco, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Denmark, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.
(and formerly Australia\textsuperscript{39} and Canada\textsuperscript{40}). These nations make up Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, otherwise known as CJTF-OIR.

Additional military aid is provided by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kuwait, Lebanon, Spain and Singapore, along with other unnamed Eastern European and Middle Eastern nations.\textsuperscript{41}

Unfortunately for Rojava, these airstrikes would largely only begin after the city of Kobanê was nearly overrun by Daesh. Prior to this, the Rojava conflict was largely unknown to Westerners, but the actual clashing with outside forces began for Rojava all the way back in 2011, shortly after the aforementioned protests took place. There were reports on 16 March 2011 of clashes in Al-Hasakah between government forces and local protesters.\textsuperscript{42} The early morning of 23 March 2011 saw bloodshed in the southern city of Dara’a, with 15 or 16 protesters being killed by police and military officials.\textsuperscript{43} The 31st saw great promise for the Kurds; initially, President Assad offered to investigate the loss of

Syrian citizenship by 150,000 Kurds in Al-Hasakah under his father Hafez al-Assad, an attempt to placate the Kurds and keep them from joining the rebellion. As April began, chaos began to spread to certain parts of Syria. Unknown gunmen began firing on protesters. On 7 April President Assad granted citizenship to 220,000 Kurds who had been stripped of their nationality in the 1960s (along with their children) in a further attempt to calm the Kurdish people and prevent them from joining the revolution. April 22nd became a rallying call for many around the nation, with mass protests resulting in at least 100 deaths. April 25 saw the beginning of the siege of Dara’a, which ended with several hundred civilians killed. The siege saw some of the first widespread use of military against civilians, including at least 20 tanks. This resulted in solidarity protests in many Syrian cities on the following friday, April 29th, as students and workers got out of their jobs and classes for the weekend. In Al-Qamishli, at least 15,000 people stood together and chanted “With our soul and with our blood we will sacrifice ourselves for Dara’a”. May saw a dramatic uptick in violence, with several other cities coming under siege. However, protesters were not dissuaded, and many thousands kept taking to the streets in cities like Homs.

44 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJYKLb72Y1k
Hama, Dara’a, Latakia, and many more. In Dara’a, the body of a 13-year-old boy named Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb was returned to his family after a month in police captivity. The body showed signs of mutilation and torture, and his death reinvigorated protests around the country.

By now at least 1,000 people had been killed around Syria, with at least a dozen cities and towns under military siege. Jisr ash-Shugur was attacked with gunships and tanks and was finally stormed on the 13th of June. Seven days later, President Assad gave a long, rambling speech, in which he blamed foreigners and outside intervention for the protests and the violence. This served to further aggravate the Syrian people, who took to the streets in greater numbers than ever before. Protests began in Damascus for the first time, and the international community began placing sanctions on Syria. In Deir ez-Zor, mass protests of over 450,000 people began taking place in late June and early July, finally culminating in a mass defection of Syrian army personnel on the 29th and the creation of the Free Syrian Army, or FSA.

The next major date for Syrian Kurds was 7 October 2011, when activist Mashaal al-Tammo was murdered by unknown gunmen in his home. The attack was later blamed on the government. In Al-Qamishli, tens of thousands took to

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50 "Defecting troops form 'Free Syrian Army', target Assad security forces". World Tribune. 3 August 2011.
the streets outside the hospital al-Tammo’s body was taken to in protest.\(^5^1\) The following day at least 14 mourners were killed in a government crackdown after around 50,000 people took to the streets of Al-Qamishli to remember al-Tammo.\(^5^2\) On January 10, 2012, president Assad gave a rambling speech in which he blamed the ongoing unrest on foreign dissidents, provocateurs, and terrorists, a line he would continue to echo for years to come.\(^5^3\)

In February the war began to take on a darker turn, with hundreds being killed by the Regime on a daily basis. In the international realm, several nations, including the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) closed or restricted their diplomatic missions to Syria. Sanctions were attempted through the United Nations Security Council (Resolutions S/2012/77 and S/2012/538), but these were vetoed by Russia and China.

