

**CHAOS OF THE SYRIAN WAR: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR KURDISH DIGNITY,
INDEPENDENCE OR SUBMISSION?**

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Chaos of the Syrian War: An opportunity for Kurdish dignity, independence or submission?

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For Fiorella

Immensely grateful with Alvaro

In memory of Tita Ligia and Gabriel Fernando

ABSTRACT

This investigation presents and analyzes a problem in the midst of the chaos of the war in Syria; the Syrian Kurds, their strategy, struggle, and primary objective. It aims to answer the following research question: **“How does the Syrian Kurds’ strategy, framed by their identity, respond to global powers interventions in the chaos of the Syrian war?”** It will explore how the strategy and identity of the Syrian Kurds have changed in the context of the chaos of the war in Syria, from 2011 to 2019, considering their identity and the actions of the other actors. To that effect, it pretends to demonstrate the hypothesis that the Syrian Kurds must implement a unified strategy that protects their identity, impervious to the actions of others, to fulfill their main objective: Independence.

To demonstrate, or deny this affirmation, this dissertation will use chaos and complex interdependence theories to analyze the strategy of the Syrian Kurds, using a bibliographic review, along with elaboration and examining interviews.

A determinant factor is that the war in Syria, although in Syrian territory and mostly fought by Syrian citizens, armed and civilian, is a “cold war” between Russia and the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Iran, Shiites and Sunnis. Turkey and Irak, as well as others have interests, but on the ground, are represented by others; “proxies”.

Keywords:

Kurds, Syrian War, Chaos Theory, Complex Interdependence Theory, Identity.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

IDP	Internally Displaced Person
RSC	Regional Security Complex
U.S.	United States
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ' <i>Daesh</i> ,' also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or simply Islamic State (IS).
KNC	<i>ENKS/ Encûmena Nîstimanê ya Kurdî li Suriye</i> - Kurdish National Council of Syria. Coalition of Kurdish political parties. Supported by KDP of Iraq.
Peshmerga	<i>Pêşmerge</i> - (Literally 'one who confronts death') Rojava Peshmerga – Syrian Kurdish forces allied to the KNC.
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i> - Kurdistan Workers' Party. An opposition party still fighting for autonomy of southeast of Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the U.S. list the group as a terrorist organization
PROXY WAR	Is the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome. They are constitutive of a relationship between benefactor who is the state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of existing conflict, and their chosen proxies for the conduit for weapons, training on funding from the benefactor. Such arms length interventions are undertaken ostensibly for reasons of maximizing interest, while at the same time minimizing risk. In short, proxy wars are the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly and bloody warfare.

- PYD** *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* - Democratic Union Party. Syrian political party. It formed the YPG, YPJ, and TEV-DEM. Is part of the SDA. Affiliate of the PKK.
- SDA** Syrian Democratic Assembly
- SDF** *Quwwât Sūriyā al-Dīmuqrāṭīya* - Syrian Democratic Forces. A military alliance of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, Circassians, and Chechen groups. Supported by the international anti-ISIS coalition to dislodge ISIS from northern Syria.
- SNC** Syrian National Coalition. Founded in November, 2012. Political opposition coalition backed by Western powers, on the principle that the Assad government must leave. KNC became a member of SNC in 2013.
- YPG** *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* - People's Protection Units of the Democratic Autonomous Administrations. Originally formed as the armed wing of the PYD, the YPG became the facto arm of the DAAs.
- YPJ** *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* - Women's Protection Units of the DAAs. The YPG's female brigade set up in 2012.

INTRODUCTION

The world is in constant turmoil due to internal conflicts that affect the international community. Sometimes, they are consequences of past decisions and actions by international players, and their strategies. The conflict between states, their nature and responsibilities has always been fundamental for past and modern conflicts. But, what happens when an actor is present but does not have the same nature as the others (“stateless”), and seeks it continuously? What happens when there is chaos and war, and this “stateless” actor becomes a key player in the resolution, or complication, of the crisis? A clear example of this is the Kurds in Syria.

The main objective of this investigation is to explore how the strategy and the identity of the Syrian Kurds have changed in the context of the chaos of the war in Syria from 2011-2019. It will demonstrate how the Syrian conflict is a perfect example of chaos theory.

Today, international security is affected by the consequences of the actions of the international community by a new generation of war, through proxy wars, primarily in the Middle East. "The perennially conflictual character of the Middle East makes it a near-perfect example of a classical, state-centric, military-political type RSC." (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.217) Where history, the identity of the region, and its dynamics come into conflict through constant global intervention, creating a scenario of chaos.

The Middle East, is not well defined by geography. The term was coined by the British for the geography between India and Arabia but, in contrast to a person from France who considers himself European, a person from Iran does not consider herself Middle Eastern. However, it's characterized as multi-dynamic, multi-conflict, multi-ethnic, and multi-religion. It is a complex region with armed conflicts that involve domestic and international states, as well as non-state actors. "The Middle East is a place where an autonomous regional level of security has operated strongly for several decades, despite continuous and heavy impositions from abroad." (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.187)

There are legal and illegal armed groups, rebels, ethnic groups, and religious conflicts, among others, which make the Syrian war, a proxy-war with international and local actors, including the Kurds, an ethnic minority that has played a vital role in the development of the conflict. Due to the diffuse nature of the Syrian war, the main points to be dealt with will be addressed by comprehending two main factors. First, the two main milestones that made the difference in Syrian Kurdish history. Second, the actors present in the war and the premises involved.

According to Collins, Middle Eastern countries are the result of erroneous conceptions of the region by the western powers, that still have consequences today (2007), and creates an opportunity for new actors –the Kurds- to emerge.. In this order of ideas, it is essential to present the two main milestones that made the difference in Syrian Kurdish history: The Sevres / Lausanne Treaty and the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

It is relevant to highlight Gombacci analysis (2016); Turkey was born through a war, with allied troops occupying the Ottoman capital; representatives of the victorious powers were going to sign a treaty (Sèvres, 1920) with the defeated Ottoman government that divided the empire into European spheres of influence. Sevres internationalized Istanbul and the Bosphorus giving pieces of Anatolia to the Greeks, Kurds, Armenians, French, British, and Italians. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Father of Turkey) rebelled and in 1933 the division was reversed. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) left the Kurds stateless, divided among Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, without a specific territory, and in constant search for autonomy,

The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) changed Syrian history. It was an agreement between the United Kingdom and France (and Russia until the Revolution took it out of the war) to divide the Middle East, and was the basis of today's Syria, Iraq, Jordan Lebanon, and Palestine (now part of Israel). But, the critical factor is that this partition was a wrong conception of the territory, a division that didn't take into account history, the reality of the land and needs of the people. Western influence gave the region many conflicts.

Carved borders across an area that had not known them and whose people did not want them. All you need to do is to look at a map and you will see straight lines, which is contrary to all-natural borders. Britain's predominant concern was not what the Syrians wanted or needed, but what The Times of August 21, 1919, called "the traditional rights and interests of France in Syria. (Glass, 2012, p.36)

The United Kingdom's primary interest was control of the territories that connect Europe and the Mediterranean with its Crown Jewel, India. So, the conflict began in 1916, and its repercussions are present today. Therefore, it will be: "*Syria a Case Study*".

Second, the actors in the war and premises involved. It is essential to indicate that this is a conflict that has evolved significantly since the actions and alliances by the actors changed over time, from the beginning of the conflict to reality today.

To understand the actors in the conflict today, it is important to highlight that there are two primary and opposing objectives: to keep the Bashar Al-Assad regime in power, versus achieving an "Independent Syria". Some players are present via substitute actors –proxies- that characterizes the Syrian war, with different natures and interests: countries, ethnic and religious groups, armed or terrorist groups. Three main blocks can be considered: the regime and its allies, the rebels and their allies, and the jihadist (terrorist) groups. At the same time, a fourth bloc –the Kurds- initially supported by the United States, emerged as a consequence of the dynamics of the previous actors, that seeks to combat and expel jihadist groups, and also obtain its autonomy. (For a better visual understanding see annex #1).

The first block is the Bashar Al-Assad regime and its allies, whose power and permanence due to its allies. One of its main allies is Russia, since 2015. "Russia's involvement in Syria is not limited to targeting ISIS but also extends to Assad's opposition. According to Russia, if Assad resigns abruptly, it will result in a vacuum which a myriad militias and insurgents will exploit and create more chaos in the country." (Alkaff, 2015, p.88) Russia has helped to recover critical areas, such as the city of Aleppo, and has also become the intermediary between Al-Assad and other actors. Iran is another vital ally of the regime since it has sent fighters to Syria and also provides military advisors.

Similarly, Al-Assad has the support of militias and Hezbollah fighters. As the Institute for National Security Studies published:

Among their spheres of cooperation, the most important one is the military intervention in Syria, involving Russian and Iranian forces. Russia has recognized the legitimacy of Iran's intervention in Syria. Based on a shared interest in the stability and survival of the Assad regime, Russia and Iran divided up their activity in Syria. Russia's contribution consists of aerial attacks and advanced military technology, while Iran contributes ground troops, particularly from Hezbollah and Shiite militias it has set up, led by officers and units from the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force. (Kam, 2018, p.36)

The second block, is the rebels and their allies, internally divided by their objectives. Those who are against the government and seek "an independent Syria" are The Army of Islam and the Free Syrian Army, and those who are opposed to the Al-Assad regime.

Western and Islamic powers have been selective in their support of factions of the Syrian opposition that most closely represent their best interests in the country and the region. For instance, the Free Syrian Army has been supported by western countries while the Islamic Front is known to be receiving support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. (S. H. Alkaff, 2014, p.33)

On one hand, the Army for Islam is a proxy actor for several countries, but mainly for Saudi Arabia, in response to Iranian support.

The rebels, initially grouped under the name Free Syrian Army. "In December 2012, the United States and others recognized the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people." (Hof et al., 2015, p.9). That gave way to various factions; rebels without religious affiliation, to Islamist groups. This, group no longer carries much weight but was one of the main actors, and the regime's most prominent opponent. This was one of the proxy actors of the international coalition against the government, especially for the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and France.

The third block is, the Jihadists, at odds with each other who seek to defeat the government. Two main rival jihadist forces are the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. As mentioned by Caris & Reynolds (2014), ISIS conquered large extensions of Syria since its eruption in 2013 and proclaimed a "caliphate" in 2014 in conquered territories in Syria and Iraq, which was the primary concern of international actors, especially the United States.

The Islamic State is not only a terrorist group. It is a political and military organization that holds a radical interpretation of Islam as a political philosophy and seeks to impose that worldview by force on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. (Friedland, 2014, p.5)

Today it has been squashed; due to the alliance between the Kurds and the United States, ISIS suffered numerous setbacks and only controls 5% of Syria, compared to 33% before. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, branch of Al-Qaeda, controls most of Idlib province and has a small presence west of the Aleppo Governorate and north of the Hama Governorate.

At the birth of the Jihadist actors, the fourth main block emerges; the Kurds and their allies. Since ISIS became one of the main risks and therefore the priority of the international coalition the biggest proxy actor to defeat ISIS emerges in the conflict: the Kurds. They do not support the regime, but do not seek an "independent Syria." Instead, they use the situation to pursue their autonomy and took advantage of the withdrawal of the Syrian army to establish a local administration in the north of the country.

In 2016, they developed a "federal" region in the territories they controlled and organized their first elections in September. The Popular Protection Units (YPG), its main armed militia, form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDS) - also made up of Arab fighters - supported by the international coalition led by Washington. As stated by the Kurdish Institute (2017), they control 28% of the territory, where almost 15% of the population lives.

This international coalition, driven by the United States, includes more than 60 countries. It carries out airstrikes against the Islamic State in support of ground troops. With the end of the great battles against ISIS, the airstrikes decreased. Nearly 2,000 U.S. soldiers are deployed in northern Syria,

mostly as Special Forces to combat ISIS and train local troops in areas recovered from jihadists. The Kurds are the main allies of the United States in the fight against ISIS. Turkey acquired a new role in the conflict that will develop later, against the Kurds, as they gain autonomy in northern Syria.

For this reason, it is vitally important to highlight three premises involved in the conflict:

First is the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. According to Tzemprin et al., this is a cold war not about world domination, but over control of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran see each other as enemies and are locked in increasing competition for influence and dominance in the region. (2015) This, rivalry is expressed in the support both provide, through various mechanisms, to militant groups and forces, especially in Syria. After the Ottoman Empire was dismembered, the territory was vulnerable, the fight for regional dominance began, and still lives today creating a cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

This is reflected in the economic (oil) resources these two countries have, but also a religious confrontation since Iran is mostly Shia and Saudi Arabia is primarily Sunni. This continues to the Arab Spring (2011) - a fight between the status quo power (Saudi Arabia) and the anti-status quo power (Iran). This proxy dynamic has been mimicked in different countries like Syria, where Saudi Arabia - Irani involvement has increased since both feel that their national interests and survival are threatened. This is reflected in the confrontations in Syria and how their proxy troops make alliances.

The second premise is the shifting alliances of the United States in the region. The United States had a historical presence in the region, especially in Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. U.S. involvement in the Middle East made them one of the main actors in the region and most armed conflicts. Either directly or by proxy wars, that has been a challenge with the dynamics of the Syrian war and Russia's new involvement in the region. As reported in the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (2019), U.S. historical transatlantic solidarity in the area has been undermined by Trump's criticism of the European Union, and by the Erdogan regime in Turkey.

But, most important, it has changed because President Trump is transferring weight from the Middle East to China and Southeast Asia, which strengthens Russian influence in the region. U.S. State Department and the Pentagon see involvement in Syria as necessary for American interests: maintaining a presence and influence in the Middle East, blocking Iran's entrenchment in Syria, blocking Russia in Syria and American leverage is needed, led by the military presence. Trump reversed his decision twice, given pressure from the Establishment. In the end, Trump's justification for keeping forces on the ground was “guarding Syrian oil”.

The third and last premise, is the division of the Kurdish people. There are more or less, per the Kurdish Institute, 30 million Kurds around the world, mostly in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, searching for their state since 1920. (2017) Since then, they have been an unprotected minority and an actor in the Middle East. But their situation and the way they've been treated varies from country to country, since they had to adapt to the specific scenario of each host country. What follows is a broad summary of the status of the Kurds in these countries.

In Iraq, Kurds have suffered violent oppression since they have waged insurgency throughout the 20th century, and Baghdad retaliated often. In 1988, Hussein gassed thousands of Kurds in the city of Halabja, as reported by the BBC (1988). After the Gulf War, the Kurds tried to organize an independent state, but the government slaughtered tens of thousands. Despite this, after Hussein's fall, the Kurds established a fragile semi-autonomy in northern Iraq, where they had military and administrative control of some areas that were still being disputed. At the same time, the Iranian government is against the establishment of Kurdistan even outside their borders since they fear that this hypothetical state would threaten their national unity, especially because the Kurds have a relationship with the United States.

In Turkey, Kurds face severe government oppression in response to the Kurdish separatist movement. As stated by the Kurdish Institute, Kurds are 15 to 20% of the population in Turkey but do not have the same civil rights. (2017)

Some domestic and international organizations have argued that human rights have been abused during this displacement process, which later became the focus of the international community's

criticism of turkey's human rights practices. These organizations claim that Turkey violated the rights of the Kurdish IDPs not only in rights to life and property but also by the state's inability to provide food, temporary housing, and medical care. (Çelik, 2005, p.981)

They have faced forced resettlement, as well as the denial of their identity and customs. Until 1991, as claimed by Mahmut (interview, 2020) the Turks referred to the Kurds as Mountain Turks, and the government banned the word 'Kurds', 'Kurdistan', and 'Kurdish'. If used, citizens could be arrested or even go to prison. The government saw this as necessary because they were frightened of an armed uprising seeking independence. "Over the course of time, resentment grew among the Kurds in Turkey who had rebelled against the Republic with the larger aim of carving out a separate Kurdistan within the boundaries of the Turkish Republic." (Çelik, 2005, p. 978) The PKK - Kurdistan Workers Party - fought for Kurdish autonomy and independence; it is now considered a terrorist group by the Turkish government.

Turkey is afraid of an independent Kurdistan because of the consequences this might present in their nation. Thus, they'll do anything to avoid the creation of Kurdistan. It is important to highlight that Turkey has been a historical ally of the U.S. and a pillar of NATO since 1952.

Kurds are the most significant ethnic minority in Syria, where they have faced government oppression and discrimination. They have been denied fundamental rights as well as citizenship and land ownership. The Kurds have been involved in the war seeking independence and, consequently, tried to take advantage of the situation to achieve this goal.

In March 2011, following the wave of the so-called Arab springs, the Syrian Kurds were able to play one of the most important cards in their history. Syria was in turmoil. Social inequality had reached a remarkable peak: 50% of the wealth was concentrated in the hands of 5% of the population. 30% live in poverty or extreme poverty. The Kurdish parties decided not to ride the revolutionary wave of opposition to Assad, neither were they enthusiastic about the openings of the central government of Damascus in their confrontation. (Gombacci, 2016, p.70)

Instead, they decided to start a dialogue with the government, and to try to achieve independence by protecting their territory from Islamist groups, especially ISIS.

After the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Syria, there was a resurgence in the formation of new political parties; between 2004 and 2010, seven new parties were formed. (For a better visual understanding of the Syrian Kurds political parties see annex #2). The Syrian Civil War did not halt the fragmentation of Kurdish political parties despite increased motivation for unity. The rise of the PYD pushed opposition parties into a hodgepodge of coalitions that eventually formed the boundary line between the KNC and the PYD-led autonomous administration.

