

# **THE SYRIAN KURDS: THE OUTSIDER IN THE SYRIAN WAR**

**Dr Spyridon Plakoudas**  
(Defence Analyst, RIEAS Research Associate)

**Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies  
([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr)) Publication date: 24 March 2016**

## *Syria: A Divided Country*

After five years of sectarian violence, the country has been reduced to rubble and partitioned de facto in several warring statelets: a) the titular state of Syria under Assad that still controls the populous urban centres of eastern Syria along the Damascus-Latakia central road, b) a mosaic of dominions and enclaves under the shaky rule of the anti-Assad opposition in northern and southern Syria, c) the sprawling jihadist state in the eastern Syrian desert under the black banner of the Islamic State and d) an almost continuous Kurdish state along the long Turkish-Syrian frontier.<sup>1</sup> A few days ago, the Kurds of Syria proclaimed the establishment

---

<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned situation reflects the current state of affairs, wherein the central government under al-Assad and the Kurds have increased their territorial gains at the expense of the anti-Assad opposition and the Islamic State respectively. [Staff]: “The Battle for Syria”, *New York Times*, 22/2/2016. For maps on the current state of affairs in Syria, see: [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/30/world/middleeast/syria-control-map-isis-rebels-airstrikes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/30/world/middleeast/syria-control-map-isis-rebels-airstrikes.html?_r=0)

of a federal government in northern Syria – in stark defiance to Turkey’s stern opposition to a second independent Kurdish entity.<sup>2</sup>

Without doubt, the Kurds stand out as the greatest winner by far of the vicious sectarian violence in Syria since 2011. A nation of roughly 2 million souls whose existence was denied and identity suppressed by the Syrian state authorities since 1962<sup>3</sup>, the Kurds currently control almost the whole length of the 822 km long Turkish-Syrian frontier. How did the Syrian Kurds achieve such a dramatic turnaround? Do they owe their success to the support of foreign powers? Or should their achievements be attributed to their iron will and fiery war temper?

### **The Sources of the PYD’s Success**

The Kurds of Syria owe their initial success primarily to the divisions and conflicts among their main foes: the anti-Assad opposition and the Ba’ath regime. Although the Syrian Kurds welcomed the popular uprising against the oppressive Ba’ath regime in March 2011, they did not actively participate in the war and preserved their scanty military capital intact. When in July 2012 Assad withdrew his ground forces from several border towns in northern Syria (with the exception of al-Qamishli in Jazira) to counter the opposition’s main thrusts in Aleppo and Damascus,<sup>4</sup> the PYD (the strongest political party in Syrian Kurdistan) seized the

---

<sup>2</sup> [Al Jazeera]: “Syria Civil War: Kurds Declare Federal Region in North”, *Al Jazeera*, 17/3/2016.

<sup>3</sup> Jordi Tegel: *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 53-68.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Hubbard: “After Defeat in Damascus, Syrian Rebels Expand Fight in Aleppo”, *Associated Press*, 24/7/2012; Ivan Watson: “Battles for Key Cities of Aleppo, Damascus Heat Up in Syrian Civil War”, *CNN*, 27/7/2012.

opportunity and captured a few Kurdish-majority towns without a fight.<sup>5</sup> Whether military expediency or diplomatic cunning induced Assad to act this way is still debated;<sup>6</sup> perhaps both factors dictated such a tactical move with far wider implications. By August 2012, almost every Kurdish-majority town in northern Syria – with the exception of al-Qamishli and al-Hassaka – had been captured bloodlessly by the YPG – the PYD’s newly-formed military wing.<sup>7</sup> The government-in-exile of the anti-Assad opposition accused the PYD of covertly collaborating with Assad, whereas the latter insisted on its steadfast opposition towards the oppressive Assad regime;<sup>8</sup> in reality, however, the PYD stayed neutral and only minor political groups of Syria’s Kurds participated in the Syrian National Council at the behest of Barzani – the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government and rival of the PYD.<sup>9</sup> Stationed in and dominated by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar,<sup>10</sup> the opposition-in-exile did not appeal to a party inspired by Marxism-Leninism and Kurdish irredentism.

---

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Markey: “After Quiet Revolt, Power Struggle Looms for Syria’s Kurds”, *Al Jazeera*, 7/11/2012; Justin Vela: “In Syria Clashes between Arab Rebels, Kurds”, *Washington Post*, 28/11/2012.