From February until June Kurdish front stayed largely quiet, with mass protests occasionally breaking out in Al-Qamishli. On 19 June the FSA called upon the Kurds to join in the fight against the Syrian government. In exchange, they promised to end “injustice” against the Kurds in a future Syria.\(^5^4\) On 19 July


the border city of Kobanê was taken over without a shot fired by the Kurdish
Popular Defense Committees as the SAA pulled back to cover the “heartland”.\textsuperscript{55}
Toward the end of July, Salih Muslim, one of the co-leaders of the PYD, told the
BBC that the Kurds were ready to “govern themselves”, but reiterated that he did
not mean Kurdish independence; rather, he was referring to increased autonomy
in a new, democratic Syria.\textsuperscript{56}

August started with a condemnation of the Syrian government by the
United Nations General Assembly. The resolution, 66/253, read, in part:

1. Condemns the increasing use by the Syrian authorities of heavy
   weapons, including indiscriminate shelling from tanks and helicopters, in
   population centres and the failure to withdraw their troops and heavy
   weapons to their barracks, contrary to paragraph 2 of Security Council
   resolution 2042 (2012) and paragraph 2 of Council resolution 2043 (2012);

2. Strongly condemns the continued widespread and systematic
gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian
authorities and pro-Government militias, such as the use of force against
 civilians, massacres, arbitrary executions, the killing and persecution of
protesters, human rights defenders and journalists, arbitrary detention,
enforced disappearances, interference with access to medical treatment,
torture, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, including against children, as
well as any human rights abuses by armed opposition groups;

3. Condemns all violence, irrespective of where it comes from,
   including terrorist acts; \textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} “Syrian Kurdish Town Declares Independence from Damascus.”
\textsuperscript{57} United Nations General Assembly. Press Office. “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 3
Throughout the remainder of 2012 and into 2013 the Kurds in Rojava continued to consolidate power in their cities. All cities were cleared of government forces save for Al-Hasakah and Al-Qamishli, wherein the garrisons remained and controlled substantial portions of the city. On 27 October, 2012, approximately 30 people were killed in clashes between the YPG in a Kurdish neighborhood of Aleppo and unknown Arab rebels. An additional 200 people were taken prisoner by either side (total of 200).  

On 18 January 2013, two radical jihadist groups, Ghuraba al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (Syrian offshoot of al-Qaeda), the latter designated a terrorist group by the United States and many other nations/organizations, launched an attack on the city of Kobanê. Heavy fighting ensued, and at one point the jihadists were reinforced by three tanks that were driven in from the Turkish border. However, the YPG managed to hold the town and actually capture one of the tanks, which proved to be extremely useful in later operations. 

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The first major clash between YPG and Islamist forces came on 16 July, 2013, in the town of Ras al-Ayn. Since the conclusion of the Battle of Ras al-Ayn on 19 February 2013, the town had been divided between Arab and Kurdish fighters. On the 16th of July, a YPJ (Women’s Protection Units) patrol was ambushed by al-Nusra (Henceforth JaN), which had recently reinforced its positions in the city with approximately 200 more fighters. The driver was captured, but two passengers in the vehicle were able to escape. Proverbial alarm bells sounded and the YPG brought in reinforcements from the nearby town of al-Derbasiya. Clashes broke out between the YPG and JaN, and within a few hours the YPG had taken control of the local JaN headquarters. By midday on the 17th the YPG had routed JaN from the city and captured the Turkish/Syrian border crossing, but not before two Kurdish and nine JaN fighters died. Fighting continued through the 19th in the towns of Tal A’lo, Karhouk and A’li Agha. Between the 16th and the 19th at least 35 Islamist and 19 YPG fighters had been killed in the clashes.