As mentioned by Koontz, in 2012, the PYD's military component, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and its allies, were allowed to lay claim to vast swathes of land in northeast Syria while the regime retreated, mostly without contest. The forces that would later form the SDF focused on pushing ISIS out of northeast Syria and the KNC developed as a response to the hegemony of the PKK-aligned PYD. (2019)

In that sense, and under the dynamics mentioned above, there is a proxy war in Syria that dates back many years, where it seems that 'stateless' Kurds have been a critical element for the development of the situation. An ethnic group that has been present as far as modern history goes and before and, as Marco Gombacci indicates, Kurds are recognized as belonging to the ethnic and linguistic group of Indo-European origin of Iranian background. (2016). Initially, they were characterized by a nomadic tradition devoted to grazing and organized in different tribes. The Kurdish people live mainly in mountainous areas between the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf. In 2014, the Kurds of Syria became known around the world after the attacks of ISIS in Kobane. However, the violent acts that surround these events and the struggle the Kurds is less well known. The Syrian Kurds face one of the most brutal, erratic proxy wars as a stateless minority in a turbulent, chaotic region, struggling with their identity, their allies, and their strategy.

Hence, more than a group in search of autonomy, they became a key minority group for the resolution of a conflict of international relevance. In that sense, this investigation aims to answer the following research question: *How does the Syrian Kurds' strategy, framed by their identity, respond to global powers interventions in the chaos of the Syrian war?*

To answer this question, the hypothesis is that Syrian Kurds must configure a unification strategy that protects their identity, impervious to the actions of other actors, to be able to fulfill their main objective: Independence. Therefore, the dependent variable of this hypothesis is the Kurd's strategy, whose methods will be interconnected with the first independent variable, their identity. Likewise, the reach of the Kurds is given by the second independent variable, the actions of the other actor's: the regional and international powers involved in this scenario of chaos.

This is why this investigation aims to be exploratory research to understand the Kurd's strategy and identity, under the logic of the chaos theory and theory of complex interdependence. To demonstrate how the Kurdish strategy in the chaos of the Syrian war has modified its own identity to adapt and respond to the Syrian conflict, and especially to the intervention of the global powers, to achieve their autonomy and consequently to understand what the possible action range of the Kurds could be. Following this logic, the main objective will be to elaborate an analysis of the Syrian Kurd's strategy within the context of the chaos of the Syrian war.

Which will result in the following specific objectives:

1. Demonstrate the context that makes war in Syria so volatile, and the changing objectives and actions of the actors.
2. Elaborate a historical account of the nature of the Syrian Kurds. To understand their requests and position.
3. Describe the strategy of the Syrian Kurds in Syria 2012 – 2019. Parallel to the intervention of different international actors.

After clarifying the problem and investigation objectives, the theoretical and conceptual framework that outlines the research to form an academic sphere for the analysis will be stated.

It is noted that the central theme of this research is a problem of cause and effect, where the actions of the actors have immediate consequences on the others and in the development of the general situation in Syria. In this sense, it is pertinent to analyze the situation from perspective of interdependence.

It is essential to point out the theory of complex interdependence to understand the Syrian war. In this case, complex interdependence is seen in specific situations reciprocally that, although there are costs for the state, a mutual dependence is generated (Keohane & Nye, 1988). This is why the agenda is variable and fluctuates, depending on what the actor is experiencing.

But since no state can survive without others, power is distributed asymmetrically, leading to cooperation; those who can influence the international system the most achieve more power.

As mentioned by Keohane & Nye, although there is a mutual dependence, it is asymmetric, where all the actors are sensitive to change (costs that are imposed are shown before modifying a policy). (1988) The sensibility "implies degrees of response within a political structure (how changes in one country cause changes, at a certain cost, in another country and what the magnitude of that cost is?) (...) The sensitivity of the interdependence is created through interactions within a policy framework" (Keohane & Nye, 1988, p.26) However, not all are vulnerable to it (disadvantages after having modified a policy).

In the other hand, vulnerability "can be defined as the disadvantage of an actor who continues to experience costs imposed by external events even after modifying the policies. Since it is usually difficult to change policies quickly, the immediate effects of external changes generally reflect sensitivity to dependence." (Keohane & Nye, 1988, p.28) And this is ultimately where the strength of the actor in question lies. So, although there is mutual dependence, to analyze a relationship, it should not be highlighted how sensitive the actor is, but rather how vulnerable the actor is to said change, and its ability to react to it.

Therefore, the analysis adapted throughout this investigation will be on the relationship of complex interdependence, focused on the vulnerability and sensitivity of the actors. And how it affects the development of the actions of different actors. In the specific scenario of chaos in war, where every step of every actor has a cascade effect. Pointing out the particular complexity that a proxy war dynamic encounters. Furthermore, what makes an actor act the way that it does even though the actor may be more vulnerable than another actor will be reviewed.

Important to clarify the specific characteristics of this particular war, so that it is easier to understand the mutual dependence of the actors since the war in Syria remains one of the most prominent international conflicts influencing the global system today because of its relevance in different areas, national and international.

The involvement of many international, regional, and local actors in the Syrian turmoil has created an "inflation of power." This dynamic is another cause of instability, as it requires that the settlement process be conducted by agreement, or at least coordination, among the many different parties involved. (Valensi, C., Dekel, U., & Kurz, 2018, p.8)

Ergo, it is a case study that lends itself to local and international conflict and generates a perfect example of chaos theory.

This is a war that has different strategic factors that shape possible scenarios and, consequently, its outcome. According to Valensi, C., Dekel, U., & Kurz (2018), there are five main factors that characterize the Syrian war:

First developments in the battlefield between the Assad regime and the rebels. The second is the scope and nature of Russia's engagement. The third factor is the extent of Iran's involvement in shaping Syria, and the tension with Saudi Arabia. The fourth factor is the fate of the Islamic State and the campaign of the U.S.-led coalition to defeat it. Finally, the willingness and ability of the different rebel groups to cooperate and, perhaps, unite.

These factors are vital to understanding the regional dynamics and the formation of different tensions that extrapolated the Syrian war to other regional conflicts, such as Saudi Arabia- Iran cold war, or Erdogan's confrontation with the Turkish Kurds. Hence, this is a war whose nature is not only chaos but also interdependence, where actors change actions, positions, and even alliances regarding a specific scenario at a particular moment—keeping in mind that this is a proxy war with a high level of direct participation by some actors. So, after highlighting the particular dynamics of this context and knowing that the actors have an interdependence relationship it is vital to understand the dynamics in the Syrian war. To do so, it is crucial to comprehend what fundamental concepts will be used in this dissertation.

The war in Syria, has previously been referenced in the context of chaos. It is worth clarifying why chaos is referenced in the Syrian context before going any further. As mentioned by Thiétart & Forgues, chaos theory deals with several complex systems and nonlinear dynamic systems sensitive to variations in its initial conditions. Small variations in these initial conditions can imply large differences in future behavior, making long-term predictions impossible. (1995) Nonetheless, there are different approaches to understanding chaos. "For deconstructionists, chaos repudiates order; for scientists, chaos makes order possible." (Hayles, 1990, p. 184) So, it is important to understand chaos in an armed conflict.

In reference to Thiétart & Forgues chaos theory, within the apparent randomness of a chaotic system, there are patterns, interconnections, and self-organization of a nonlinear system. (1995) Where "chaos is deemed to be more fecund than order, uncertainty is privileged above predictability, and fragmentation is seen as the reality that arbitrary definitions of closure would deny." (Hayles, 1990, p.167) This is, thus, proper to the case study.

In the opinion of Kalyvas, actors in armed conflicts do not seek to generate chaos. On the contrary, they seek to establish their own order, which causes violence to be used in different ways to achieve their particular goal. Where the actor has greater control, violence is minor in that specific territory. (1998) Therefore, violence will be selective depending on the actors' information—clarifying that each actor will seek to exercise greater control in the areas that it considers most relevant to its cause.

Nevertheless, the problem is established when a territory enters into dispute with another actor in the conflict. So, for each actor, there will be territories of greater control, less violence (selective violence), and other territories of interest. Still, less control, hence disputed, violence will be massively implemented. Finally, territories where armed confrontation is always present, are the areas where violence is present in an indiscriminate way.

However, the previous is highlighted to show that in war, even the use of violence has a specific order that develops in a particular way upon the strategy of each actor.

"Within the complex regions created by these folds, orbits wander in unpredictable ways (...) Iteration produces chaos because it magnifies and brings into view these initial uncertainties." (Hayles, 1990, p.183) Consequently, recognizing that chaos is not entirely random since it is a behavior that comes from specific information. Where each change, regardless of its size or relevance, by each of the actors, influences the development of the conflict, which contributes to the generation of violence, or the opposite. That is, small or massive action or decision has a domino effect that provides substantial changes in the scenario.

Again, it is crucial to explore the notion of chaos in the framework of international relations, to lay the foundation for this case study. This is why it should be understood that "chaos better reflects the reality of an international system where individuals and non-state actors can have a significant effect on the international or system level." (Kissane, 2007, p.87) So, it is evident that the war in Syria can be framed in chaos theory, since "a related element of chaotic systems is the importance of unit or individual unit events to have wide-ranging effects on the wider system. Interactions, even those limited to just two primary units, can and do affect all other units in the system. Still, although we know it is possible for such unit-level effects to have a significant system-level impact, it is either impractical or impossible to collect and analyze such data." (Kissane, 2007, p.92) With this in mind, it is evident that this happens with all the actors involved in the case study.

At the same time, it is crucial to understand the concept of identity. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "identity is who a person or group is, or the qualities of a person or group are that make them different from others".

Identity is fundamentally a way of defining, describing, and locating oneself. As social animals, our identity is derived in part from the groups to which we belong. Group memberships range from those that are largely determined, such as citizenship or ethnicity, to those that reflect individuals' values, interests, and skills. (Armstrong et al., 2018, p.44)

Hence, the set of beliefs and actions of an actor are mostly defined by identity. So, it is possible that when there is conflict, two or more identities collide with each other. This is the case of the conflict in Syria.

Although this war has many roots, the confrontation of the identity of many of the actors collide and a solution is more complicated. To exemplify this, the Kurdish identity and the Syrian identity will be briefly addressed.

Modern Syria was established in 1920, when France got the mandate of the country by the League of Nations and its borders were established by international occupation. As mentioned by Allsopp, the people within its borders were multi-confessional and multi-ethnic (2014). And, this comes back in time. During the Ottoman Empire, identity and political loyalties were fragmented, including Kurdish identity. This ethnic group is larger and goes beyond Syrian borders. The Kurds have been, in theory, aligned to achieving independence since the Treaty of Sevres was dissolved. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that, there is complete coherence and unity. In line with Fuller's opinion, the Kurds possess a strong sense of identity, but their sense of ethnic and political unity is still poorly developed (1993).

No matter in which Middle Eastern country the Kurds are present, they fight for independence and autonomy, and will probably still carry that fight for many years to come because of their sense of identity.

Kurdish nationalism is the politics of the affirmation of Kurdish national identity. Kurdish national identity is a product of modernity, albeit a specific form of it, associated in a close and specific way with the institution of the modern nation-state. It has its roots in the political and cultural processes and practices of the construction of the modern nation-state and national identity in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. (Vali, 1998, p.83)

So, it can be said that Kurdish identity will be a cross line in the Kurdish strategy and have historically been identified as "the others" in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, where they have been oppressed and rejected.

This diversity of the "other," however, defines not only the fragmentation of Kurdish national identity but also its specifically transnational character. The dialectic of denial and resistance assigns a specifically transnational character to Kurdish nationalism which, given favorable

regional conditions, may surpass the political and cultural fragmentation of Kurdish identity. But this has never been more than a theoretical possibility. (Vali, 1998, p.83)

Taking the above into account a bibliographic review will be used to achieve a methodological design for this dissertation. Since it allows obtaining relevant information that to explore and understand what, and to what extent, the strategy of the Syrian Kurds has developed in context of chaos of the war in Syria.

In this sense, a bibliographic review of primary and secondary sources will be made based on literary review, documentary research and a follow-up of news. The dissertation will gravitate towards analysis within the framework of the complex interdependence theory by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. To gain a better insight into the Kurd's identity, two semi-structured interviews were conducted.

One of the interviewees, Mahmut, is a Turkish-born man, who lived in Syria 2004-2017; the other interviewee, N. Omar, is a Syrian-born Kurdish woman, a militant for Kurd independence who lived in her country until mid-2019. Both interviewees wish to remain anonymous. (The conversations have been recorded and transcribed see annex #3 and #4). Two other interviews will be reviewed, one by the Oxford Research Group to Yaniv Voller, Lecturer in the Politics of the Middle East at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent (see annex #5). The other one by the Washington Post to Joost Hiltermann, Program Director, Middle East, and North Africa of Crisis Group, Lisel Heintz, Assistant Professor of International Relations at Johns Hopkins University and, Mustafa Gurbuz, Adjunct Professorial Lecturer of Critical Race, Gender, and Culture Studies Collaborative at the American University. (see annex #6).

It is important, to note this dissertation has a constructivist approach. Since the actors are a social product, whose identity has been built by the collective system of meanings and norms within which they move; where their interests, beliefs, affections, and behaviors are largely determined by that social environment, thus putting the "social" construction of their own identity (Losada & Casas, 2010).

Understanding that their actions are, mainly, a reflection of this social construction and, therefore, their respective identity.

This dissertation will be divided into three chapters that attempt to demonstrate how the actions of other actors affect the strategy of the Syrian Kurds. The first chapter will demonstrate how the actions of all the actors make the war in Syria a scenario of chaos. The second chapter will present a historical account of the Syrian Kurds' nature to understand their position. The third chapter will describe the Syrian Kurds' strategy 2012-2019. Finally, a conclusion.

SYRIA IN CHAOS: ACTIONS OF THE ACTORS PRESENT

In the previous chapter, the need to establish the theoretical and methodological framework, was to clarify the field of action where the analysis will be carried out. This chapter will demonstrate the context that makes the war in Syria volatile, and how the actions of the actors involved contribute. It will be established that the war in Syria is a perfect example of chaos theory. It will address the elements that make this true and some of the actions of the actors will be mentioned and how their identity, mainly the Kurds', contribute to the decisions made through the war.

This chapter will show how the identity of the Syrian Kurds and the actions of other actors are related and affect their strategy. Likewise, this is framed with the theory of complex interdependence by Keohane & Nye (1988), within the framework of chaos theory. Since, the identity and the objective of the Kurds are maintained, what determines the changes in their strategy are the actions of other actors, using its vulnerability as a tool for their strategy.

It is crucial to state that it is not casual that Syria is a controversial scenario, since it is a country with geopolitical importance because of its historical relevance, because of the Suez Canal, and resources like oil, access to the West and because it is the main crossroad between east and west. What makes the war in Syria volatile will be shown; understanding the Syrian war under the theory of chaos by Kissane (2007), and the relationship of all actors under the theory of complex interdependence.

First and foremost, it is essential to clarify that:

There is no reason to suggest that interdependence cannot occur in an anarchic system nor that interdependent systems must be other than anarchic. However, the emphasis on interdependence does imply a different epistemological stance than the predominant focus on anarchy in one very significant way: the interdependent theorist implicitly assumes that cooperation in the international system is not only possible but likely and ongoing (Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.41). (Kissane, 2007, p.90)

This is shown in the different alliances in the war, and how the players need to make agreements among each other to accomplish their goals. A clear example of this is the U.S. - Syrian Kurds as a way to combat ISIS. In the opinion of Gurbuz (2019) even though the U.S. is a strong global power, they needed the Kurds to oppose ISIS; The U.S. used the Kurds so they wouldn't be as vulnerable; the Kurds used the U.S so they could gain stability and some autonomy, making both actors less vulnerable, but if those conditions change, as they did, their actions would change as well.

Hence, this dissertation will focus on how the actors are mutually dependent. Each action starts a chain reaction of the other's political, military, or even economic reaction,, where even the inner political changes of the international actors have immediate consequence in the dynamics of the conflict. It will only be addressed to the actors considered key in this investigation, alongside milestones in the conflict's development for the objective of this investigation. For this, it would be essential to highlight the interdependence between the different actors and, consequently, their actions.

Secondly, according to Keohane and Nye "where there are reciprocal cost effects in exchanges, there is interdependence" (1988). Yet, in the context of mutual interdependence under the chaos theory context, where:

The Butterfly Effect - in reality just the popular name for the more correct 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions' - suggests that it is possible that the flutter of a butterfly's wings in Beijing can be responsible for producing a hurricane in South America (Thiéart & Forgues, 1995, p. 21). This sensitive dependence on initial conditions is common to all chaotic systems). (Kissane, 2007, p.91)

This sensitive dependence is reflected in the initial conditions that make cooperation necessary. It should be noted that sensitive dependence is present in many examples of cooperation developed in war. Nonetheless, as shown above, the alliance between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds, the sensitivity of the dependence is, as mentioned by Kissane, directly related to the initial conditions that allowed cooperation in the first place.

In this case, the first independent variable of the dissertation thesis is one of these initial conditions that allowed the cooperation to take place. It is Kurdish identity and the pursuit of their goal that led the Syrian Kurds to form an alliance with the U.S.

Anyhow, in the opinion of Hiterman, the threat of ISIS is the initial condition that enables cooperation by the U.S. (2016). Inevitably, a sensitive dependence is generated since the motivation for U.S. cooperation ceases to be valid, unlike the motivation of the Syrian Kurds. Consequently, following the premise of Keohane and Nye, the cost effects of the exchange are no longer reciprocal and, therefore interdependence, breaks down.

It is crucial to highlight that the Syrian Kurds' identity, in the opinion of N. Omar (interview, 2020), will always be the initial condition on why the Kurds seek an alliance or change their strategy. Still, the initial conditions of the other's actions change depending on what's happening in their territory, and the product of those motivations will be the ones that the Kurds will have to counter. So, it is important to establish that the Syrian Kurds' strategy, will change as a consequence of the actions of others Yet, a line of thought determined by their identity will be maintained.

Thirdly, on the authority of Kissane (2007), three assumptions or elements should be described:

Kissane's first assumption is that in international politics, one must first assume that the international system is chaotic. While true that chaos is a style of interdependence, it is also true that a chaotic system is so different from other 'regular' interdependent systems that it cannot be addressed in the same way as in a 'regular' way. (2007) In this sense, it must be understood that the war in Syria does not behave like a 'regular' interdependent system, and consequently it is more complex and chaotic.