<sup>6</sup> Wyre Davies: “Crisis in Syria Emboldens Country’s Kurds”, *BBC News*, 28/7/2012; Daniel Wagner and Giorgio Cafiero: “In Kurdish Syria, a Different War”, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 5/9/2013.

<sup>7</sup> The towns without a weighty Kurdish majority such as Rays al-Ayn remained divided between the anti-Assad opposition and the PYD until 2013 and 2014. Joe Parkinson: “Syria’s Quiet Revolt: Kurds Take over North-East”, *Wall Street Journal*, 3/10/2012.

<sup>8</sup> The majority of such articles which speak of an underground alliance between the PYD and Assad originate in the pro-government press of Turkey – which after all supports the anti-Assad opposition. Merve Aydoğan: “PYD Leader Reveals Hidden Relationship between PYD, Assad”, *Daily Sabah*, 27/7/2015.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Lowe: “The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria” in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (eds.): *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) pp. 226-228.

<sup>10</sup> Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith: “How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution”, *Financial Times*, 17/3/2013; Bilal Y. Saab: “Saudi Arabia’s Plan in Syria”, *Foreign Affairs*, 17/12/2015; Semih Idiz: “How Much Support Did Turkey Provide to Syrian Opposition?”, *Al Monitor*, 1/3/2016.

By the spring of 2013, the PYD could count on an important ally for support: the PKK. The latter has waged intermittently a violent insurgency against the Turkish state authorities in pursuit of independence for Turkey's oppressed Kurdish minority since 1984. In March 2013, the PKK proclaimed a unilateral ceasefire after an appeal by its jailed leader and transferred its main forces in Syria.<sup>11</sup> Despite persistent renunciations by the party's top leadership, the PYD retains organic ties with the PKK.<sup>12</sup> Versed in the art of irregular warfare, the PKK taught the YPG how to fight. The uneasy alliance between the PYD and the anti-Assad opposition collapsed in July 2013. The frontier town of Ras al-Ayn (or Serêkanî), divided in half between the YPG and Jabhat al-Nusra, was captured in July 2013 and a string of frontier towns and villages in northern Syria were wrestled from al-Nusra between July and December 2013 – although the jihadists were supported in various ways by Turkey.<sup>13</sup> Ankara perceived the jihadists as a far lesser threat for Turkey than the PYD owing to the latter's organic ties with the PKK. After all, Ankara consistently endeavoured since 2011 to achieve two inter-related objectives in the Syrian War: first, overthrow Assad and install a friendly Sunni Muslim government in Damascus that would dismantle the Shia Axis<sup>14</sup> in the Middle East and, secondly, prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish entity in

---

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG): "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria" (International Crisis Group, Brussels, 2014), pp. 4-12.

<sup>12</sup> The extent of the association between the PKK and PYD can be easily discerned in the ubiquitous posters of the PKK's jailed leader, Öcalan, and the regnant ideology of Apoism (from Öcalan's nickname Apo). Michael Gunter: *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst, 2014), pp. 61-73.

<sup>13</sup> According to claims by the opposition parties in Turkey (CHP and HDP), the support of the Turkish state authorities to the jihadists ranged from hospital treatment for wounded fighters to weapons and sanctuary for the jihadists. Richard Spencer and Raf Sanchez: "Turkish Government Co-Operated with Al-Qaeda in Syria, Says Former US Ambassador", *Telegraph*, 11/9/2014; Aaron Stein: "Turkey's Evolving Syria Strategy: Why Ankara Backs al-Nusra but Shuns ISIS", *Foreign Affairs*, 9/2/2015.