By August Daesh had announced their intention to capture the YPG headquarters city of Kobanê. The month saw continued clashes in smaller

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villages around Kobanê, namely between the FSA/Islamists and the YPG. At this point, JaN and Daesh were still allies. As August came to a close the YPG seemed on the retreat, with Islamist factions gaining ground in Kobanê canton. These advances, and similar advances in Aleppo, led to some Kurds fleeing toward Kobanê and Afrin. As Islamist groups, in particular Daesh, took control of these villages and towns, they began ethnically cleansing members of the Kurdish community. In the absence of heavy weapons, Daesh was able to quickly overrun YPG positions. As noted previously, Daesh has in their inventory many main battle tanks and other armored fighting vehicles, something the YPG lacked at the time (and still largely lacks).

Finally on 13 September 2014, Daesh initiated a large-scale offensive to capture the Kobanê canton and the city of Kobanê itself. Since February Daesh had been separate from JaN, so as Daesh forces encircled Kobanê elements of the FSA joined Kurds fleeing Daesh and seeking refuge in Kobanê or Turkey itself. Heavy combat ensued, with the YPG pledging not to give up Kobanê and

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Daesh pledging not to halt until the town was taken.\(^{69}\) By 19 September Daesh had captured approximately 40 Kurdish villages near Kobanê and was advancing rapidly on the city itself.\(^{70}\) As Daesh closed in on at least 100 more smaller villages, the YPG began evacuating civilians to safety in Turkey despite sustained enemy artillery fire. All-told, approximately 300,000 civilians were evacuated through Kobanê in September/November 2014.\(^{71}\) Still others were left stranded at the border, unable to cross into Turkey as-per Turkish officials.\(^{72}\) Evidence of this human exodus is visible via satellite imagery, with thousands of cars seen parked in large encampments every several miles along the Turkish/Syrian border near Kobanê.\(^{73}\) The YPG swung into crisis mode, consolidating their forces in Kobanê and receiving at least 300 reinforcements via Turkey.\(^{74}\) Meanwhile Murat Karayilan, a senior PKK official in Turkey, called upon Kurdish youth in Turkey to answer the call and respond to Kobanê.\(^{75}\)

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Daesh is adept at using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), in layman’s terms a car full of bombs driven by a suicidal fighter toward enemy lines. Their humble beginnings were red-and-white Nissan sedans with trunks full of old artillery shells driven at American forces in Iraq during the occupation of that country which began in 2003. More contemporary Daesh VBIEDs feature heavy armor plating, making it nearly impossible to stop them with anything short of an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM), a tank, or an airstrike. Again, as previously stated, Daesh had in their inventory a wide variety of armored vehicles. However, it is important to note that these vehicles do not equate an effective mechanized force on their own. Modern weapons of war require extensive maintenance, repair, and resources. Thus, as many captured tanks and armored personnel carriers ran out of ammunition, they were filled with explosives and driven at YPG lines. Armored recovery vehicles and ambulances were also used in the assaults, along with a plethora of homemade vehicles, from armored garbage trucks to pickup trucks sporting massive anti-aircraft guns. However, perhaps one of the deadliest and most feared weapons on the Daesh inventory is none other than the armored bulldozer.\(^76\) In an interview with an Iraqi Peshmerga member, the details of these vehicles was fully revealed. Essentially a standard bulldozer (or a military bulldozer in some cases) is taken and

up-armed with steel plating around vital areas. Then, in some cases, the vehicle is also given concrete reinforcement. Finally it is packed with explosives and sent chugging toward enemy lines. Often ATGMs and tank shells fail to destroy the improvised bulldozers, leaving only airstrikes to prevent them from wreaking havoc on Kurdish lines.

VBIEDs are used in conjunction with other armored vehicles and infantry waves to overwhelm and shock defenders. Often two or three VBIEDs will be used in quick succession, eliminating layers of defenses and allowing Daesh fighters to infiltrate behind Kurdish defenses. After Daesh began massacring Yazidi civilians in Shingal, Iraq, the United States, as previously mentioned, began bombing the terrorist group on behalf of Baghdad. In late September 2014, that focus shifted to include Syria as well, and on 27 September the first airstrike was carried out by an American F-15E near Kobanê, targeting a Daesh building and two armored vehicles (possibly VBIEDs).