Where, as Kissane mentioned, in a chaotic system no particular polar distribution of power is necessarily more stable or ordered than any other (2007). As Kissane explained, chaos doesn't favor one distribution of power or security over another, in terms of bringing stability to the system.

And, this makes the chaotic system so particular, where the 'regular' dynamics no longer apply. Hence, other tools became key in the chaotic system, which in a 'regular' system might not be as relevant.

Kissane's second assumption is that actors in this chaotic system seek security. Where it is vital to highlight the difference between security and survival. According to Kissane:

A state actor, for example, seeking survival makes a bad decision if they take action to decrease the power of the state to regulate its own affairs (sovereignty) or to decrease its power vis-a-vis other states (the relative gains issue). A state seeking security may well trade-off sovereignty to another state or institution if it believes it to be in the best interests of the state's security. It is also important to note that security, in this analysis, is an actor-constructed reality. Each actor may define security differently and move to secure different things. (2007, p. 94)

On the authority of the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, this can be seen in the actions of the Syrian government who, in search of security, has relinquished sovereignty to Russia, since they believe that it's the best strategy to obtain security and thus remain in power. It's also present in the actions of the Syrian Kurds who, although they are not a state actor, seek autonomy but above all are doing everything to survive. (2019) They have made bad decisions that diminish their power, which made them vulnerable to the actions of the United States, consolidating a sensitive dependence.

Kissane's third assumption, is that:

In seeking security, actors interact with other actors. While this seems straightforward and, in some ways, may seem to be tied to the second assumption, it is significant in the context of the wider chaotic approach. Security cannot be pursued independently in this analysis: security can only be sought and attained by interacting with other units in the system. These interactions drive the security balance and also the chaotic nature of the wider system. (Kissane, 2007, p.94)

In this sense, it will be shown how the actions of the actors, the second independent variable mentioned above, will be driven by their own conception of security in the scenario of chaos, from their own particular possibilities, framed by their identity.

In addition, taking into account that "interdependent relationships will always involve costs since interdependence reduces autonomy, but it is impossible to determine a priori if the benefits of a relationship will be greater than the costs" (Keohane & Nye, 1988), the alliances and relationships become a focus of the analysis, to understand how Syrian Kurds interact with other actors.

With the aforementioned, the context that makes the war in Syria volatile is demonstrated, where the changing actions of the actors generate chain reactions that modify the position of others. This, to the extent and as a consequence of how vulnerable each actor is to said change. Where:

Chaos offers the chance to explain the behavior of international actors that recurs in the system and explain the emergence of new behaviors from time to time. It implies an analysis that is not limited to states or institutions alone but one that recognizes the potential for much smaller units - individuals, terrorist groups, lobbyists - to impact the wider international system. (Kissane, 2007, p. 101)

For this reason, it is possible to demonstrate that the war in Syria has been volatile and is a clear example of chaos theory, because when analyzed from the theory of complex interdependence, it is shown that the actions of all the actors change concerning the effect that the actions of others have, generating a butterfly effect, which is the sensitive dependence on initial conditions. Where the actors modify their actions, prioritizing their security, and interact with each other to achieve it and thus obtain a balance in security. This being so, in the case of the Syrian Kurds, it is evident that their identity does not change, and their objective remains the same. Yet, strategy is modified in the context of the actions of other emerging actors. This being so, in this chapter, it is not only shown what is the framework that makes war in Syria volatile, but also that the Kurds must configure a strategy that protects their identity, to be able to act in a consolidated way to achieve their objective. The next chapter will elaborate a historical account of the nature of the Syrian Kurds, so, it is possible to understand their main objective.

NATURE OF THE SYRIAN KURDS

The context that makes the war in Syria so volatile and the severe consequences it implies, will be determined by the historical development of the Kurds, influenced by their identity and the other actors. To achieve this, the development of the Kurds in the region will be reviewed in more recent times.

It is important to point out, as stated by Tejel, that the Kurds are a millenary ethnic group, been present in the same territory since the 20th century b.c., (2008), seeking to obtain their desired goal, denied by those they have been subjected to, but never successfully exiled. In consequence, their alliances with governments and other stateless actors will be analyzed, be able to determine their main goal in the Syrian war.

In the early 18th century, during the war between the Ottoman and the Persian empires, the Kurds supported the Ottomans who promised them more autonomy. According to Knappert, the Kurds rebelled against the Baghdad government on several occasions, and each time, they had excellent reasons for their opposition to Arab oppression. Since "the Kurds always lose but they prefer death to slavery" (1993, p.69) However,

The Turks in the Ottoman period did not bother to pacify the Kurds as long as they nominally recognized the sultan in Istanbul as their suzerain." And the Kurds agreed since "during the Ottoman state, Kurdistan was divided into principalities that enjoyed a large degree of autonomy. (Allsopp, 2014, p.46)

Since, as Keohane & Nye state the most vulnerable actor is one who continues to experience costs imposed by external events. (1998). This, reflects the vulnerability that the Kurdish people have always had. It shows, how the Kurds have had to shape their context, so they are not eradicated. Yet, they have remained subject to the ruling power; in this case the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the Kurds adapt to their political environment. This strategy has been present in the past, and it prevails nowadays.

It is no secret that the Kurds have always been extremely vulnerable to events around them. There have been different milestones, where global powers made promises that they could get their

wished-for autonomy in exchange for their help. This can be seen since the Ottoman Empire (Knappert, 1993), as well as the with France when they occupied Syria after the Sykes-Picot agreement (Tejel, 2008).

As they were a strategic asset in exchange for validating their ethnic, cultural and linguistic rights; and the most current one, the alliance between the Syrian Kurds and the United States that shifted in October, 2019 with the withdrawal of the U.S. troops (Hiltermann, 2016). There, is a historical heritage on how the global powers interact with the Syrian Kurds, and therefore this reinforces the wish of an autonomy precisely because of the lack of trust of the other actors, thus reinforcing their identity, and also reinforcing the strange relationship Syrian Kurds have with other actors.

This main goal has been questioned by many Kurds and has created political divisions among them. Lisel Heintz, Assistant Professor of International Relations at Johns Hopkins University, stated in an interview with the Washington Post in November 2019, "there are a number of Kurds who say, 'I'm ethnically Kurdish but nationally Turkish'." (L. Heintz interview, Washington Post, 2019, annex #6) This shows a vital point of the first independent variable of this dissertation, how the Kurdish identity is formed and reflected over the years, and therefore how to influence their actions. It is not a matter of who is doing the oppression; it is about their goal to achieve a life based on dignity and respect. In this regard, the main strength of the Syrian Kurds, and one of the main factors that makes them less vulnerable, is their ability to maintain their identity and main objective consistently, regardless of who they are subjected to or who the Kurdish leader is at a given time.

So, it isn't right to state that there is a natural, historical confrontation between Turks and Kurds. As established by Heintz at the Washington Post interview, to state they are natural enemies would be an oversimplified answer; it is a more complicated relationship, where their more recent confrontations are a result of current political tensions and not a historical consequence. (2019) As one interviewee said:

The Kurds don't have a hatred towards the nationality they are living; a Turkish Kurd do not hate Turkey; a Syrian Kurd does not hate Syria. We look for independence, not as a senseless cause; we

are not against the countries we live in. We are against the violent historical oppression, the government's' structural discrimination, the rejection of our values, and our identity. We are looking to gain autonomy to live our lives as any other human being do, where we can live in a society where we aren't treated as second class citizens, and where our fundamental human rights are protected. And we have always wanted that; it goes even to the Ottoman Empire and solicited more autonomy, not necessarily independence. I think it is safe to say that most Kurds wouldn't even consider looking for this autonomy if treated with dignity and respect. I am Kurdish, but I am also Turkish, I just don't understand why that makes me unworthy of my fundamental human rights and dignity as a person. And that is the reason we seek autonomy. Like in the U.S., the African American citizens are fighting because they are discriminated against because of their race, we are discriminated against because of our ethnicity, just in a more complex and precarious scenario. We are only looking for a way out of historical oppression linked to the respect our identity and ethnicity deserve. (Mahmut interview, 2020, annex #3)

According to Heintz, the reason there is a current confrontation with the Turkish government is that after the Balkan Wars and the First World War, Atatürk saw ethnic nationalism as dangerous, and treated them likewise, trying to erase Kurdish ethnicity, which left a heritage in the country (2019). In this sense, it could be said that the ethnic nationalism groups in the region are a possible cause of change where the Turkish government is very sensitive to such possible change, since it is vulnerable to these changes.

As many authors, such as Stephen Mansfield (2014) stated, it is possible that if a new country emerges in the years to come, that country would probably be Kurdistan. And this idea is an imminent threat that threatens Turkey as a whole, because of the number of Kurds in Turkey but also because of the threat that this represents to its territory. Whether this happens or not is a matter of how current events develop.

To do so, four main groups of actions will be mentioned; however, for a more detailed chronological recap of the war's main events see annex #8. Following the above, the actors mentioned are the following:

First, addressing the Arab Spring, as is reported in Al Jazeera Global network, in 2011, the successful uprising in other countries such as Tunisia or Egypt known as the Arab Spring, gave hope to Syrian pro-democracy activists. By 2012, the pro-democracy Free Syrian Army was formed as a militant group against the government. It was later armed and trained by the United States. (2020) In this sense, the Syrian government was always sensitive to possible regional changes that could affect their sovereignty. It was reflected in 2011 how vulnerable the government is to inner demonstrations and claims of change on how the government acts towards its citizens. This is vital to point out since this is the base scenario of the conflict, a country where the citizens make it clear that the government is exposed to significant changes from inside out. So, it could be asked if the Syrian government is the actor most exposed to costs, and then, as stated by Keohane & Nye, the most dependent actor.

Moreover, according to Keohane & Nye, the degree of vulnerability that a State possesses in response to a situation brings more consequences than its degree of sensitivity to generate a response. (1988) Therefore, the degree of vulnerability of the Syrian government will play a fundamental role in how President Assad reacts, so it can have security. Nevertheless, these alliances will have a cost in years to come, and in how the conflict develops.

President Assad, seeking to consolidate his security, interacts with other actors in order to obtain a balance, as suggested by Kissane (2007). In this sense, it generates an alliance with Russia who becomes its main ally. A complex interdependence relationship is formed, where clearly the most vulnerable actor is the Syrian government. It is important to note that Syria becomes the main gateway for Russia in the Middle East.

Over time, since 2011, the Syrian rebels, later consolidated as the Syrian armed forces, the jihadist groups, ISIS, the other unidentified groups, and the Kurds came to be relevant actors in the conflict as mentioned by Mustafa Gurbuz (2019).

Still, the dependence that occurs among all actors, the Syrian government established relationships with these groups and international actors. With the focus of this dissertation, the specific relationship with the Kurds will be discussed.

It is worth noting the structuring of the Kurds and their political development in Syria, since this will become a cost for the Syrian Kurds when entering a relationship of mutual dependence. It is important to understand the relationship between the Syrian government and the Syrian Kurds, especially because "in the seismic social and political change brought by the Syrian uprising, one thing that has not changed is the sheer number of illegal Syrian Kurdish political parties" (Allsopp, 2014, p.17) (For a better visual understanding see annex #2). As mentioned by Allsopp, this plurality of organizations seeking to represent the Kurdish population in Syria is part of the reason why there are so many different means to what they believe is the better way to achieve their goal. (2014)

This creates two main issues for the Syrian Kurds. First, is the number of political parties, and second is the function of these parties in society, taking into account their illegality prevents them from entering the formal electoral system. Nonetheless, this does not create a division in their identity since it is always clear that their goal is just a way to achieve their goal, the ones that conflict with each other.

Even though, Kurdish Political activity in Syria has always been illegal, political parties have been the means for the Kurds to present their grievances to the Syrian government. As claimed by Torelli, they did have some form of relationship with the Syrian authorities despite their illegality. As a result, the Kurds have a very complicated relationship with Assad's regime (2016). Creating different, direct, and indirect channels of communication between the government and Kurdish parties. "To address Kurdish grievances, parties have been compelled to attempt to develop a direct relationship with the state, whether through confrontation, through seeking dialogue or through the moderation of Kurdish demands. Yet political parties have often faced criticism when they have developed relations with the Syrian authorities." (Allsopp, 2014, p. 114). Hence, the relationship with the Syrian government has always been complicated, to say the least.

They have never completely and directly confronted but their alliances and the changes in those alliances make the relationship smoother or the opposite. This, since both actors act on this search of their own security by interacting with other actors since both have alliances of sensible dependence.

It is important to understand the geography, since the conflict with the Syrian Kurds is not only because they are fighting to achieve their goal but also because of the region they are located. On the report of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, the Kurdish areas of Syria are located in the northern part of the country, along the borders with Turkey and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. (2020) The three central Kurdish regions in Syria are the Kurd Dagh, Kobani, and the Jazira (roughly Hasaka province). (For a better visual understanding see annex #7) In these regions, according to Allsopp, Kurds grow up with the Kurmanji dialect of the Kurds, where the identity of the Kurds is settled. This ancient Kurdish community's presence in these regions and Damascus dates back to Ottoman times. (2014). Even so, in Damascus and other cities like Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, Hama, or Latakia, the Arab society, as well as Arabic, is more integrated than the Kurdish tradition.

Nevertheless, as stated by Allsopp, it is essential to highlight that the three main Kurdish areas are of economic and strategic importance to the state, and thus the controversy over this territory. (2014) Mainly, because they are among the most productive and resource-rich areas in the country. These areas, especially Hasala province, is the origin of most of the country's crude oil and natural gas, as well, is a fertile land.

So, this territory is of great importance to the Syrian government. Therefore, the three central Kurdish regions are geopolitically strategic inside Syria, and due to its sensitive position on the Turkish border, primarily because of the number of Kurds present in Turkey and the presence of the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK); but also because of its position in the general dynamics of the region. It is vital to point out, that this geopolitical information is critical for both the security and the productivity of the Syrian Kurds but also is a strategic territory for the Syrian government.

Ergo, it is fundamental to review Kurdish National relations. As stated by N. Omar, before the Syrian uprising, the primary concern of Kurdish leaders was to gain some recognition of the Kurdish nation in Syria, which needed dialogue with the Syrian government. (Interview, 2020) The fact that there are so many Kurdish political parties, has presented difficulties, and the illegal nature of such parties. However, when the Syrian uprising started, the dynamics regarding the political spectrum towards the Kurds changed.

Not only because of the climate in the country but also due to "the natural affinity with the Kurdish national movements in Turkey and Iran, these wider Kurdish movements have also become a means of furthering Kurdish interests indirectly and of gaining nationalist capital by fostering relations with them." (Allsopp, 2014, p. 39), making the Syrian Kurdish political parties shift their attention towards Kurdish movements outside Syria and the independent/autonomy movements in Syria. Where this territory and possible non-Syrian Kurdish alliances might become a strategic resource for the Syrian Kurds, in their search for their security.

Even though, as mentioned by Allsopp, the Kurds face a historical conflict in the lines of illegality with the Syrian government, they have established a mutual dependence, where they have never been fully against or entirely aligned with the government. (2014). The Kurd's identity and, consequently, actions are focused, in the opinion of Mahmut (interview, 2020) on gaining a sense of dignity, so they are looking for a political way to be respected and valued. By independence from the government, or by having a political pathway to be respected.

Hence, it can be inferred that the relationship with the government shifts, depending on what is happening and the consequences of the actions of the other actors. Since all the relationships are very sensible to dependence, they need to modify their allegiances, so their fight is possible. Where the dependence, goes beyond political confrontations but involves a geopolitical and economic fight for the territory of northern Syria, where the Kurds are, as mentioned by N. Omar (interview, 2020), fighting a war to keep the war outside *their territory*.

Secondly, the actions and the dependence created with the United States with the Syrian Kurds. As claimed by Gurbuz, it's important to highlight that the United States has approached the Syrian conflict in different ways since 2011 and has shifted its strategy and actions. (2019) It is also vital to point out the change in foreign policy from Obama to Trump. The United States original solution was a speech approach; yet, over time, everything escalated.

As is reported in Al Jazeera, the focus of the United States and its allies shifted priority in 2014 when ISIS entered the scene claiming a caliphate and creating acts of terror locally and

internationally, gaining the attention and becoming the prime target of the western coalition (2014). Over time, foreign backing and open intervention have played a significant role in Syria's war, directly and indirectly.

The U.S. has repeatedly stated its opposition to the Assad government, but didn't involve itself as profoundly at the time. Since 2016, Turkish troops have launched operations against the Islamic State near its borders, and Kurdish groups armed by the United States. "The military support of Washington is considered the turning point in the relationship between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds: the hitherto informal contacts with the leaders of the PYD became official." (Gombacci, 2016, p.102). As reported by the New York Times, on April 2017, the U.S. carried its first direct military action against Assad's forces, launching fifty-six Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian air force base, from which U.S. officials believe a chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun had been launched (Gordon et al., 2017). However, President Trump announced, through a White House brief (2019) and his Twitter account (2019), that with Kurd forces, ISIS was defeated, and the United States was going to reduce their presence since, as stated by Trump, defeating ISIS was the only reason the United States was present in Syria. Later on, according to Schmitt (2019), on October 6, 2019, the United States withdrew its troops from Syria, leaving its ally, the Kurds, adrift.

It is vital to highlight that United States' foreign policy is not as vulnerable to foreign actors as to its own internal political feuds that create a chain effect in the country's stand in the political spectrum, especially in the Middle East. These changes in policies make their allies, such as Kurds and rebels, lose their opportunity to what would be their primary objective.

In the Washington Post interview (2019), the United States' speech changes from wanting Assad to be removed from office to focusing on the annihilation of ISIS, especially when Trump took office. In this matter, the allies of the United States were not only sensible to the changes of their leading partner but utterly vulnerable to its decision.