<sup>14</sup> Pro-Iranian Shia parties currently exercise control over four Arab capitals (Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Sana'a) and ally themselves with Iran (the champion of Shia Islam), thus establishing a Shia Axis.

northern Syria which would rekindle the irredentism of Turkey's Kurds.<sup>15</sup> By late 2013, the Kurds had overwhelmed the insurgent allies of Turkey and established three autonomous enclaves (i.e. cantons): one in north-western Syria around Afrin that was encircled in the north by Turkey and in the south by the al-Nusra, one in north-central Syria around Kobani and a third one in the easternmost edge of northern Syria around al-Qamishli – a town divided between the YPG and the Assad regime.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the theories of Öcalan about “democratic confederalism”, the PYD resolved to implement a radical political, ideological and economic experiment in western Kurdistan, or Rojava. Secularism, egalitarianism, socialism and religious tolerance comprised the centrepieces of the PYD's radical political and economic program.<sup>17</sup>

In the first six months of 2014, the Syrian Kurds were increasingly harassed by the Islamic State – a new jihadist group that waged violent raids from Ramadi in central Iraq to Tell Abyad and Aleppo in northern Syria. In June 2014, the Islamic State unleashed a blitzkrieg which northern and central Iraq that culminated with the impressive capture of Mosul and the advance all the way up to the gates of Baghdad in central Iraq and Erbil in northern Iraq; the jihadists repeated the same lightning wars in northern Syria and swept aside their Arab and Kurdish opponents. In September 2014, the Islamic State set siege to the capital city of the second

---

<sup>15</sup> Spyridon Plakoudas: “Russia and Turkey at Loggerheads: An Expected Clash”, *KEDISA*, 27/11/2015. Also, see: Aaron Stein: *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (London: RUSI, 2015), pp. 59-87.

<sup>16</sup> Erika Solomon: “Special Report: Amid Syria's Violence, Kurds Carve Out Autonomy”, *Reuters*, 22/1/2014. A map on the first three cantons in February 2014 can be found here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrin\\_Canton#/media/File:Rojava\\_february2014\\_2.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrin_Canton#/media/File:Rojava_february2014_2.png)

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongersen: “Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14 (2012), pp. 1-16; Carne Ross: “Power to the People: A Syrian Experiment in Democracy”, *Financial Times*, 23/10/2015; Wes Enzina: “A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard”, *New York Times*, 24/11/2015.

canton, Kobani, and by early October stood on the verge of victory. The plight of the besieged town sent shockwaves across the Middle East and Europe, stirring the Kurdish diasporas and communities into action. In Turkey, the Kurds protested violently against the apathy – to the extent of connivance – of the Turkish state authorities in the face of the humanitarian crisis just a stone’s throw from the Mürşit Pinar border crossing.<sup>18</sup> From all over Europe and the Middle East, Kurds and Westerners flocked to Kobani to fight against the Islamic State in what was increasingly viewed as a “crusade against Islamo-fascism” given the genocidal credentials of the jihadists. Yielding to popular pressure, Barzani set aside his long-standing quarrels with the PYD and sent an expeditionary army to relieve the siege of the town in a rare show of pan-Kurdish solidarity.<sup>19</sup> On 15 March 2015, the Islamic State had been defeated after enduring the worst losses until then<sup>20</sup> and the Battle of Kobani was immortalized as an epos in the hearts and minds of the Kurds.

Notwithstanding the heroism of the Kurdish male and female fighters, in reality the US air operations turned the tide of the battle. On 27 September 2015, the USA targeted the jihadists around Kobani with air strikes for the first time, thus inaugurating a successful co-operation with the YPG that persists up to date in

---

<sup>18</sup> The violent protests raged for three days (8-10 October 2014) throughout south-eastern and eastern Turkey (where the vast majority of the Kurds reside) and cost the lives of 34 people in total; only the appeal of Öcalan pacified the angry Kurdish crowds.

<sup>19</sup> Barzani and the PYD vie for control of Syria’s Kurds. Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurds and an ally of Turkey, wants to unite the Kurds of Iraq and Syria under his rule and opposes the PYD – which retains close ties with the PKK. However, the PYD endeavours to install itself as the sole representative of Syria’s Kurds at the expense of the other Kurdish parties allied with Barzani and the anti-Assad opposition. International Crisis Group (ICG): “Syria’s Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle”(Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2013), pp. 22-40.