Despite the airstrikes, Daesh continued to shell the city. The following day, 28 September, over 1,500 Kurdish fighters arrived from Turkey to join the fight.

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As October arrived, soldiers inside Kabanê proper began preparing for increased urban combat as the fighting came closer and closer to the city center. Sandbag emplacements were installed and heavily defended, but in the end a lack of ammunition and heavy weaponry led the YPG to retreat from outlying city positions. As YPG forces retreated, Daesh moved in and immediately began embarking on a campaign of ethnic cleansing, torture, and crimes against humanity.81 Thousands crowded the Turkish border crossing, where Turkish troops were deployed but not ordered to intervene. Stories of children having their hearts cut out of their chests and elderly persons being brutally beaten and murdered spread like wildfire, adding to the panic at the border. Captured fighters, particularly women of the YPJ, were beaten, often raped, and beheaded. The true brutality of Daesh really came out in their campaign against Kabanê and reminded the Kurds what they were fighting for.82

The use of suicide bombers was not unique to Daesh. In rare desperation, a Kurdish woman was used as a suicide bomber against IS positions, killing at least a dozen.83 Nine days into October and the YPG was running low on

ammunition and other supplies. Outnumbered and outgunned, the situation
looked dire as Daesh fighters began setting fire to Kobanê to create a smoke
screen designed to thwart the prying eyes of the Coalition.Quick to adapt,
Daesh began dressing fighters up in YPG uniforms, flying YPG flags from their
motorcycles (which they began using to ferry ammunition around the city)\textsuperscript{85}, and
driving tanks into the city under the cover of smoke and darkness. 40% of
Kobanê was captured by 10 October.\textsuperscript{86} By the 15th of October the fighting had
spread to the Turkish/Syrian border crossing, which Daesh assaulted at least
four times. Over the course of four days (between the 13th and the 17th) the
coalition launched over 53 airstrikes against Daesh in and around Kobanê alone.
On the 19th, the first Coalition airdrops of supplies to YPG forces took place, with
supplies coming from Iraqi Kurdistan as well as Coalition countries.\textsuperscript{87}.

In early September a joint-operations room had been founded\textsuperscript{88},
comprising of the YPG/YPJ and elements of the FSA. This coalition, known as

\textsuperscript{84} “Report: A Third of Kobani Captured by Islamic State Read More:
\textsuperscript{86} "Islamic State Fighters Capture Kurd HQ in Syria's Kobanê: Monitor." Deccan Chronicle, October 10,
2014.
\textsuperscript{87} "US Airdrops Weapons for Kurds Fighting ISIL." Al Jazeera, October 20, 2014.
305.html.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abajSkn_hcYY.
Euphrates Volcano, was announced on 10 September 2014. Euphrates Volcano is comprised of the following groups, along with the YPG and the YPJ: the Islamic Front (Aleppo Division), Tawhid Brigade (Northern Sector), Jaysh al-Thuwar, Jabhat al-Akrad, Kita‘ib Shams al-Shamal, Liwa Thuwar ar-Raqqa, Liwa al-Jihad fi Sabeel Allah, Saraya Jarablus, Tahrir Brigade, Jaysh al-Qasas, and Liwa Amna ar-Raqqa.\(^9^9\) On 29 October, FSA fighters began arriving via Turkey, the first time Turkey had allowed non-Syrian Kurds to cross the border to fight.\(^9^0\) In addition to FSA reinforcements, comrades from Iraqi Kurdistan began crossing the border with Syria (of which they had controlled the northern section of for about a month) and arriving via Turkey, bringing with them much-needed heavy equipment.\(^9^1\)

As more Kurdish defenders streamed into the city, the once-thriving Kobanê turned into a meatgrinder. Daesh began pulling forces from other areas of Syria and throwing them into the offensive, desperate not to let their assault die out.\(^9^2\) By November the situation had reached its worst point, with 60% of the city under Daesh control. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) began


sending more fighters and equipment across the border to bolster Syrian Kurdish forces, and by the end of November the tides had begun to turn. Coalition airstrikes, along with reinforcements and resupply, bloodied the nose of Daesh, who stubbornly refused to back down from the confrontation. To some this inability to throw in the towel, so to speak, was surprising. To others it was absolutely expected.