From the above, it follows that there is an interdependent relationship between the U.S. government and the Syrian Kurds, where sensitivity and vulnerability, concepts coined within the

theory of interdependence exposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1988) play an important role for understanding the relationship.

In this case, the most dependent actor turns out to be the most vulnerable, since he assumes the costs much more intensely, the Kurds, for high dependence on the United States. Therefore, the country generated a radical change in its position and President Trump's Twitter account claimed that ISIS had been '100% quickly' defeated and consequently was leaving Syria (2019), leaving control in northern Syria, to the main fighters of ISIS: the Kurds. In this sense, the Kurds show their high vulnerability and dependence on the United States, as a consequence of how fragile the alliance turned out to be since the motives of the U.S. were very sensitive to change. Anyhow, there is still a doubt as to what will occur in the Kurdish-American relationship.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Turkish-Kurdish-United States conflict of interest is a clear example of how these two actors are sensitive to the actions of the United States but, in October 2019, the Kurds are the most vulnerable as the United States prioritizes relations with Turkey; changing their motives, ergo their actions.

This so, although the international media commonly assimilate the Kurds to the United States, deepening the topic, this is only partially true for a multitude of reasons, including the most important and certainly the presence in the Atlantic Alliance (NATO) of the Turks, the everlasting enemy of the Kurds. That of Washington can be considered to all intents and purposes a rhapsodic approach determined by *Realpolitik's* needs, geopolitical and military reasons, and domestic and electoral urgencies. (Gombacci, 2016, p.100)

Exemplifying once again, not only the vulnerability that the United States generates in the Syrian Kurds, but also confirming the assumptions made by Kissane. Where, it is reflected how in the chaotic war system in Syria, actors seek security by interacting with each other, prioritizing relations that generate a balance of security.

Thirdly, Russian alliances and presence in the conflict shifted the dynamics of the conflict and added elements to the war's volatility, making it even more complicated. This due to the complex relationship between the U.S. and Russia, the complexity of their alliances, their historical power

conflict, and the conflicting interests in Syria. "Syria also shares Iran's hostile approach to the United States. These are the reasons why; for many years, Iran has invested money, military aid, weapons, and oil in Syria." (Kam, 2018, p.34). But, in this case, the region's complexity leads to a confrontation with the west but also new alliances reflected in the Syria - Russia - Iran relationship.

It is crucial to understand that, in the opinion of the Institute for National Security Studies, Russia legitimizes the presence of Iran in Syria. (2017) This creates a mutual dependence for the three-way axis, but also is a strategic move by Russia; highlighting what it means to the international community this new emerging position of Iran in the region, and what it means for the U.S. and, therefore, Israel.

It is vital to notice that Russia is becoming a crucial actor in the Middle East through the Syrian conflict and how it has been present in the conflict not only politically, economically, but also militarily; Russia became an important actor in the Syrian war, as a major ally of Syria and Iran. Where a sensitive dependence is created between these countries, which is clear that even though Russia needs Syria as a gateway, Syria and Iran are the most vulnerable actors in this relationship, since per Keohane & Nye, Syria could bear the costs much more intensively.

Although with the help of Iran and Russia, Assad's position improved during 2017, his regime's stability is not yet assured, and its future is unclear. Even if the regime does stabilize, it will not be the same regime or the same Syria. It will be more dependent on Iran, and it will also consume more human and economic resources. Overall, Syria's current severe distress and its inability to deal with this crisis on its own weaken the Iran-Syria axis. (Magen et al., 2017, p. 34)

Among their spheres of cooperation, the most important one is the military intervention in Syria, involving Russian and Iranian forces. Russia has recognized the legitimacy of Iran's intervention in Syria and, as mentioned by Dekel the Russian strategy sees the agreement with Syria as a means for Russia to strengthen its international position through military and political tools, in large part by the actions of the United States that now has a secondary role. (2017). This, not only make the Russia - Syria - Iran axis more powerful but also less vulnerable to the changes that might happen in the region, since they have consolidated, for now, a mutual dependence that focused on the sovereignty and the objectives of each state. This is reflected in how the Syrian conflicts evolved at the end of 2019, when Russian forces began patrolling along the contact line between Turkish

and Syrian government forces in northeast Syria, filling the security vacuum created by the sudden U.S. withdrawal.

As well, this emerging position means a new security balance where Russia is leading. In consequence, the other actors had to shift their alliances and try to gain a competitive relationship with Russia. This is shown in the new Russian - Turkey relationship, where they agreed in the Sochi Agreement (Al Jazeera, 2019) of 2019 to set up a Second Northern Syria Buffer Zone (Uras, 2019).

This is why Moscow remains at the window, to control how the situation could evolve, ready to adapt to the future Syrian structure and interested in maintaining good relations with Damascus and with the Kurds, should they manage to obtain cultural and political concessions from the central government at the end of the war. (Gombacci, 2016, p.128)

This last main point directly affects the survival of the Syrian Kurds, where they will have to adapt and become less vulnerable to U.S. actions. And they will probably do so, despite the division towards fighting for independence or a political path under the Assad regime. So, they will now have to shift direction to the main actor to try to achieve their goal despite all the changes made by the U.S. and their position of extreme vulnerability.

Fourth, Turkey. As mentioned by Gombacci, the U.S. and Turkey have a historical regional alliance, and there is a strong dependence of the U.S. on Turkey because of its position in the region and Turkey's relationship with NATO. (2016).

In the opinion of Allsopp, thanks to American support, the Kurds managed to win and, to a great extent, reduce ISIS and acquire autonomy in Syria. (2014) Ergo, the U.S. has had an alliance with the Kurds, to follow U.S. goals, especially, but not only the fight against ISIS.

Since in the opinion of Heintz, Erdogan's government fears that if there is an independent Syrian Kurds territory led by the YPG, the PKK - a YPG ally in Syria - might generate a strong independence movement to unite with the Syrian Kurds and in this measure lose territory and therefore sovereignty. (2019) This resulted, in the "Operation Peace Spring" to *eliminate the*

Kurdish and ISIS threat and create a safe zone so refugees can return to Syria launched by Turkey on October 27, 2019.

Even though, there was political tension between the two countries and both were sensitive to changes, the possibility of action didn't make them so vulnerable, mainly because of the threat of a close relationship between Turkey and Russia. Hence, the confrontations the Kurds have in the region aren't historical confrontations because of the nature of each group; the events around them shape their actions, and this has been their reality since 1918 and is still what happens today with the Kurdish strategy.

The perpetual suppression of Kurdish identity is the condition of the Kurds' "otherness" in these societies, their position as strangers in their own homes. That the Kurds remain unrepresented is the fundamental cause of their obsession with their identity. These dialectics of violence defines the ethos of Kurdish national identity and the modality of its relationship with its others. It assigns a specific character to Kurdish nationalism, setting it apart from classical nationalism in Western Europe. (Vali, 1998, p.85)

It is safe to say that there is an obsession with this identity that becomes a useful tool for their struggle and becomes a central strength.

It is the only characteristic of the Syrian Kurds that puts them at an advantage over other actors, since they have an identity continuum which means that their objective does not change as happens with other actors.

There is a structural difference between the Kurd's wishes, to the nature of the political spectrum. Where the Syrian Kurds claim becomes buried, and consequently an inner division among the different Kurdish political parties is always present, as a consequence of the few possibilities, and high vulnerability. Although the same objective is maintained, a division is generated in the way the Syrian Kurds seek to achieve it.

In Mahmunt's view, due to the inherent structural problem of Syria's sovereignty as opposed to Kurdish goals. This is reflected, in the actions of the Syrian Kurds and why, despite being a major

ally of the U.S. during the Syrian war, they have never been in direct opposition to the Syrian government and only claim “to fight a war to keep it away”. (Interview, 2020). However, there is a clear division and change of action from who had subjected them in the past, to how they reacted to contemporary events.

Bearing in mind, what was previously stated, historically the Kurds have lived under the mandate of other actors and have had positive and conflictive relationships. Still, it is also evident, as N. Omar establishes in his interview that:

The Kurds have not changed their objective, historically it has been the same, which is what is taught generation after generation. Independence is not sought for independence itself. Furthermore, what we Kurds want is to be able to live peacefully, with human dignity under our customs and our traditions, where our identity is respected. That is why we are willing to live under another nationality, as long as our ethnic group is recognized. I believe that even this is a huge difference that many decision-makers do not understand since many times, it is not reflected in the country's political construction since its constitution, which should happen in the Middle East countries that are all multiethnic, and multi-religious, but the problem is structural. And this is why our fight will continue until we achieve respect not only as a human, if not as Kurds, either by acquiring our nationality or by achieving it through the political means already present.

But if something is clear to me, it is that although our culture is very peaceful and welcoming to those who are not part of it, we are also very proud of being Kurdish and we prefer to die than to be treated worse than animals, which is what happens to us, and that's why we seek our autonomy. But we also try to have a positive relationship with the governments in question to look at all the possible scenarios to meet our final objective, and this is why the internal division of the Kurds is generated. Some say that ours is utopian; we believe that it is the basic that any human deserves. (N. Omar Interview, 2020, annex #4)

This is to show how the Syrian Kurds have changed their actions in different scenarios they faced and depending on the power that is ruling them.

There are two primary means by which new behaviors emerge in a chaotic system: new solutions to problems emerge in the interactions of actors because it is considered that the situation in hand

is so new that it requires new, untested strategies; and new behaviors also arise out of ad-hoc interactions in feedback systems. (Kissane, 2007, pg. 96)

Therefore, it could be stated that the new Syrian Kurds *ad-hoc* behavior has shifted because of the novelty of the environment, but also because of the radical change in the system. Their strategy and interactions with the other actors have changed, but their objective has remained. However, this objective is not to have independence, this is a goal of some Syrian Kurds, as a way to achieve their ultimate goal. When analyzed from the theory of complex interdependence, the main way the Kurds have tried to be less vulnerable to sensitive dependence, is by being true to their identity, and have created an 'obsession' with it; that has allowed them to shape themselves into the chaotic system they are in. Consequently, in the case of the Syrian Kurds, it is evident that their identity does not change, and their objective remains the same. Yet, as shown in this chapter, there was a misconception as to which is their main objective.

It is not necessarily to gain independence, but rather to be respected and to find a way where they can live according to their status, where their ethnic, cultural, and political rights are recognized as any other citizen; to be able to live with dignity. This being so, in this chapter, the historical account of the Syrian Kurds is shown, but also that the Kurds must configure a strategy that protects their identity to be able to act in a consolidated way and thus achieve their objective: live with dignity where their ethnicity is respected. The next chapter describes the strategy of the Kurdish Syrians during the war; in order to understand how its strategy responds to global powers.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYRIAN KURDS STRATEGY

In previous chapters, the context of the Syrian war was presented from the Kurdish identity and the influence of the other actors. Likewise, the historical development of the Kurds influenced by their identity, and the other actors to understand what their objective is and why they want it. In this chapter, the development of the Kurdish strategy against the actions of the other actors, within the framework of their identity will be analyzed.

Precisely, because this is their goal, there is structural division among the Kurds, according to N. Omar; some believe the way to achieve it is through armed militias that fight the government, who

take advantage -in the Syrian case - of the situation to achieve it through the fight for independence, and those who believe that the answer is through a political path inside the political system in which they already are in. (Interview, 2020)

So, in this chapter it will be shown, in a broader way, the strategy of the Syrian Kurds in the frame of the war primarily focused on the PYD and the YPG (consequently the PKK). It is important to state, that the Syrian Kurds strategy has shifted during the war as consequence of the butterfly effect others create. Where among the Kurds the SDF, led by the YPG and YPJ, have become the main Syrian Kurdish fighters; being the armed arm of the PYD.

As stated above, there is a close correlation between Kurdish identity and their actions. Their actions are moldable to the situation, since they adjust to the circumstances, trying to obtain the most significant benefits. This is why the relationship between the Kurdish Syrians and the Al-Assad government is complicated, where permits and concessions are constitutionally illegal, but at the same time there is a give and take relationship.

The PYD had acted illegally in Syria and had been targeted by the regime prior to the uprising as part of the agreement between Turkey and Syria in 1998 to combat PKK activity (...) but the Syrian uprising altered political agendas and allegiances in Syria as well as beyond it. (Allsopp, 2014, p. 208)

As consequence of the vulnerability of both actors, they had to establish an informal relationship for mutual benefit, generating a sensitive dependence. However, "the power vacuum in the Kurdish regions of Syria provided the PYD with an opportunity to put into practice Öclans theories of democratic autonomy and confederation and to apply a form of bottom-up self-management, distinct from that of state systems." (Allsopp, 2014, p. 208) This, as a consequence of the reality,, where the Syrian war turns to be an opportunity, but also an instinct of survival (Kissane, 2007), the need to fight for autonomy and, consequently, protection for their own.

The Assad regimes, both father and son, not only oppressed Kurdish nationalism, but denied the Kurds in Syria their most basic rights, including citizenship. The Syrian civil war provided the

Kurds in Syria with an unprecedented opportunity to fight for their rights, although they officially demand autonomy rather than independence. (Voller interview, 2016, annex #5)

And most importantly, because of this opportunity, "the PYD had been able to secure Kurdish areas, providing the necessary protection from the worst effect of the Syrian uprising." (Allsopp, 2014, p. 214). In this sense, the Syrian war became an opportunity to fight for their rights, but also to create alliances that could make them less vulnerable, unfortunately not less sensitive, since these alliances would be of sensitive dependence.

So, it is in this volatile scenario where mutual dependence is created between the Syrian government and the Kurds, because they make each other vulnerable to change.. Still, it becomes a vicious circle because, just as they are used as tools or need each other, they are also a threat to each other.

It is notable how the formation of the YPG / YPJ an armed arm of the PYD, emerges in the 2000s and brings a new consolidated action from the Kurds in the Syrian war scenario. And, this will have significant consequences not only in the Syrian government but how to interact with global powers, the U.S. and Russia; but most importantly, how this becomes a point of inflection with Turkey. "Hence the ideological weakness of official nationalism in Turkey, Iran and (later on) Iraq, which had to be bolstered by intensifying the use of political violence in the processes of construction of uniform sovereign nations and national identities in these countries." (Vali, 1998, p.87)

This weakness makes the governments seek to be less sensitive and vulnerable to possible revolts, and, because it is a more plausible reaction of their Kurds to consolidate a fight because they are obsessed by their identity, as it was explained in the previous chapter.

In the opinion of Voller, Kurdish armed groups are effective because: First, their familiarity with the terrain, especially Peshmerga and the YPG. Second, is experience, since Pesmerha has years fighting against the Iraqi army and Islamist militias. As well, the PKK has been leading guerrilla warfare against the Turkish security forces for decades (2016). And finally, and most importantly, their motivation.

The Kurds are fighting in and for their homeland. (...) there is an ideological motivation. Especially for the Peshmerga, fighting along the West has meant greater legitimacy for their autonomy and sovereignty. The KRG is a de facto state. And states establish alliances. (...) These are highly trained, disciplined, and motivated fighters, who are fighting for their home and for recognition. (Y. Voller interview, Oxford Research Group, 2016, annex #5)

However, according to Joost Hiltermann, Program Director, Middle East, and North Africa of Crisis Group, the link between the PKK and YPG is strategic to the Syrian events and is clearly recognized (2019). Still, it cannot be forgotten that PKK, even though it is militant Turkish Kurds aiming at independence, is considered a terrorist group by Turkey.

Hence, in the opinion of Hilterman, this organic link between YPG and PKK is the same for Turkey, and for this country; they should be treated the same (2019). Turkey never accepted this alliance between the U.S. and YPG, not even as Hiltermann said, with the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces - a U.S. created multiethnic fighting force) so that Turkey wouldn't feel as vulnerable towards this alliance. That is why the reaction of Turkey to the Syrian war is focused on the Kurds, and the proposal of the buffer zone alongside the military confrontation with the Kurds, to avoid this imminent threat, and therefore the way they could be less vulnerable was to get an agreement with the U.S. that resulted in the withdrawal of the U.S. troops in October 2019, leaving the Kurds utterly vulnerable.

In this sense, "the civil war in Syria has revitalized PKK, allowing it to effectively seize control of Syrian Kurdish areas through its Syrian affiliate, PYD, expanding the territory under its command." (Hiltermann, 2016). Where "the experience of Kurdish experiments in self-rule was successful in many ways. The agenda of the political parties and the reality on the ground had begun to reflect popular calls from the street for Kurdish self-rule, self-determination, and the establishment of a federal Kurdish region in Syria." (Allsopp, 2014, p. 214). It is essential to establish that even though the Kurdish militias became the most effective force in Syria, especially against the Islamic State, and in consequence, a possible asset for other actors, as for the U.S.; these alliances are a global actor's main point of sensibility, and in consequence will use every resource, including its western allies to be less vulnerable.

Nevertheless, the "back seat" taken by the regime, as PYD moved into government offices, erected checkpoints and took control of border crossings, fueled fears of Kurdish separatism amongst the Sunni Arab opposition." (Allsopp, 2014, p. 217) There, entered the international public eye, where the Kurds in Rojava got western public opinion support since it seems to be a legitimate, pro-democracy group fighting for their rights and an essential actor to defeat an international threat: ISIS.

Commentators began to talk of a Kurdish Spring emerging from the fallout of the Arab Spring. Suddenly, the consequences of the Kurdish self-rule in Syria for the broader Kurdish question and regional politics took Turkey and international observers by surprise. The Kurdish issue sprang into the international media and became the subject of several reports pressing issues. (Allsopp, 2014, p. 217)

Even so, it is crucial to understand that:

In Syria, the dominant Kurdish party, the PYD, is a sworn enemy of the Turkish government through its close links with the PKK, the militant Kurdish movement in Turkey that is now at war with the government. And within both Kurdish regions, the dominant parties face strong opposition from a number of other factions. (Hiltermann, 2016)

This, created a strong-armed reaction of the Erdogan government as an imminent threat to its sovereignty, making it sensitive to possible changes.