<sup>20</sup> The number of dead jihadists amounted to 1,442 men – almost 1/10 of its total fighting strength (20,000 fighters) at the time if the wounded fighters are also accounted for. Rami Abdurrahman: “YPG Retakes more than 332 Villages in Ayn al-Arab ‘Kobane’”, *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 17/4/2015.

spite of the vehement opposition of Turkey.<sup>21</sup> After the end of the siege, the YPG recaptured the whole canton and thrust towards the east. Co-operating closely with the US air force and supported by several allied contingents of the Free Syrian Army<sup>22</sup>, the YPG captured the strategic town of Tell Abyad on 16 June 2015 – uniting the Kobani and Jazira (Qamishli) cantons; by late June, the YPG had advanced just 50 km north of al-Raqqah – the Islamic State’s capital.<sup>23</sup> In early June, the jihadists captured almost half of al-Hasakah, a strategic town in north-eastern Syria previously divided between the YPG and loyal Assad forces, in a surprise raid; by August, the YPG had recaptured the town and expelled the jihadists from the whole province.<sup>24</sup> This operation stands out as the first time the loyal Assad forces and the YPG co-operated militarily against a common security threat. The PYD still retains a “no war, no peace” policy vis-à-vis Assad: although rhetorically opposed to Assad, the PYD has clashed only seldom with the loyal Assad forces and still shares power with the latter in al-Qamishli and al-Hasakah.<sup>25</sup>

The victories on the field of battle against the Islamic State have upgraded the status of the PYD into a de facto ally of the USA in the struggle against the jihadists. Thanks to its diplomatic capital of this de facto alliance, an invasion in Syria by Turkey has been staved off. After the capture of Tel Abyad, Ankara has

---

<sup>21</sup> Indicatively of the success of the US air operations, nearly 1,000 additional fatalities were reported among the jihadists during the four-month siege. Laura Smith Park: “ISIS Fighters Say Constant Airstrikes Drove Them Out of Kobani”, *CNN*, 31/1/2015.

<sup>22</sup> The contingents of the Free Syrian Army that stand shoulder to shoulder with the YPG include: Jaysh al-Thuwar, Jabhat al-Akrad, Jabhat Thuwar al-Raqqah and Al-Shaitat.

<sup>23</sup> Nour Malas, Ayla Albayrak and Julian E. Barnes: “U.S. Allies in Syria Cut Islamic State Supply Line”, *Wall Street Journal*, 16/6/2015; Tom Perry and Laila Bassam: “Syria Kurds Seize Town from Islamic State near ‘Capital’”, *Reuters*, 23/6/2015.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Wyke: “Kurdish Forces Declare Syrian City of Hasakah Liberated from ISIS”, *Daily Mail*, 2/8/2015; Leith Fadel: “ISIS’ Largest Offensive Fails: Al-Hasakh City Is Fully Secured”, *Al-Masdar News*, 3/8/2015.

<sup>25</sup> Seyhmus Hakan: “Kurds Battle Assad’s Forces in Syria, Opening New Front in Civil War”, *Reuters*, 18/1/2015; Al Jazeera: “Syrian Kurds Set Terms for Partnership with Assad”, *Al Jazeera*, 4/8/2015

warned repeatedly that the unification of the Afrin and Kobani cantons constitutes a *casus belli*. The Turkish state officials have routinely accused the PYD of engaging in ethnic-cleansing against the Arabs and Turkmens in northern Syria and oppressing the minor Kurdish groups.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the PYD labours to monopolise political power in Rojava (Western Kurdistan) and homogenise this ethnically diverse area – often through brute force.<sup>27</sup> However, the YPG has not committed war crimes in a systematic way or on a vast scale as claimed by its critics.<sup>28</sup> Had the YPG systematically pursued an ethnic-cleansing campaign against non-Kurds, the latter would have never coalesced with the Kurds to set up the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – an alliance of Arab, Assyrians, Armenian, Kurdish and Turkmen militias under the aegis of the YPG – on 10 October 2015.<sup>29</sup> Nor would the non-Kurds participate in the administrative apparatus of the new quasi-state in Rojava.<sup>30</sup> For Turkey, the PYD and the PKK amount to two sides of the same coin: far-leftist terrorist groups.<sup>31</sup> In December, the SDF captured the Tishrin Dam from the Islamic State and crossed the western bank of the Euphrates – violating the “red line” of Ankara. Turkey consistently implores the USA to establish a no-fly zone in

---

<sup>26</sup> Indicatively, see the interview of Al Jazeera with Yasin Aktay, the chairman of Turkey’s ruling party for foreign affairs. [Al Jazeera]: “Kurdish Fighters ‘Carry Out Ethnic-Cleansing’ in Syria”, *Al Jazeera*, 15/2/2016.