Daesh was formed partially by former Iraqi Ba’ath party members, many of whom were in the Iraqi military. The Iraqi military, while historically decent at logistics and supply operations, suffered when it came to tactical battlefield decision making. During their numerous wars with Israel, Iraqi forces often brought more than enough equipment, ammunition and fuel, but junior officers failed their troops. Furthermore, as evidenced at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi generals lacked originality and would refuse to guard their flanks. Forces were sent into enemy territory with no reconnaissance done, with no flank guards, and while they did well when facing an enemy head-on (and the Iranians did suffer in early head-on battles), simply maneuvering to the sides of the massed Iraqi armor would allow Iranian forces to attack the weaker parts of the armored columns, routing them time and again. When frustrated by a lack of action, Iraqi forces under Saddam Hussein would launch large-scale chemical weapons attacks against the masses of Iranian infantry, who were lightly armed
and poorly trained. This tactic would rear its ugly head several more times before Saddam was ultimately removed from power. Again during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent action against American and Coalition forces, while some Iraqi soldiers fought tenaciously and bravely, the majority were routed simply due to a lack of military intelligence and combined arms abilities. After the war, Shia and Kurdish minorities in the south and north of Iraq (respectively) rose up at the urging of the US, only to be brutally put down by Saddam’s security forces. This was hardly the first time the Iraqi military had been used against the Kurds; the Iraqi government and Kurdish citizens had battled several times throughout the short history of the Mesopotamian nation-state. Thus, animosity among Saddam’s men toward the Kurds was widespread, especially among military officers.

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, loyalist forces under President Hussein often fought to the bitter end; the Fedayeen Saddam, created after the first Gulf War to help bolster the Iraqi regime against internal threats, along with some members of the Republican Guard, stood against nearly impossible odds and fought the Coalition invaders, dying in their thousands while doing next-to-nothing for the war effort itself. These tactics can still be seen in use against forces like the YPG today.
As reinforcements and supplies continued to come in from abroad, Daesh went on the defensive. Several attempted advances were halted with air support and the extremist forces were pushed back. By the end of December, Daesh was barely holding onto the city, and a series of rapid advances in early January proved to be the final blow against the organization in Kobanê. On January 26th, the YPG announced the liberation of Kobanê and the beginning of their clean-up operations in the town.93

As Kobanê proved, local Kurdish and allied forces, supported by American and Coalition airstrikes could prove absolutely lethal to Daesh. September - October 2014’s airstrikes alone totalled the following:

- September 2014 -- Building (1); Armed Vehicle (3); Artillery (1); Tank (1);94
- October 2014 -- Checkpoint (2); Fighting Position (6); Armed Vehicle (33); Tank (3); Other (59); Artillery (2); Supply Depot (1); Building (30)95
- November 2014 -- Other (100); Armed Vehicle (8); Building (6).96

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In those three months alone (and September barely counts), it is clear to see the impact the coalition made on Daesh’s operational capabilities. The strikes target a wide variety of targets beyond VBIEDs as mentioned earlier, including buildings, machine gun nests, sniper positions, training centers, artillery positions, fighting positions, checkpoints, and other military infrastructure. Continuation of these strikes, with an emphasis on limited or eliminating altogether civilian casualties, is a must for the United States and the global coalition (CJTF-OIR). Without continued air support, the tides could just as easily shift against the YPG and back into the hands of Daesh. As recently as May 2016 Daesh has been on the offensive, showing their ability to gain ground is still intact.