However, their NATO alliances made them less vulnerable than the Kurds and created a chain reaction that led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops, and therefore the Kurds protection of their gained autonomy. Where the Kurds, as "the most dependent actor may be (or appear to be) more exposed to suffering" (Keohane & Nye, 1988, p.34) and have now an imminent need to re-accommodate their position to try to keep what they've gained but also once again adapt to the new environment.

Undoubtedly, the West has abandoned the Kurds many times in the past. But we have to remember that the International community has traditionally been suspicious of separatist movements because

changes in state boundaries are considered a source of regional and global instability. And of course, there has also been the realist aspect of keeping good relations with Turkey. Turkey is a key ally of the West in the region and a NATO member. And it has traditionally objected to Kurdish independence. (Y. Voller interview, Oxford Research Group, 2016, annex #5)

The withdrawal of American troops not only shifted the Kurd's strategy and power in but also marks a turning point in the Syrian conflict and, the Middle East. Continuing with the above, making Russia the leading global power in the conflict, as a result of Trump's isolationist foreign policy. "As for other parts of the Middle East, such an isolationist approach may also result in regional chaos. Such chaos could have disastrous implications for regional stability, but also opportunities for a change in the status quo." (Y. Voller interview, Oxford Research Group, 2016, annex #5) So, there are two main points that must be addressed.

First, is the relationship between the Kurds and the U.S. Second, what do these changes mean for the Assad-Russia axis relationship with the Kurds? How will the Syrian Kurds change? It is then clear, that the Kurds went from being a neutral actor in search of their objective, to making alliances with the United States to achieve it, without going against the government, leaving a door half-open. However, what happens now with the relationship with the United States, and what does this mean in their position in the region?

It is also essential to highlight that, as mentioned at the beginning, everything that happens has a butterfly effect in the region. That there is an Iran - Saudi Arabia cold war in the Middle East, and that the U.S. and Russia are involved. Yet, last year's changes in the U.S. policy opened a door for Russia to position itself as the influential global power in Syria, a crucial geopolitical country, which could mean a complete shift in the regional dynamic. This is shown in the U.S. - Kurd's relationship when the YPG general reference to:

President Trump's facilitating of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring that, "We do not deny the success that we achieved [against ISIS] thanks to the Americans, but in recent times, everything between us failed, and most importantly, they let us down in the international field." He added, "There is no trust like before." To reiterate: it is within the context of dwindled trust that the YPG-led SDF's flirtations with Russia and Assad must be understood. (Ayton, 2020)

The aforementioned, then generates the need for the Kurds to change their strategy and mold themselves to their new context. They are opening a new possible alliance or emerging relationship with Russia. "Some may point to the possibility of increased YPG-Russia-Assad strategic cooperation as evidence of the inherent flaws in the U.S.'s operational model of fighting, with and through a local non-state actor like the YPG-led SDF." (Ayton, 2020). Russia could mean a new chance for the Kurds to achieve their goals after the U.S.'s abandonment, but the Kurds could also become a bargaining chip for Russia with Turkey, a way to create pressure.

While Russian President Vladimir Putin has always held Turkey as the bigger prize as part of his strategy of sowing divisions between NATO members, in the context of a further deterioration in relations over Idlib, the Kurds may prove to be a useful tool to turn up the pressure on Ankara. (Ayton, 2020)

Nowadays, the Syrian Kurds strategy is still drifting and changing to adapt to its chaotic environment, but it has now proven what it can be done and why they are needed in the region they currently control.

If Russia truly wishes to achieve its goals in Syria, it will need to bring into line a regime that feels emboldened by Moscow's support and acts as if impervious to Moscow's pressure. Only then would it demonstrate that it is capable not only of winning the war, but also of securing a sufficiently stable post-war order, and allow it to extricate itself successfully. (Hiltermann, 2018)

The previous, on the imminent possibility of a new change because of the possibility that NATO or the U.S. return to the panorama.

However, until Assad and Russia can totally supplant the Autonomous Administration—or gently bring the two together through negotiations—an arrangement may emerge in which the regime enjoys a degree of nominal 'sovereign control' while the SDF gets to maintain much of its political and security structures. For now, at least, this may be the best of bad options for both the SDF and Russia, particularly as it may help to forestall another Turkish intervention reminiscent of October

2019 by giving the impression that Syrian sovereignty has returned—an outcome in the interests of both parties. (Ayton, 2020)

In this case, the Kurds could have other tools to be less vulnerable, as they could have different bargaining tools but will continue to be sensitive to the actions of other actors. As demonstrated throughout the dissertation, their greatest strength is the constancy and strength of their identity.

This, because when analyzed from the theory of complex interdependence, it is shown that the main way the Kurds have tried to be less vulnerable to sensitive dependence, is by being true to their identity, and have created an 'obsession' with it; that has allowed them to shape themselves into the chaotic system they are in. This being so, in this chapter, it is not only describing the strategy of the Syrian Kurds in the war but is then clear that this strategy is to remain true to their identity and shape their alliances to obtain their goal, regardless of whether these changing alliances are contradictory or complex; which makes dependent alliances even more sensitive. Making it clear, this strategy is a consequence of the changes and effects generated by the actions of other actors, in relation to the mutual interdependence generated with said actors. This in the context of chaos and what it entails in the system as explained above.

CONCLUSIONS

After three chapters, it was possible to review the Kurdish strategic response to global powers in the context of the chaos of the war in Syria, which allows us to affirm that the Kurds' strategy is shaped by events that happen around them, and they change in the face of the opportunities presented to them. A review of the results found in the previous sections will be established in this chapter.

First of all, keeping in mind the general objective of this thesis, an analysis of the Syrian Kurds strategy within the context of the chaos of the Syrian war. On one hand, the context that makes the Syrian war a volatile scenario was demonstrated. Where this context directly supports the development of a linear strategy, since each actor is changing and generating a butterfly effect on the other, where their policies may be contradictory to another one carried out previously as a consequence of precisely reaching their individual objectives and try to be the least vulnerable actor. Secondly, it was shown that the historical development of the Kurds is influenced by their identity. The other actors were described, to understand what they are looking for and why to do it, to understand their strategy, and to be able to analyze what their strategy as a consequence of the actions of the other actor's present. And in the third place, the strategy was developed against the responses of the other actors within the framework of their identity, to understand their current position and how the Syrian Kurds look for recognition today in the contemporary scene.

The aforementioned, was possible thanks to the contributions of complex interdependence theory by Robert Keohane & Joseph Nye and chaos theory by Dylan Kissane since it allowed demonstrating and evidencing the context in the development of the situation to be analyzed and, therefore, the actions presented by each actor within the framework of their objectives, and in the Kurdish their identity.

On the other hand, the considerations taken into account were not exclusively theoretical. From the beginning statements, interviews, and reviews made by different political actors, international and governmental organizations were taken into account.

It is essential to highlight that these changes and this complex scenario have presented the Syrian Kurdish PYD with a tricky strategic choice:

Should it seek to replicate the Iraqi Kurdish model of using American power as a vector for Kurdish ambitions? If it does, it knows that Washington seems likely to limit those ambitions, providing some degree of Kurdish autonomy within a Syrian state that Washington hopes to rebuild through a peace process sponsored by the U.S. and Russia. Or should Syria's Kurds exploit the country's disorder to expand the territory under their control and simultaneously escalate the war in Turkey in the overall pursuit of the ultimate Kurdish goal: to gather up the four severed Kurdish parts and reconstitute them into a single "Greater Kurdistan"? (Hiltermann, 2016)

Although all the actors turn out to be vulnerable and sensitive to the war in Syria, it is evident that not all the actors are equally vulnerable and sensitive. Following Keohane and Nye approach, an actor will be the one who suffers the highest costs and inconsistencies in, and this actor will be the most vulnerable in this complex interdependence. And it becomes clear, then, that one of the most dependent actors are the Syrian Kurds, since they clearly depend on the protection of another actor and are very vulnerable to changes

However, it is possible to affirm that the Kurds have managed to adapt their lack of resources in a way to shape themselves and thus seek to be less vulnerable. If they succeed or not, will be seen. This has been present since "the Kurdish parties", in particular PYD, which was increasingly becoming the reference point in Kurdish-Syrian society, decided not to ride the revolutionary wave of opposition to Assad, nor were they enthusiastic about the opening of the central government of Damascus towards them.

"The biggest fear was that a revolution in Syria would prioritize an Arab or, worse, Islamist agenda, forgetting Kurd demands." (Gombacci, 2016, p.71).

The PYD's fighting force, the YPG, having gained a sense of its value, and therefore leverage, as an indispensable ally in the fight against the Islamic State, doesn't shy away from playing the big powers in the region—the U.S., Russia, Turkey, the regime of Bashar al-Assad—against each other, regardless of the cost. If Washington continues to treat the YPG as little more than a private security

company, a hired hand to help it dislodge ISIS from the banks of the Euphrates, and refuses to help the YPG in its territorial ambition to unify the three Kurdish cantons (which are interspersed with Arab, Turkoman, and Christian populations), then the YPG believes it can use the prospect of a defacto alliance with Russia to get more support from the U.S.. (Hiltermann, 2016)

In line with the above, from the theory of interdependence, it is possible to affirm that there are different actors, regimes, pacts, strategies that seek to obtain various benefits in the war in Syria. Where, there are several parallel disputes that go beyond the conflict in Syria if not in the general development of the region, it is evident that these do not turn out to be as distributive as one might think. On the contrary, they become part of the strategy of how one actor or the other acts. As reflected:

During the Syrian uprising, the Kurdish regions and political parties have proved to be much less prone to external interference and falling prey to groups. This, was due primarily to the fact that, historically, the Kurdish issue the interest and agendas of foreign political powers than Arab opposition have not been adopted as a cause by competing state powers in the Middle East, which have seen the Kurds and Kurdish nationalism as a threat took interests rather than a way of meeting them. International authorities have also regarded the pursuit of Kurdish interests as an obstacle to preserve the status quo in the Middle East. (Allsopp,2014, p. 216)

This allows to explain why the Syrian war's Kurdish strategy has a changing stance against the actions of the global powers. And it is understandable because the answer to the abandonment of the Syrian Kurds by the United States is to seek an alliance with the axis Russia-Syria.

A Kurdish YPG general told this author that following recent developments, "here are many things that we are working on with the Syrian regime and Russia. In the future, there will be great success between us." Since U.S. President Donald Trump essentially granted Ankara a *carte blanche* to attack Kurdish forces in October 2019 by ordering the redeployment of U.S. troops away from northeastern Syria, YPG leadership is said to be reassessing the strategic importance of its ties with what is an increasingly unreliable Washington and is looking to further diversify its portfolio of international partners, with an eye toward strengthening ties with Russia. (Ayton, 2020)

That, precisely reflects the Kurds' quest to achieve their goal regardless of the changes generated in the context by the butterfly effect in the chaos of war. Therefore, the possibility of new relationships of sensitive dependency speak precisely of that search for security and survival of the Kurds to achieve their purpose and seek to be less vulnerable. In any case, it is clear that the Kurds are highly vulnerable to the changes around them, where the only advantage is precisely the management of the territory and their experience adapting to the changes in his environment. As a former senior Pentagon official who was heavily involved in working with the YPG said:

The YPG are survivors and have been put in a position where they have to work a variety of relationships to remain viable and hopefully get integrated into some eventual peace process." Still, the contradictions of Russian policy in the trans-Euphrates, where it has to tend to Ankara's concerns over the YPG while trying to facilitate a rapprochement between the latter and an Assad regime that is determined to recover full sovereignty, leaves an exploitable space for the United States to reassert itself. Yet, this largely depends upon whether a U.S. president—be it Trump or a Democrat—discovers the will to do so. (Ayton, 2020)

In sum, it is evident that war in Syria is the cradle of chaos, in Kissane terms, and volatile context that makes the dynamics and their development complex and changing. Where, the identity of the Syrian Kurds has led them to look for solutions to the evolving, volatile context that characterize the chaotic war in Syria.

In the Syrian context, it is represented as a struggle for autonomy, fighting a war to ward off the war and thus be able to develop as an autonomous society and have fundamental human rights. It is also imperative to clarify, that even if the Syrian Kurds conflict would be resolved today, the Syrian war and the conflict in the region have many other branches, and the root of the conflict is even more complicated. And even though the Kurds are a millenary group, they are only one actor in the many parallel disputes that make the region, and Syria so volatile and complex, where it's uncertain what will develop.

Finally, it could be said the hypothesis in this investigation was partially accurate. The Kurds must indeed configure a unification strategy regarding how they are going to act to protect their identity. Nevertheless, their main purpose is not to achieve independence as initially stated.

In other words, to gain human dignity and respect for their ethnicity. However, the question is if the other actors present are willing to make that happen under the context of chaos and that it is more the fear of not being able to control what could happen rather than give them what they legitimately deserve. And so, the Syrian Kurds strategy is flexible, and adapts to the global powers and local interventions, and they will continue to fight to obtain their main goal since it dates back to its ancient roots. Although, the Kurds need to unify their strategy, protecting their identity, to fulfill their objective, which was supposed to be independence, it is evident that, throughout the analysis this hypothesis becomes that its final objective is not only independence but to be recognized and respected as citizens and everything that means being a Kurd is respected.

Having said the above, it is then evident that the answer to the research question of this dissertation is that the Syrian Kurds modify their strategy by forming and changing their alliances in order to adapt to the scenario of chaos, and the different modifications generated by other actors in this same scenario, and then, seek to obtain their main objective, which, as previously established, is live with dignity where their ethnicity is respected.

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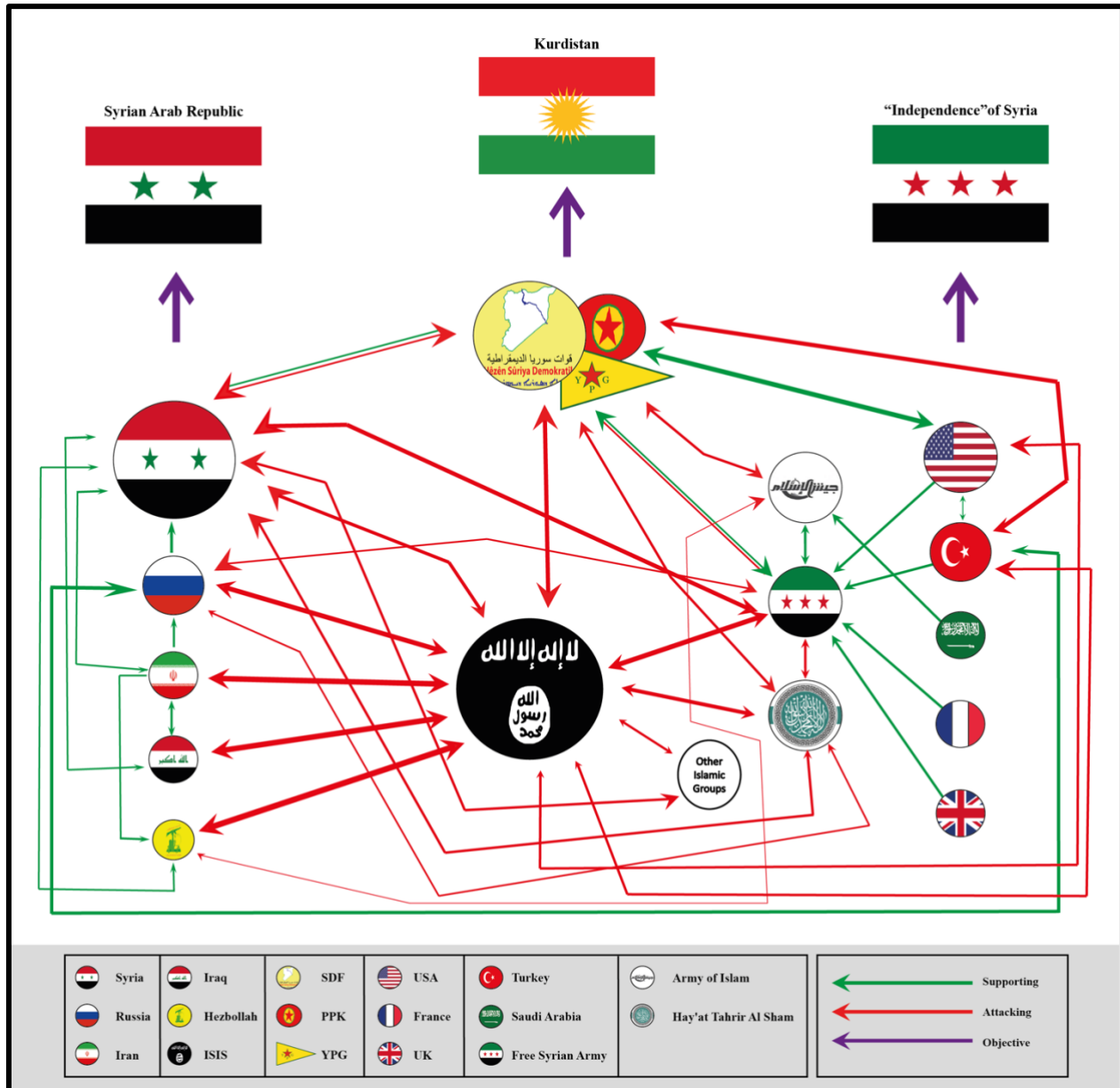
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ANNEXES

ANNEX #1: MAIN ACTORS PRESENT IN THE SYRIAN WAR



ANNEX #2: SYRIAN KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES

Source: Harriet Allsopp (March 2014)

Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)

al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya (el-Partî)

Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (The Party)

Head: Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar

(formerly Partîya Dêmkokrata Pêşverû a Kurdî li Sûriyê)

Hizb al-Musawah al Dimoqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria

Head: Aziz Daoud

Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)

al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya (el-Partî)

Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (The Party)

Head: Nusradin Ibrahim

Partîya Yekîti ya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê

Hizb al-Wahida al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria

Head: Muhidin Sheikh Ali. Previously led by Ismail Omar (also known as Ismail Amo) who passed away 18 October 2010)

Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê

al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria

Head: Dr. Lezgin Muhammad Fakhri

Partîya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê

Hizb al-Yekîti al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Union Party in Syria

Head: Leader elected for three-year term.

Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê

al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria

Head: Abdul Karim Sako

Partîya Çep a Kurdî li Sûriyê – Kongra

al-Hizb al-Yasari al-Kurdi fi Suriya – Kongres

Kurdish Left Party in Syria – Congress

Head: Muhamma Musa Muhammad

Partîya Dêmkokrat a Pêşverû a Kurdî li Sûriyê

al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Taquadumi al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria

Head: Abdul Hamid Haj Darwish

Partîya Çep a Kurdî li Sûriyê – Komîta Navendî

al-Hizb al-Yasari al-Kurdi fi Suriya – al-Laj nab al-Markaziyab

Kurdish Left Party in Syria – Central Committee

Head: Salih Gido

Partîya Wekhevî ya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê

Partîya Welatperêz a Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê

al-Hizb al-Watani al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Patriotic Democratic Party in Syria

Head: Tahir Sadun Safouk

Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî ya Sûrî (elSûrî)

al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi al-Suriy

Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party

Head: Jamal M. Sheikh Baqi

Partîya Hevgirtina Gelê Kurd li Sûriyê

Hizb al-Itihad al-Sha'bi al-Kurd fi Suriya

Kurdish Popular Union Party in Syria

Head: Mustafa Rashid (Now primarily existing in exile with only a few, if any, members in Syria.)

Şepêla Pêşerojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê

Tiyar al-Mustaqbal al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Future Movement in Syria

Head: Jangidar Muhammad

Şepêla Pêşerojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê

Tiyar al-Mustaqbal al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Future Movement in Syria

Head: Rezan Bahri Shaykhmus

Partîya Azadî ya Kurdi li Suriyê

Hizb Azadi al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria

Head: Mustafa Juma'a

Partîya Azadî ya Kurdi li Suriyê

Hizb Azadi al-Kurdi fi Suriya

Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria

Head: Mustafa Oso

Partîya Yekîti ya Dêmkokrat (PYD)

Hizb al-Itihad al-Dimuqrati

Democratic Union Party

Head: Saleh Muslim and Asya Muhammad

Partîya Rêkeftina Dêmkokrat a Kurdistani - Sûriyê

Hizb al-Wifaq al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdistani – Suriya

Kurdistan Democratic Concord Party – Syria

Head: Nash'at Muhammad (replaced Fawzi Shengal)

Partîya Yekîti ya Kurdistani li Sûriyê

Hizb Yekiti al-Kurdistani fi Suriya

Kurdistan Union Party in Syria

Head: Omar Daoud

Partîya Dêmkokrata Pêşverû a Kurdî li Sûriyê

al-Hizb al-Kurdi al-Dimuqrati al-Taquadumi fi Suriya – Harakat al-Islah

Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria – Reform Movement

Head: Faisal Yusef

ANNEX #3: INTERVIEW WITH MAHMUT

Transcript of the interview of Mahmut (Pseudonym). Elaborated by Maria Camila Calderon Papa on May 29, 2020.

How would you describe the Kurdish identity?

The Kurds are an open, welcoming community that has been rejected in the countries they live in. Kurds are really close to the communities they build. We are an ethnic group with a particular heritage, where culture and the traditions are passed generation to generation. We are a peaceful community that is trying to be respected as human beings like any other person. That's why there is a division among the political organization of the Kurds, not because of what we want but because of the means they use to achieve our goal. We want to be treated equally; to have rights as anyone else, that they respect our culture and identity, where we can develop as any other nation.

What do you think about the geographical division of the Kurdish community have? (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria)

As Kurds have been oppressed in different ways in the four countries you mentioned, the thing is how they have mistreated us have changed over time and depending on which government is in charge. So, it changes depending on the country they are living in. I believe governments are afraid of the Kurdish community's possible independence. Still, at the same time, they don't grant them basic human rights or dignity any human being wants and deserve, and that is the moment the idea of independence appears among our people.

Q. How is the treatment of the Turkish citizen to the Kurds?

The Turks referred to us Kurds as mountain Turks, they have always considered us second class citizens, or they do not even consider us citizens. The government banned the word Kurds, Kurdistan, and Kurds. If the word 'Kurd' was used, you could be arrested or also go to prison. Historically, we have been discriminated against and rejected. But as I understand it, it has only been this way in this time, when Syria, Turkey, etc. was formed. Before that, we had more autonomy and could leave better, of course, under some specific conditions.

Q. What would you say is the main objective of the Kurds? Is it to achieve Kurdistan?

We as Kurds want dignity, to be respected and valued, and that we are not discriminated against for who we are. We want to have the same human rights everyone has, including being able to participate in politics. And we have searched for it for many years. Some want to continue on the path of politics and try to change from within each country. Others seek independence since they see it as the only solution. We have faced forced resettlement, as well as denial of our identity, clothing, and customs. Look that until 1991 we could go to prison for being Kurdish, as I said before, only because of our identity, because of who we are.

Q. So why is there a current fight for independence in Syria? And why has it been in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran?

The Kurds don't have a hatred towards the nationality they are living; a Turkish Kurd do not hate Turkey; a Syrian Kurd does not hate Syria. We look for independence, not as a senseless cause; we are not against the countries we live in. We are against the violent historical oppression, the government's' structural discrimination, the rejection of our values, and our identity. We are looking to gain autonomy to live our lives as any other human being do, where we can live in a society where we aren't treated as second class citizens, and where our fundamental human rights are protected. And we have always wanted that; it goes even to the Ottoman Empire and solicited more autonomy, not necessarily independence. I think it is safe to say that most Kurds wouldn't even consider looking for this autonomy if treated with dignity and respect.

I am Kurdish, but I am also Turkish, I just don't understand why that makes me unworthy of my fundamental human rights and dignity as a person. And that is the reason we seek autonomy. Like in the U.S., the African American citizens are fighting because they are discriminated against because of their race, we are discriminated against because of our ethnicity, just in a more complex and precarious scenario. We are only looking for a way out of historical oppression linked to the respect our identity and ethnicity deserve.

I wonder what would happen in the U.S. if discrimination against African American people were worse? If they were in the context that we are in, would they not seek their independence? If independence is the only way that some see living with dignity, living in peace, wouldn't they fight to have it? I think they would.

Q. If the main Kurdish goal isn't independence, why do you think there is such confrontation with their respective governments?

For me, one of the main problems is due to the inherent structural problem of Syria's sovereignty as opposed to Kurdish goals. This is reflected in the actions of the Syrian Kurds, and why, despite being a great ally of the U.S. During the Syrian war, they have never been in direct opposition to the Syrian government and claim only "to fight a war to keep it away." It is not that we are against the government, nor is it that we agree. We simply believe that we can live in harmony, without being discriminated against for what we are. We believe that if we had the dignity that we seek, differences could be resolved in a political sphere. But we see the world differently. We are pro-democratic, pro-ecological, and have much more gender equality, as seen in the western world, and this in itself collides with the government. Therefore, it is a rejection of our identity and traditions, but they are also politically different from many of our political and social positions.

Q. What would be the best solution for you? Independence, or continue to seek a political solution within each country?

I'd rather not say.

ANNEX #4: INTERVIEW WITH N. OMAR

Transcript of the interview of N. Omar (Pseudonym). Elaborated by Maria Camila Calderon Papa on June 17, 2020.

N. Omar - Syrian-born Kurdish women, a militant for the Kurds' independence who lived in her country until mid-2019.

Q. How would you describe the Kurdish identity?

The most important thing for us is our identity, what characterizes us as Kurds. It is the inheritance of our parents and grandparents. It is taught from generation to generation. Therefore, it will always be what motivates us and guides us. That is why we are going to look for the best option, no matter what, to be able to live with dignity. Whether it is an alliance, a political agreement, or independence, that is secondary. Sure, it is still important, but what we want is to live with dignity, like any other person. That is why you see that there are divisions even within ourselves; each one adapts to the conditions of the country they live in. But because you are Turkish or Syrian, you do not stop being Kurdish; nationality is different from ethnicity. Of course, many seek independence, but I assure you that if we were respected and lived normally, we would not be seeking independence, or it would be a very, very small group. That is why we act depending on what is happening, and that is why you see the differences in each country we are in.

Q. What has the war in Syria meant for the Kurds?

Look, even before the war in Syria, what our leaders wanted was to have recognition of our nation, and they had dialogue with the government. As consequence of the war, an opportunity is generated with which many dream today, independence. But before, it was not like that. It didn't look as possible as it might be now, or the recent years. And the reality is that it occurs naturally. In Syria, we attempted to isolate ourselves from the war. We were fighting a war to keep the war outside from our territory, the territory we live in.

Then, the possibility of having independence emerged. And of course, if we are going to be able to live in peace, of course, we will fight for it. But in Syria, the Kurds go to war to keep it away from their people, not because they're interested in a war.

Q. What would you say is the main objective of the Kurds? Is it to achieve Kurdistan?

The Kurds have not changed their objective, historically it has been the same, which is what is taught generation after generation. Independence is not sought for independence itself. Furthermore, what we Kurds want is to be able to live peacefully, with human dignity under our customs and our traditions, where our identity is respected. That is why we are willing to live under another nationality, as long as our ethnic group is recognized.

I believe that even this is a huge difference that many decision-makers do not understand since many times, it is not reflected in the country's political construction since its constitution, which should happen in the Middle East countries that are all multiethnic, and multi-religious, but the problem is structural. And this is why our fight will continue until we achieve respect not only as a human, if not as Kurds, either by acquiring our nationality or by achieving it through the political means already present. But if something is clear to me, it is that although our culture is very peaceful and welcoming to those who are not part of it, we are also very proud of being Kurdish and we prefer to die than to be treated worse than animals, which is what happens to us, and that's why we seek our autonomy. But we also try to have a positive relationship with the governments in question to look at all the possible scenarios to meet our final objective, and this is why the internal division of the Kurds is generated. Some say that ours is utopian; we believe that it is the basic that any human deserves.

ANNEX #5: INTERVIEW WITH YANIV VOLLER

Source: Oxford Research Group. Retrieved

Interview with Yaniv Voller, Lecturer in the Politics of the Middle East at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent. Elaborated by Oxford Research Group on November 24, 2016.

Q. Numbering approximately 35 million worldwide, the Kurds are often referred to as the largest group of stateless people in the world. Today, the Kurdish nationalist movement is often seen as one of the largest worldwide campaigns for self-determination. Who are the Kurds, and what are the origins of their struggle for a homeland?

The Kurdish people are a distinct ethnic group, concentrated mostly in a broad region, which is often referred to as Kurdistan. Most of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but there are large Shi'i, Yezidi and other Kurdish-speaking communities.

Already during the time of the Ottoman and the different Iranian empires there existed semi-autonomous Kurdish kingdoms that served as a buffer between the two empires.

Modern Kurdish nationalism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, along with other nationalist movements, such as Arab and Turkish nationalism. After the end of the First World War, Kurdish leaders were promised an independent state as part of the Paris Peace Conference. However, following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, this promise was overturned. By the mid-1920s, Kurdistan ended up divided between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

The Kurds protested this decision and there were some uprisings in different parts of Kurdistan. In 1945 there was even an autonomous Kurdish republic, known as the Mahabad Republic, which survived for a year.

The first major Kurdish uprising erupted in Iraq in 1961. This uprising lasted until 1991 when, after years of brutal, even genocidal, Iraqi counterinsurgency campaign, the Kurds in Iraq gained complete autonomy over their territory.

In Turkey, Kurdish insurgency emerged primarily during the late 1970s, with the formation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) by Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK is still active today, though it formally renounced its aspiration for independence and is now calling for an autonomy for the Kurds within a democratic Turkey.

In Iran, too, there has been a long conflict taking place. The Islamic Republic has not been less brutal than the Turkish Republic or Saddam Hussein's Iraq in suppressing Kurdish demands for self-determination.

The Kurdish struggle in Syria has been the least organized, although sporadic uprisings had occurred. The Assad regimes, both father and son, not only oppressed Kurdish nationalism, but denied the Kurds in Syria their most basic rights, including citizenship. The Syrian civil war provided the Kurds in Syria with an unprecedented opportunity to fight for their rights, although they too officially demand autonomy rather than independence.

Q. Looking at the Kurds in Iraq, did Saddam Hussein's counterinsurgency campaign actually help create a strong sense of Kurdish nationalism?

Yes, it did. Particularly the Anfal Campaign, which took place between 1986 and 1989, served to foster Kurdish national identity and desire for self-determination. The Iraqi army's use of chemical weapons made it clear to most Kurds that living under Baghdad's rule is impossible in the long term. Even Kurds who openly collaborated with the regime, the so-called National Defense Battalions, seemed to have come to this conclusion after their own towns and villages came under attack. National tragedies often serve to foster national identities, and even though the Ba'th regime's genocidal campaign devastated Kurdish society, it did strengthen Kurdish national identity.

Q. In Turkey, there has been much systematic discrimination against Kurds and historic attempts to eradicate Kurdish identity. Did these repressive measures in Turkey also help Kurdish nationalism gain momentum?

Yes, to some extent. Government repression and discrimination often foster a national identity among persecuted groups. But this is only one factor among others. Other factors that have contributed to the strengthening of Kurdish identity include Kurdish activism, whether in Turkey or in the diaspora; urbanization; modernization; greater access to education. And the experience of Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan, and especially in Iraq.

Q. Western powers over the past century have used Kurdish fighters when it suited their purposes, and then arguably abandoned them. There have been promises from Western leaders of establishing a Kurdish homeland only for those promises go unfulfilled. Why do you feel Western powers have treated the Kurds this way? Is it simply a matter of realist interests and Western leaders wanting to appease regional powers?

The only time that Western powers made a clear promise about a Kurdish homeland was at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The US supported the KDP in the early 1970s as proxies in Iran's conflict against Iraq, but they didn't make an explicit promise about a Kurdish homeland. The Americans also implicitly encouraged the Kurds and Shi'is to rise against Saddam after the First Gulf War – but again, without promising them independence.

Undoubtedly, the West has abandoned the Kurds many times in the past. But we have to remember that the International community has traditionally been suspicious of separatist movements, because changes in state boundaries are considered a source of regional and global instability. And of course, there has also been the realist aspect of keeping good relations with Turkey. Turkey is a key ally of the West in the region and a NATO member. And it has traditionally objected to Kurdish independence.

Q. The Kurds have been a vital part of the war against the Islamic State (IS). Through a combined effort of Peshmerga, PKK, YPG, and Yazidi militias, the Kurds became the most effective fighters by far on the ISIS frontier. Why do you feel the Kurds have proven to be such an effective force against IS?

There are several factors that have turned the Kurdish militias into the most effective fighting force in the war against the Islamic State. The first is familiarity with the area and the terrain. The Kurds, and especially the Peshmerga and the YPG, are natives of the region. They know it well and are aware of the challenges they are facing. The second factor is experience. The Peshmerga has years of experience fighting against the Iraqi army, Islamist militias and even each other. The PKK has been leading a guerrilla warfare against the Turkish security forces for decades. The third factor is motivation. The Kurds are fighting in and for their homeland. The Islamic State has attacked the Kurds in their own lands. The Yazidis are particularly motivated, not just by vengeance, but also because many Yazidis are still in captivity. But there is also an ideological motivation. Especially for the Peshmerga, fighting along the West has meant greater legitimacy for their autonomy and sovereignty. The KRG is a de facto state. And states establish alliances. The KRG has considered itself an ally of the West for many years now. For the PKK, fighting IS has meant challenging its status as a terrorist organization. In short, these are highly trained, disciplined and motivated fighters, who are fighting for their home and for recognition. They outweigh most other forces involved in the fighting in these parameters.

Q. How far do you feel that the fight against IS will help the cause for a Kurdish homeland?

This is a difficult question to answer, because we need to define what we mean when we say a Kurdish homeland. If we mean a scenario in which a Kurdish state is established in Iraqi Kurdistan, then the answer is probably positive. The KRG's fight against IS has once again proved to the West, but also to Turkey and other regional states the viability of the KRG and its ability to function as a sovereign actor. The Peshmerga has been one of the most reliable forces in the conflict, and in essence functions as the West's "boots on the ground."

But if we talk about a Kurdish homeland that spreads over other parts of Kurdistan then I am in doubt. Ankara, which is still the most important veto actor when it comes to the idea of a Kurdish state, will not allow the formation of a Kurdish state in Rojava and even more so in Turkey. Even the PKK's contribution to the fighting would not change Turkey's mind – if anything, it will make Ankara even more intransigent about it.

Q. Looking at the Iraqi case, Massoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has recently called for a referendum on a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Would the fight against ISIS at least help strengthen the case for a referendum?

Yes, I believe so. The Peshmerga's participation in the war against ISIS has demonstrated once again to the International community, and especially Washington and Ankara, that the KRG is indispensable for regional security and that the Kurdish leadership could contribute to regional stability. The Peshmerga has proven able not only to protect the KRG's domestic sovereignty, but also to participate as an equal partner in regional counterterrorism campaigns. This could play in the KRG's favor when time comes.

Q. Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet last year resulted in dramatic swifts in relations between those two states. The Kurdish question has also entered into this complicated relationship as Russia has shown some support for Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. How do you feel the Kurdish question will effect relations between the two in the future?

This is more challenging for me to respond to, because I am not an expert on Russian foreign policy and am not sure on how much Russia is committed to the Kurds. From a Turkish perspective, the question of Syrian Kurds has been something of a red line. Any support perceived as helping the Syrian Kurds toward independence is bound to make Ankara extremely nervous. And while Moscow has its own interests in Syria, which may clash with Ankara's, I don't believe that Moscow would cross this particular line. After all, Russia also prefers a unified Syria.

Q. In regards to Turkey, would simply a change in leadership to a more liberal position help the case for a Kurdish state or is the issue of what has been described as anti-Kurdism or ‘Kurdophobia’ far more deep seated in Turkey?