<sup>27</sup> According to various sources, the PYD coercively sidelined the Kurdish National Council, an umbrella political organisation of the minor Kurdish groups under the influence of Barzani, and forcibly expelled the Turkmens and Arabs in northern Syria on account of their collaboration with the Islamic State. Amberin Zaman: “Amnesty International Accuses Kurdish YPG of War Crimes”, *Al Monitor*, 13/10/2015; Khaled Yacoub: “The West’s Darling in Syria” (Berlin: Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2015), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of the rationale and scale of the ethnic-cleansing campaigns of the various parties in the Syrian War, see: Fabrice Balanche: “These Maps Show How Ethnic-Cleansing Has Become a Weapon in Syria’s Civil War” (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Suleiman al-Khalidi and Tom Perry: “New Syrian Rebel Alliance Formed”, *Reuters*, 12/10/2015.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Glioti: “Syriac Christians, Kurds Boost Co-operation in Syria”, *Al Monitor*, 20/6/2013; Vladimir van Wilgenburg: “Kurdish Strategy towards Ethnically-Mixed Areas in the Syrian Conflict”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 11, No. 23 (2015), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> For an article indicative of the Turkish viewpoint, see: [Daily Sabah]: “PYD/YPG Terrorist Group to Declare a Federal Group in Northern Syria, Spokesman Says”, *Daily Sabah*, 16/3/2015.

the region between the Afrin and Kobani cantons on humanitarian grounds – but in effect to avert the union of the two cantons. Despite the war threats by Turkey, the support of the USA for the Kurds ruled out any prospect of a Turkish invasion.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Mismatch between the PYD's Military Strength and Diplomatic Capital**

By early 2016, the future for the Syrian Kurds seemed very promising: they had chased the Islamic State out of the various Kurdish-majority lands, enjoyed the protection of the superpower against Turkey and the Islamic State and implemented a radical political project in Rojava. However, the Syrian Kurds realized that their successes on the field of battle did not usher in legitimacy and authority on a peripheral and international stage.<sup>33</sup> Indicatively, the anti-Assad opposition still possesses far more legitimacy and authority than the PYD despite the fact that the powerful Russian opposition in 2015-2016 crippled its political and military powerbase.

Conscious of this grave limitation, the PYD's top leadership resolved to increase the usefulness and, by extension, attractiveness of the YPG to Russia and the USA – the two dominant actors in the Syrian War. Though closely co-operating with the YPG in the struggle against the Islamic State since September 2014, the US did not undertake any diplomatic initiatives which would upgrade the status of the PYD lest Turkey should be offended. Russia was not restrained by such

---

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Steel: "The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!", *The New York Review of Books*, 4/11/2014; [DW]: "Syrian Kurds Take Strategic Dam from 'Islamic State'", *DW*, 26/12/2015.

<sup>33</sup> Hassan Hassan and Bassam Barabandi: "Kurds Can't Be Syria's Saviors", *Foreign Policy*, 18/11/2015; [Stratfor]: "For Syria's Kurds, Gaining Ground Is Only Half the Battle", *Stratfor*, 16/3/2016.

alliance entanglements since its relations with Turkey had reached a nadir after the downing of a Russian war jet in November 2014. Therefore, the Russians started openly courting the PYD. In January 2016, Moscow insisted that the UN Special Envoy for Syria invited the PYD for the recent round of peace talks in Geneva. However, Turkey threatened to boycott the peace conference in such a prospect and the UN Special Envoy yielded to this blackmail. A few days later, the PYD opened a consulate in Moscow with all due ceremonialism. Moscow started co-operating with the PYD not only in diplomatic but also in military terms. Aided by Russia's air force and indirectly by Assad's ground campaign in the Aleppo province, in early February 2016 the PYD advanced north of Aleppo at the expense of the insurgent allies of Turkey in the contested territory between the cantons of Afrin and Kobani. Ankara stated categorically that the unification of the cantons constituted a *casus belli* and ordered an artillery barrage against the advancing PYD units after the latter reached the outskirts of Azaz on 10 February. However, the presence of Russian and Iranian military forces on the ground and the unresponsiveness of the USA to Turkey's earnest appeals wound up any thoughts for an invasion; the joint declaration with Saudi Arabia for a co-joint invasion in northern Syria against the PYD and ISIS never materialised either.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time the YPG continued its successful co-operation with the US air force in north-eastern Syria. In mid-February, the YPG thrust south from al-Hassakah and stormed the ISIS's strongholds one by one along the Khabur River