In a move heavily supported politically by the United States, on 10 October 2015 a new organization was founded in Northern Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF. The SDF is comprised of, on top of the YPJ/YPG, the following groups: The Syrian Arab Coalition, members of the Shammar tribal militias, the Al-Sanadid Forces, the former Euphrates Volcano, Army of Revolutionaries, the Northern Sun Battalion, the Martyrs of Dam Brigade, Liwa Jund Al Haramayn,

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Through air strikes, the Western powers can show their political and military support of Rojava and express their will to support Kurdish self-determination. One of the deciding factors in any military intervention should without a doubt be the thought of political repercussions; that is to say, if the Russians oppose supporting a group of fighters, supporting them anyway hurts relations with Russia. In the case of the PYD (And via them the YPG/YPJ), there is no real danger of hurting relations with Russia. In fact, the only real negative side to said support would be relations with Turkey. Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and is thus a close American ally. As the YPG is a sister organization of the PKK, it can be seen as supporting the PKK to support the YPG.

In order to secure Turkish support for such a venture, the United States would need to either (1) find a way to guarantee materials will not end up in the hands of the PKK, (2) provide only air support and no ground support, or (3)
refuse to support Rojava altogether. Anti-tank missile systems, such as the BGM-71 TOW, would help the YPG combat Daesh’s heavy equipment, but would also allow the PKK to destroy Turkish tanks in combat. In an attempt to circumvent this issue, the United States could provide advanced defensive systems to Turkey for use on tanks and other armored fighting vehicles, technology from the currently-deployed US M1A2SEP2 Abrams main battle tank which could easily be converted to Turkey’s extensive fleet of Leopard I and M60 main battle tanks. Turkey’s own domestic tank, the Altay, could be supplemented with advanced technology, making it nearly invulnerable to most BGM-71 TOW systems (older ones, at least).

Recently the Iraqi military embarked on a campaign to liberate the al-Rutbah area of western Iraq. In the attacks the Iraqi military used extensive close air support and flanking tactics, tactics the Iraqi military previously was unable to pull off. As the war has progressed in Iraq and Syria, repeatedly it has been proven that when faced with a competent military utilizing close air support, Daesh can be defeated. This was evidenced recently at al-Rutbah and Ramadi in Iraq, and Palmyra in Syria. The SDF provides a vessel through which American and coalition influence can be exerted via air strikes and supply drops, along with embedded trainers.
A major part of US efforts, however, will need to be political and diplomatic. In order to properly carry out attacks in Syria, the US must secure peace between the PKK and the Turkish government. This must be done or any efforts will be in vain as Kurdish forces loyal to the PKK may trickle back into Turkey, prompting a Turkish invasion of Rojava. Real, solid negotiations are required and much political maneuvering must be achieved. It will take a skillful set of politicians in the US to accomplish this, making the upcoming election even more important.

Furthermore, negotiations between Rojava and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq must be worked out. The two sides are at least amicable at the current time, but it is anybody’s guess as to how long that will last.

In closing, it is important to bear in mind the key role airstrikes and supply drops have had on the battlefield. Without them, Kobanê surely would have fallen. If the coalition is to see success in the upcoming (currently-underway as of this writing) operation to retake Raqqa, they will surely need to continue supporting local forces such as the SDF and in particular the YPG. This means more heavy weaponry, medical supplies, and other forms of equipment on top of continuing airstrikes in the region. For these purposes it is recommended to deploy a carrier battle group or additional USAF assets to the region. However, the impetus must be on reducing and eliminating civilian casualties, similar to the
NATO campaign in Libya. Surplus armored bulldozers should be delivered to the SDF, along with anti-mine equipment and the training on how to use the advanced equipment. A possible (unlikely) scenario would see US and Russian military sappers working side-by-side in Syria behind the SDF, clearing IEDs from the countryside as the Kurdish and allied forces advance.

The potential for a stable, democratic and popularly-supported Rojava is real. The world needs to recognize this opportunity at a unique political experiment, a federal system which may prove to be the foundation for solving other issues (such as Israel/Palestine, Morocco/Western Sahara, etc.). In order to allow this system to develop, the world must also stand in support of the local forces in the area and provide them with the equipment, training and military support necessary to defeat Daesh and protect the Kurdish lands.

As of this writing, the battle for the Daesh capital city of Raqqa has begun with the SDF leading the fight.