A change of leadership wouldn't have much impact on Ankara's approach to the Kurdish question. I am afraid that there is no liberal opposition in Turkey – certainly not toward the Kurdish question. The People's Republican Party (CHP) may be more secular than the AKP. However, its agenda has been based for many years on Turkish nationalism and objection to any hint of Kurdish nationalism and separatist desires. The other, much smaller, Turkish opposition party is the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). This is an ultra-nationalist party with a neo-fascist ideology. Militias associated with the party were involved in attacking and assassinating Kurdish activists in previous decades. Ironically, in its early days, the AKP had been considered more liberal than most other parties with relation to the Kurdish question, and therefore gained many Kurdish votes. The most liberal party in Turkey nowadays is the predominantly Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). But not only that I don't see the party ever elected for power in Turkey, its actual existence is under threat nowadays, with the arrest of its leaders in the last few weeks.

Undoubtedly, anti-Kurdish sentiments are entrenched in the Turkish public and political discourse. But even if a change takes place, I don't see it affecting party politics, amid the absence of genuine opposition on the subject among the main Turkish parties.

Q. What impact do you think Trump's presidency will have on the Kurdish question, if any?

Based strictly on Trump's statements, I don't think the Kurds should be overly optimistic. Trump has hinted that he is after an isolationist foreign policy. This means, in my opinion, that Trump, at best, will not intervene against Turkish repression of the opposition, including the Kurdish opposition. As for other parts of the Middle East, such an isolationist approach may also result in a regional chaos. Such chaos could have disastrous implications for regional stability, but also opportunities for a change in the status quo.

ANNEX #6: INTERVIEW WITH HILTERMANN, HEINTZ & GURBUZ

Source: The Washington Post

Interview with Joost Hiltermann, Program Director of the Middle East, and North Africa Crisis Group, Lisel Heintz, Assistant Professor of International Relations at Johns Hopkins University and Mustafa Gurbuz, Adjunct Professorial Lecturer of Critical Race, Gender, and Culture Studies Collaborative at the American University. Elaborated by the Washington Post on November 4, 2019.

Meg Kelly. Washington Post - WP. President Trump vehemently defended his decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria, which exposed the Kurds for U.S. allies to attack.

President Trump declarations (video reference):

- "Syria wants to fight for their land that's up to Turkey and Syria as it has been for hundreds of years they've been fighting."
- "Turkey, Syria, and all forms of the Kurds have been fighting for centuries."
- "I mean, this was going to be a war of lots of other groups coming in. It's what's it going to stop with Turkey against the Kurds."
- "They've been fighting with the Turks for 300 years of people know of."

WP. The Turks and Kurds have not been fighting for hundreds of years. But they do have a complicated history, and to understand what's happening now along the Turkey-Syria border, we need to go back to 1918 and the end of the First World War. The Kurds are the largest state list ethnic group, but they are far from the single unified bloc. In the Ottoman Empire, regions were loosely defined by ethnicity. But the idea that these regions could or should act as separate nation-states with unique national identities didn't really exist outside of academic circles.

When the Ottoman Empire dissolves at the end of World War One, you have a number of different agreements that the colonial powers come to. You have the Sykes-Picot agreement. You had the Treaty of Sevres in 1920. Turkey particularly took a lot of issues with, basically, because it was a lot of the Allies, kind of carving up Turkey into a number of parts giving territory to Italians and Greeks and British and so forth. That Treaty did include the possibility of the Kurdish people having their own state, but Mustafa Kemal Atatürk played a pivotal role in changing that. See, he was a Colonel in the Ottoman army. At the time and was able to consolidate the remainder of the Ottoman military to expel the Allied powers, founding Turkey. With that, the possibility of a Kurdish state was abandoned, and the new Treaty, the Treaty of Lausanne, divided the region.

Lisel Heintz. It was kind of the agreement and, this is a really loose way of interpreting it, but you know France would have Syria, and the Brits would have Iraq, and so forth. So basically, you have the drawing of boundaries that not only, kind of, divide populations based on ethnic and religious divisions, but also are manipulated in order to kind of serve the interests of the colonial powers.

WP. That meant the Kurds were split across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. So, what happened next was different depending on which country they were in. We're going to focus here on Turkey and Syria.

Heintz. Atatürk and his cadre had gone through the Balkan Wars and had gone through World War one and saw ethnic nationalism is dangerous. There was an erasure of Kurdish ethnic identity, and by erasure, I mean killings, displacements, changing of town names, moving Kurds across the country.

WP. In 1978, some young Turkish Kurds adopted communism to push back against the Turkish government. They formed the Kurdistan Workers Party or the PKK, led by Abdullah Öcalan. In 1984, the PKK initiated a war with the government. And in 1997, the U.S.

officially labeled it as a terrorist organization. Across the border, in Syria, things unfolded differently for the Kurds.

Mustafa Gurbuz. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire made Turkey and Syria border very much artificially manufactured. In the 1920s, we see the French mandate of Syria, in which French would look at Kurds as a strategic asset. A lot of minorities under the French Empire would be supported in terms of their cultural right's linguistic rights. And we saw some intellectuals' traditional lectures coming from Turkey joining a movement in Syria, and they are standardizing the Kurdish language.

WP. But in the 1960s, Syria Kurds were stripped of basic rights forced to migrate from their towns and lost economic power. That changed in the 2000s. During that time, the people's protection unit or the YPG and its political arm, emerged as dominant among a wide range of political parties and groups. The YPG is a militant organization that has strong links to the PKK and Turkey.

Joost Hiltermann. There is an organic link between the PKK the YPG. If you go to northeastern Syria, you see PKK leaders' posters everywhere, which can only be there because the YPG allows it.

WP. When the U.S. needed help pushing back Isis in Syria it worked with the YPG.

Heintz. To get around the fact that the YPG is essentially the PKK's Syrian sister organization, that is the Kurdistan Workers Party. The United States creates the Syrian democratic forces, the SDF. The goal was to make that a multi-ethnic fighting force.

Hiltermann. And that relationship lasted until today, fighting and defeating the Islamic state territorially, and detaining a large number of Islamic State adherents and their families. That alliance between the United States and the YPG is something that Turkey never accepted and is now very happy to counter as the U.S. withdraws from northeastern Syria.

WP. With Trump's decision to remove troops from Syria, there was no longer a U.S. force mediating between Turkey and the YPG along the border, and suddenly the regional dynamic shifted.

Hiltermann. So, turkey has long wanted to remove any PKK affiliated group from the Syrian Turkish border. The Kurds are only in that area, so for Turkey, it is another way of saying we want to get rid, not necessarily of the Kurds, but of the YPG that is the main party protecting these Kurds.

Heintz. There appears to be a green light to Turkish forces to invade. They do invade on October 9th, they agree to a ceasefire, and then out of the one meet with Russian, President Vladimir Putin, who, essentially takes over the role of the U.S., and says now we're going to have turkey and Russian troops that are patrolling the area.

WP. Keep in mind that it's not just the YPG that's impacted. After all, the zone includes most of Syria's Kurdish population, and not all Kurdish people in this region support the YPG or the PKK, which brings us back to President Trump and his justification for this move.

President Trump declaration (video reference):

- "Turkey, Syria, and all forms of the Kurds have been fighting for centuries."

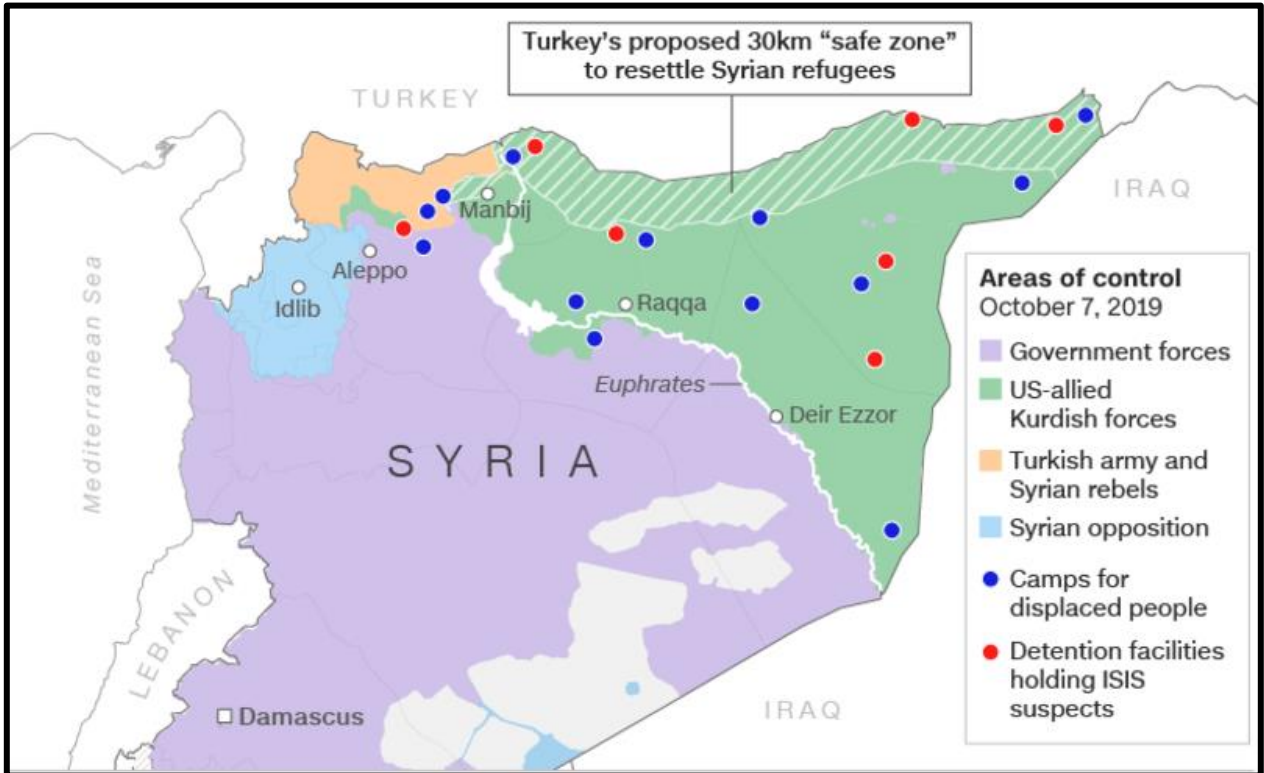
Heintz. They haven't been at war with each other for hundreds of years, the Kurds. In fact, they were allies with the Turks during the War of Independence. There are a number of Kurds who say I met ethnically Kurdish, but I feel nationally Turkish.

WP. So, the idea that the Kurdish people are somehow natural enemies or have been fighting for hundreds of years with the Turks is completely false. Not to mention oversimplified. Their history is a complex saga of peace, suppression, resistance, cooperation, and violence. Most

of that violence is a result of recent political tensions, and at times it has been on behalf of the United States.

ANNEX #7: MAP OF THE KURDISH AREAS OF SYRIA

Source: Conflict Monitor by HIS Markit, Institute for the Study of War Graphic: Tamara Qibla and Henrik Patterson, CNN



ANNEX #8: TIMELINE

Source: United States Institute of Peace

2011

- **March 6-23**

Police arrested adolescents for pro-democracy graffiti in Daraa, which sparked the first Arab Spring protests in Syria. Security forces cracked down on demonstrations and killed at least 100 people. By the end of March, protests had spread to other cities. Between May 7 and 29, Syrian security forces conducted raids in Homs, Damascus, Daraa, and several other cities to squelch protests.

- **July 1**

More than 100,000 people protested against Assad across Syria.

- **July 29**

Seven military officers defected and formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA). By November, the FSA was strong enough to launch attacks on government intelligence offices in Damascus and Aleppo.

- **July**

From Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (later to become ISIS), secretly dispatched operatives to Syria.

- **August 23**

The Syrian National Council was formed in Istanbul. It claimed to be the official representative of the Syrian opposition.

2012

- **January 24**

Abu Mohammed al-Julani, originally a member of al-Qaida in Iraq, announced the formation of the Nusra Front in Syria. In a video posted online, Julani declared war against Assad and called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria.

- **February 3**

Syrian government forces began an assault on Homs, the country's third largest city and, by then, the epicenter of the uprising. Observers reported that more than 200 people were killed in the first day of the attack. Bloody fighting in Homs continued sporadically until December 2015, when the last rebels evacuated the city as part of a U.N.-brokered deal with the regime.

- **February 12**

From hiding in South Asia, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaida, issued a video statement supporting the anti-government uprising in Syria.

- **February 15**

Syrian government forces assaulted the city of Hama. The fighting evoked memories of the 1982 Hama massacre, in which government forces killed some 10,000 people in a ruthless campaign to crush an uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

- **February 24**

More than 70 nations and international organizations participated in the inaugural Friends of Syria meeting. The group demanded that the Syrian government permit the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians. It also recognized the Syrian National Council as a “legitimate representation of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change.” The group, in various configurations, continued to meet periodically to discuss ways to solve the conflict and coordinate aid to the opposition.

- **March 16**

Kofi Annan, the U.N. special envoy to Syria, submitted a six-point peace plan to the Security Council. It called for a Syrian-led political process to address citizens’ demands, a U.N.-supervised cease-fire, provision of humanitarian assistance, release of arbitrarily detained persons, freedom of movement for journalists, and respect for the freedom to demonstrate peacefully. The Security Council backed the plan on March 21; the Syrian government accepted it on March 27.

- **April 12**

The United Nations brokered a cease-fire between the regime and the rebels, but it broke down immediately.

- **May 25**

Pro-government forces reportedly killed more than 100 people, including more than 40 children and 30 women, in the village of Houla. It was one of the first massacres by the shabiha militiamen loyal to Assad.

- **June 30**

Representatives from the United Nations, the United States, Russia, the Arab League, and other world and regional powers met in Geneva to outline a road map for peace. They called for a transitional governing body to oversee elections.

- **July**

Rebels captured the eastern half of Aleppo. Regime forces dropped barrel bombs on densely populated urban areas held by rebels. Some one million civilians fled Syria's commercial center, and another half million were displaced within the eastern part of the city.

- **August 2**

Kofi Annan, the U.N. and Arab League envoy for Syria, resigned after his peace plan failed to gain traction. On August 17, he was replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi, a former Algerian foreign minister.

- **August 20**

President Obama warned the Syrian government and other actors not to use chemical weapons. "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus," Obama said.

- **November 11**

The Syrian National Council merged with other opposition groups to form the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly known as the Syrian National Coalition. On December 11, President Obama recognized it as "the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime."

- **December 11-23**

Rebels captured key military bases in Aleppo and secured supply lines to the Turkish border. Flights from the airport were suspended after the Nusra Front threatened to shoot down commercial aircraft. It claimed the government was using planes to transport loyalist forces and military supplies.

2013

- **January 6**

President Assad presented a proposal for peace that included a national reconciliation conference, a new government and a new constitution. Rebels inside Syria as well as the Syrian National Coalition operating largely in exile rejected the offer.

- **March 4**

Rebels captured Raqqa, a city on the northeast bank of the Euphrates River. The FSA, the Nusra Front, and ISIS (still known as the Islamic State of Iraq) all operated in Raqqa, although ISIS moved military assets to consolidate control of the city.

- **April 11**

Baghdadi moved from Iraq to Syria and claimed that the Islamic State in Iraq had merged with the Nusra Front to become the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. Nusra Front leader Julani rejected the alliance and declared allegiance to al-Qaida.

- **June 13**

The White House confirmed that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons “on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.” President Obama authorized the expansion of covert military assistance to Syrian rebels.

- **August**

ISIS began attacking Syrian rebel groups, including the Nusra Front, in Raqqa and Aleppo—jockeying for position as the main non-government force inside Syria.

- **August 21**

Hundreds of people were killed by chemical weapons in an attack on the Damascus suburbs of Eastern and Western Ghouta, an attack widely suspected to be by Assad’s forces. On August 29, the British Parliament rejected a resolution for military action—potentially with the United States—against Syria after the use of chemical weapons.

- **August 31**

President Obama said the United States should act against Syria for its use of chemical weapons against civilians. But he stipulated that he wanted Congressional authorization first. In September, Obama attempted to win support from Congress and world leaders for U.S.-led action against Syria for the regime’s use of chemical weapons. Senate Joint Resolution 21, which included the authorization for the use of military force against the Syrian government, never received a floor vote. On September 9, after negotiations with Russia, Assad agreed to destroy or hand over his arsenal of chemical weapons.

- **September 27**

The U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution calling for an international peace conference and the swift elimination of Syria’s chemical weapons. The United Nations said that Syria’s defiance of the resolution could trigger sanctions or stronger coercive action. On October 31, the Joint Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed that Assad met a deadline to destroy chemical weapons production facilities.

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2014

- February 3

Al-Qaida disavowed any connection to ISIS. In a statement posted on jihadist web forums, it said al-Qaida “was not informed or consulted about its establishment. It was not pleased with it and thus ordered its suspension.”

- May 13

The U.N. envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned.

- June 3

The Syrian government held a presidential election; it claimed the turnout was 73 percent. The next day, the speaker of parliament announced that Assad won with some 90 percent of the vote. The opposition dismissed the election as a farce.

- June 21

ISIS seized the strategic border crossing between Syria’s Deir Ezzor province and Iraq as well as three Iraqi towns.

- June 29

From the Grand Mosque in Mosul, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of a caliphate stretching across large chunks of Syria and Iraq—and about the size of Indiana. He declared himself leader and rebranded his movement the Islamic State. Four days later, the group took control of al Omar and Tanak, two major oil fields in Syria.

- August 19

ISIS released a video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley, who was abducted in Syria in 2012. The group threatened the life of Steven Sotloff, another American journalist held in Syria, if President Obama did not end U.S. military operations in neighboring Iraq. On September 2, ISIS released a video of the execution of Sotloff.

- August 24

ISIS seized the Taqba airbase, which gave it full control over Raqqa province.