---

<sup>34</sup>Simon Tisdall: "Turkey's Rising Tensions with Russia over Kurds Puts Erdoğan in a Corner", *Guardian*, 9/2/2016; [BBC]: "Syria Conflict: Turkey Shells Kurdish Militia", *BBC News*, 13/2/2016; Spyridon Plakoudas: "Russia and Turkey: The New Cold War in Syria", *Washington Review*, 17/3/2016.

until the town of al-Shaddadi was captured on 19 February.<sup>35</sup> After the capture of al-Shaddadi and the whole al-Hasakah province by the SDG, al-Raqqah remained as the only significant stronghold of the Islamic State still standing in northern Syria.<sup>36</sup> Recently, the PYD started an offensive campaign south of Ayn Issa in al-Raqqah province, pushing slowly but steadily ISIS back to its strongly-defended capital – although the loyalist forces of Assad strike at the same time from the south to recapture this strategic town.<sup>37</sup> The PYD implements methodically a pragmatist strategy. The YPG co-operated with the Russian air force west of the Euphrates River since Washington did not want to upset Ankara and strain the already US-Turkish relations much further; at the same time, the YPG resumed its constructive co-operation with the US air force east of the Euphrates River where Turkey has not stated any objections. The operation against the Islamic State’s capital will nonetheless prove the real test for the viability of the alliance between the Syrian Kurds and Russia/USA. Washington would prefer a Kurdish liberation of the town, whereas Russia would opt for a regime takeover. For the time being, the Kurds and Assad advance simultaneously against al-Raqqah with the Kurds enjoying a vital head-start. The capture of al-Raqqah would significantly increase the international legitimacy and authority of the PYD and, by extension, weaken the opposition of the West and the anti-IS coalition to the prospect of an independent Kurdish state in Syria.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> [ANF]: “SDF Liberate the Entire Town of Shaddadi”, *ANF News*, 19/2/2016.

<sup>36</sup>Wladimir van Wilgenburg: “Kurds Celebrate Capture of Key IS Stronghold in Syria”, *Middle East Eye*, 19/2/2016.

<sup>37</sup> Khaled Atallah: “IS Syrian Regime about to Retake Raqqa?”, *Al Monitor*, 29/2/2016; [ARA]: “Are the Kurds Prepared to Liberate Raqqa from ISIS?”, *ARA News*, 18/3/2016.

<sup>38</sup> Sharif Nashashibi: “Kurds: Pawns and Kings in Syria and Iraq?”, *Al Jazeera*, 22/2/2016; [Editorial Board]: “The Kurds’ Push for Self-Rule in Syria”, *New York Times*, 21/3/2016.

## **The Triumph of Pragmatism**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian War, the Syrian Kurds have adopted a pragmatist stance towards this vicious sectarian conflict and emerged victorious against all odds. This Kurds oscillate between war and neutrality and, yet, they do not waver from their ultimate objective in this “bellum omnium contra omnes” (the war of all against all): the establishment of an independence Kurdish state. The proclamation of the federal Kurdish republic a few days ago attests to the triumph of the pragmatist strategy of the PYD; only a few years ago, such a declaration would have been unthinkable.

Despite their impressive victories on the field of battle, the Kurds still do not possess international legitimacy and authority de jure. The establishment of an independent Kurdish state within or outside a future Syrian federation/confederation critically depends on the support of the two prominent actors in the Syrian War: the USA and Russia. An old Kurdish saying states that “the Kurds have no friends but the mountains”. Without any doubt, the Syrian Kurds could now count Moscow and Washington among their allies. Additional military victories and skilful diplomacy could secure independence or at least autonomy for the Syrian Kurds on the negotiation table in the pattern of the Greeks after the Greek Revolution. Just as Greece benefited from the contest of the European great powers for power and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean to gain more favorable terms for its secession from the Ottoman Empire, so could the Kurds turn the rivalry of Moscow and Washington for the spheres of influence in the Middle East to their own advantage and fulfill their long-term goals.