- September 19-22

ISIS advanced on the Syrian border town of Kobani, a strategic town because of its proximity to the Turkish border. Thousands of residents fled to Turkey, which added to the growing refugee crisis in

camps along the border. On September 29, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees announced that more than three million Syrians had become refugees since the start of the conflict.

- **September 23**

The United States launched its first air strikes against ISIS in Syria, dramatically expanding its campaign against the Sunni extremist movement. Obama pledged that the United States would destroy ISIS.

- **November 1-2**

The Nusra Front, an al-Qaida affiliate, drove Western-backed FSA brigades from their strongholds in Idlib.

2015

- **January 14**

Senior U.S. officials—Major General Michael Nagata from the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force and Daniel Rubinstein, U.S. special envoy for Syria—met with the Syrian opposition to discuss a train-and-equip program. It was the first high-level meeting between the Pentagon and the Syrian opposition. “These meetings provided an important opportunity to introduce and discuss the U.S. train and equip program with members of the moderate political and armed opposition and to gain a better understanding of conditions on the ground in Syria,” CENTCOM said in a statement. On February 19, Turkey and the United States agreed to train and arm Syrian rebels fighting ISIS.

- **January 18**

An Israeli helicopter struck a convoy in the Syrian Golan Heights, killing an IRGC general and six members of Hezbollah. Jihad Mughniyeh, son of the late Hezbollah military chief Imad Mughniyeh, and Hezbollah field commander Muhammad Issa were among the dead. An unnamed Israeli official claimed Israel thought it was targeting an operations cell planning attacks against Israeli targets.

- **January 26**

Kurdish fighters, with the help of U.S. and coalition airstrikes, forced ISIS militants from the Syrian border town of Kobani after a four-month battle.

- **February 5-8**

The Jordanian air force launched 56 air strikes against ISIS targets in response to the killing of a Jordanian pilot whose fighter crashed in Syria. ISIS had burned Muath al-Kasasbeh alive in Januar.

- **March 28**

The Nusra Front and several other Islamist militias captured the city of Idlib, the second provincial capital lost by the government. Some 2,000 fighters reportedly participated in the battle against pro-regime forces.

- **April 3**

Syrian rebels and fighters from the Nusra Front captured the Nassib border crossing with Jordan and three nearby military posts. The Syrian government launched intense bombing raids in the area.

- **April 10**

Peace talks in Moscow among Syrian factions ended with no sign of progress.

- **May 17-21**

ISIS captured the ancient city of Palmyra in the south-central desert.

- **June 17**

Kurdish and Arab fighters expelled ISIS from the strategic town of Tal Abyad on the Turkish border.

- **June 25-27**

ISIS stormed back into the city of Kobani five months after they were ousted. Some 200 people were killed. Kurdish forces, backed by U.S.-led airstrikes, repelled ISIS two days later.

- **July 15**

The first group of U.S.-trained FSA members entered Syria.

- **July 23**

The Syrian National Coalition and the National Coordination Body for the Forces of Democratic Change agreed to join forces to reach a political settlement in Syria. Their efforts—both to unite the opposition and reach a deal with the government—ultimately failed.

- **September 30**

Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria, deepening its involvement in the war. It claimed to target ISIS, but U.S. officials said that many Russian strikes instead targeted civilians and Western-backed rebels. Russian air strikes, along with the deployment of military advisors, turned the tide of the conflict in favor of Assad.

- **October 20**

President Assad flew to Moscow to thank President Putin for his military support.

- **October 30**

The United States announced that it was sending almost 50 special operations troops to northern Syria for an open-ended mission to advise groups fighting ISIS.

- **November 14**

The International Syria Support Group (ISSG)—which included 17 countries, the United Nations, the European Union and the Arab League—met in Vienna to work on a cease-fire and negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition under U.N. auspices. The participation of Iran, a key Assad ally, marked a major change after earlier diplomatic initiatives failed.

- **December 18**

The U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, which called for a transition to “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” within six months. It also set a schedule for drafting a new constitution and elections for a new government within 18 months.

2016

- **February 1-3**

The United Nations hosted a third round of peace talks in Geneva between the government and the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), a broad umbrella body representing the opposition. The talks broke down on the third day, but the U.N. special envoy said negotiations would resume later in the month.

- **February 27**

A nationwide cease-fire brokered by the United States and Russia went into effect, but it began to fall apart within less than two months. The United Nations described it as the best hope for peace in five years of civil war.

- **March**

Aided by Russian airstrikes, Syrian government forces seized Palmyra from ISIS.

- **April 13-18**

The United Nations hosted a fourth round of peace talks in Geneva. The opposition walked out on April 18 to protest increased violence and the escalating humanitarian crisis at home.

- **August 14**

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated Manbij from ISIS, which had held the city since 2014. The SDF was a combination of Kurdish fighters from the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and an array of Arab fighters, both individuals and militias.

- **August 24**

Syrian government and Kurdish forces agreed to a cease-fire in Hasaka in northeast Syria. On the same day, Turkish troops and tanks entered Syria to support FSA rebels fighting ISIS holdouts in the border town of Jarabulus. Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield also sought to contain Kurdish groups, especially the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the YPG. Ankara was hostile to the PYD because of its links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), deemed a terrorist organization in Turkey.

- **August 30**

ISIS said Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, its spokesman and one of its longest-serving leaders, was killed in a U.S. airstrike while traveling near al Bab in northern Syria.

- **September 6**

A chemical attack in Aleppo injured more than 120 people and killed at least two.

- **September 12**

A cease-fire—brokered by the U.S. and Russia—went into effect between rebel forces and the government, although it again did not hold.

- **October 16**

Turkish-backed Syrian rebels took the northern town of Dabiq from ISIS. Dabiq held symbolic importance for ISIS, which claimed it would be the site of the final apocalyptic battle between Christians and Muslims. The main ISIS publication was initially entitled Dabiq, but later changed to Rumiya—*or Rome*—after the town fell.

- **November 6**

The SDF, advised by U.S. Special Forces, launched an operation to seize Raqqa from ISIS. "The effort to isolate, and ultimately liberate, Raqqa marks the next step in our coalition campaign plan," said U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

- **December 11**

ISIS recaptured Palmyra from Syrian government forces despite heavy Russian bombing.

- **December 22**

Government forces recaptured Aleppo from rebels after days of bombarding rebel-held areas of the city. Aleppo had been the site of intense fighting since 2012, when rebels took the eastern half of the city. Before the war, Aleppo was Syria's largest city and the country's commercial hub. The government victory was a major loss for the rebels.

- **December 30**

A cease-fire, brokered by Russia and Turkey, went into effect between rebel forces and the government.

2017

- **January 23-24**

Peace talks—co-sponsored by Russia, Iran and Turkey—between the Syrian government and armed Syrian opposition groups were held in Astana, Kazakhstan. The rebel factions and government representatives exchanged views indirectly. Mohammed Alloush, leader of the Jaysh al Islam group, headed the rebel delegation. The U.N. special envoy participated, but the United States attended the talks as an observer. Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to set up a trilateral monitoring body to enforce the December 30 cease-fire. More talks were held in 2017 and 2018 as part of the Astana track, in parallel to the U.N.-led talks in Geneva.

- **January 28**

The Nusra Front merged with four smaller militant groups and rebranded itself as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) following internal divisions over its relationship with al-Qaida. The move tripled its forces to some 31,000 fighters and expanded its presence from one front to operations in Idlib, Hama and Aleppo in the north and Daraa in the south.

- **Early February**

Backed by U.S. advisors, the Syrian Democratic Forces launched a campaign to encircle the city of Raqqa and cut off road connections to ISIS strongholds in Deir Ezzor province.

- **February 15-16**

A second round of peace negotiations was held in Astana. There were no breakthroughs.

- **February 23-March 7**

The United Nations hosted a fifth round of peace talks in Geneva. Participants included the HNC, the central opposition group, as well as two minor groups, the Moscow and Cairo platforms. The government and opposition agreed to an agenda for further negotiations in March, based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

- **February 24**

For the first time, the Iraqi Air Force struck ISIS targets inside Syria. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said the strikes were coordinated with Damascus. The U.S. provided intelligence for the mission, according to the Pentagon.

- **March 2**

Syrian government forces recaptured Palmyra from ISIS for the second time since the extremist movement had taken the city again in December 2016.

- **March 14-15**

The third round of peace talks was held in Astana, but the opposition refused to attend on grounds that the government violated the December 2016 cease-fire.

- **March 26**

The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) retook the Tabqa military air base in northern Syria from ISIS. The operation was part of a wider offensive to take Raqqa and the Tabqa Dam, a key electricity source for Syria.

- **April 4**

More than 80 civilians were killed in what appeared to be a sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, a rebel-controlled province. (In September, a U.N. investigation blamed the Syrian government.) Two days after the Khan Sheikhoun attack, the United States fired 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield from which warplanes had flown the mission. It was the first direct U.S. attack on a Syrian government target. On April 24, the Trump administration-imposed sanctions on 271 people involved in Syrian weapons development.

- **May 3-4**

The fourth round of peace talks was held in Astana. Russia, Iran, and Turkey agreed to a plan for de-escalation zones and cease-fires in four opposition held areas: Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs, and Dera'a and Quneitra in the southwest. The opposition suspended participation to protest government attacks on rebel areas.

- **May-09**

President Trump approved plans to arm the Kurdish YPG, despite Turkish objections, to help retake Raqqa from ISIS. The Pentagon said the YPG was the only force on the ground which could successfully capture Raqqa.

- **May 16-19**

The United Nations hosted a sixth round of peace talks in Geneva. Talks ended on the fourth day with no substantive results.

- **May 18**

U.S. jets struck a convoy of Iran-backed militiamen near the town of al-Tanf in southeastern Syria. It was reportedly the first U.S. strike on Iranian proxies in Syria since U.S. airstrikes began in 2014.

- **May 20**

Rebels began leaving the last opposition-held district of Homs as part of an evacuation deal with the government. More than 2,500 people left the area. Many headed north to Idlib province, which was still under rebel control.

- **July 4-5**

A fifth round of peace talks in Astana concluded after Russia, Iran and Turkey failed to agree on the exact boundaries of four proposed de-escalation zones.

- **July 10-14**

A seventh round of peace talks in Geneva concluded with no breakthroughs. The Assad government showed no willingness to discuss a political transition.

- **July 15**

Syrian government forces seized Wahab, al-Fahd, Dbaysan, al-Qaseer, Abu al-Qatat, and Abu Qatash oil fields as well as several small villages from ISIS in the desert area southwest of Raqqa.

- **August 12**

Syrian government forces and its allies seized the last major town in Homs province held by ISIS.

- **August 17**

Amir Eshel, the former head of the Israeli Air Force, told local media that Israel had struck more than 100 targets in Syria, including weapons shipments bound for Hezbollah, since 2012.

- **August 18**

The Lebanese army and Hezbollah announced a joint assault on ISIS territory along Lebanon's northeastern border with Syria. Hezbollah targeted ISIS from the Syrian side, while the Lebanese army targeted ISIS from its side of the border. On August 24, Hezbollah seized most of an ISIS pocket near Syria's border. ISIS asked the Syrian Army and Hezbollah to let it withdraw to the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, and they agreed. A controversial deal was struck that allowed some 600 ISIS fighters and their families to evacuate to Deir Ezzor province, in eastern Syria, by bus on August 28. On August 30, U.S.-led coalition airstrikes damaged a road and a small bridge to prevent the convoy from moving further east. "The convoy of buses and ambulances has not been struck, but there have been individual vehicles and individuals clearly identified as ISIS, and we did strike those," Colonel Ryan Dillon said. On September 13, the remnant of the convoy, some 200 fighters and their family members, reportedly reached Mayadeen in Deir Ezzor province.

- **August 21**

Russia said it killed more than 200 ISIS fighters on their way to the city of Deir Ezzor. ISIS was concentrating its forces around Deir Ezzor following territorial losses in the provinces of Raqqa and Homs, according to Moscow.

- **September 5**

Syria and its allies broke the ISIS siege in Deir Ezzor, one of the group's last major strongholds in Syria. A government-held enclave in the city had held out against ISIS since 2014.

- **September 14-15**

A sixth round of peace talks was held in Astana. Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed to set up de-escalation zones in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta and the provinces of Idlib, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo, and Hama for at least six months.

- **September 23**

The SDF, backed by U.S. advisors, captured the Conoco gas field from ISIS in Deir Ezzor province. The lucrative piece of infrastructure was the first gas field liberated in the campaign to capture areas east of the Euphrates river from ISIS.

- **September 28**

ISIS released an audio recording of its leader, Baghdadi, almost a year after his last recording—refuting reports of his death. He conceded that ISIS had lost Mosul, the Islamic State's most populous city, in Iraq. But he praised his forces. "They fulfilled their promise and their responsibility, and they did not give up except over their skulls and body parts," he said. "Thus, they were excused, after nearly a year of fighting and confrontation." He also praised ISIS loyalists for their recent attacks in London, Barcelona and Russia. "Now the Americans, the Russians and the Europeans are living in terror in their countries, fearing the strikes of the mujahedeen," he said.

- **October 13**

Turkish forces began setting up observation posts around the perimeter of Idlib province to monitor the de-escalation agreement between the Syrian military and anti-government rebels. Twelve observation posts were eventually established.

- **October 14**

Syrian government backed by Russian airpower retook al-Mayadeen, a city in eastern Syria near the border with Iraq, from ISIS.

- **October 17-20**

The U.S.-backed SDF defeated ISIS in Raqqa, its former capital, after a four-month campaign that killed some 6,000 ISIS fighters. Raqqa was largely destroyed in the fighting. Hundreds of fighters reportedly fled south deeper into the Euphrates Valley with their families.

- **October 22**

U.S.-back forces seized Syria's largest oil field, in the northeast, from ISIS. On October 26, the Syrian army and its allies recaptured the "T2" oil pumping station in eastern Syria from ISIS. The station was said to be a launch pad for the army to advance toward Abu Kamal, ISIS's last major stronghold in Syria.

- **November 1**

In Astana, at the seventh round of peace talks co-sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, Syrian opposition groups—including the Syrian National Coalition as well as the FSA's military council—rejected a Russian proposal to discuss reconciliation with the government.

- **November 3**

The Syrian government declared victory over ISIS in Deir Ezzor, the largest city in eastern Syria. On November 9, it claimed victory in Abu Kamal, the last major town held by ISIS. The next day, however, ISIS reclaimed half of Abu Kamal. By November 19, the entire town was back under government control.

- **November 20**

President Assad flew to Sochi to meet with President Putin to discuss the possibilities for a political settlement. Putin said the military operation was coming to an end. "Stability is improving, and all that opens the doors to the political process, which we started a while ago," Assad told him.

- **November 24**

President Trump told Turkish President Erdogan that the United States would stop supplying arms to Kurdish fighters of the YPG. Trump had approved the transfer of weapons in May.

- **November 29 - December 15**

The eighth round of U.N.-sponsored peace talks failed in Geneva. The Syrian government refused to discuss constitutional reforms and presidential elections, while the opposition refused to consider allowing Assad to have a future role in Syria.

- **December 21 - 22**

During an eighth round of talks in Astana, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to hold a "national dialogue conference" in Russia in January for all segments of Syrian society.

- **December 26**

Russia's upper house of parliament voted to extend the lease of the Syrian naval base in Tartous for 49 years. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced plans to expand the base to accommodate 11 Russian warships on the Mediterranean port.

2018

- **January 13 - February 1**

The Syrian military reportedly used chlorine gas in attacks on Douma, a suburb of Damascus, on January 13, January 22 and February 1. Dozens were injured.

- **January 20**

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey launched a military operation in Afrin, a Kurdish-controlled region. The Turkish army incursion culminated in its complete takeover of the enclave on March 18.

- **January 25-26**

The United Nations hosted a ninth round of peace talks, this time in Vienna. The special envoy, de Mistura, expressed frustration at the lack of progress on a political solution to end the conflict as it neared the seven-year mark.

- **January 29-30**

Russia hosted a peace conference in the resort city of Sochi, but the Syrian political opposition boycotted the event. The delegates—regime loyalists and Damascus-based opposition—embraced the need for elections and agreed to set up a committee to rewrite the constitution. The United Nations reportedly sought assurances that the Sochi event would be a one-off event before agreeing to have de Mistura, the special envoy for Syria, attend. It was concerned that Russia would supplant the U.N.-led process. De Mistura said he would select some 50 people from government, opposition and independent groups to serve on the committee.

- **February 7**

Armed forces supporting the Syrian government, including Russian private military contractors, launched a probing attack on a headquarters of the SDF in eastern Syria where U.S. Special Forces were also present. The United States responded with artillery and air strikes. "Those [incoming] artillery rounds could have landed and killed Americans and that's why we continue to prepare our defenses," Brigadier General Jonathan Braga told U.S. media. Up to 300 Syrian forces and Russian mercenaries were killed. Moscow confirmed the deaths of "several dozen" of Russian citizens but insisted that its military was not involved. Other reports suggested that there were many more

Russians among the dead. Braga said he was “absolutely concerned” that the Syrian conflict could have escalated into a confrontation between the United States and Russia.

- **February 10**

Israel intercepted an Iranian drone that crossed into Israeli airspace from Syria. The Israeli Air Force retaliated by attacking Syria’s T-4 military base—a pivotal command center in the war, near Palmyra—from which the Iranian drone had been launched. On its way back, one Israeli fighter jet crashed in northern Israel after coming under Syrian anti-aircraft fire. Israel then hit eight Syrian targets and four Iranian positions.

- **February 19 - April 12**

On February 19, Syrian ground forces, backed by Russian airpower, escalated their offensive on Eastern Ghouta, the last rebel stronghold near Damascus. Hundreds were killed in the first days of the attack. By April 8, all anti-regime rebels agreed to evacuate. Government forces took full control of the area on April 12.

- **March 16**

A ninth round of talks took place in Astana. Russia, Iran and Turkey reaffirmed their support for Syria’s independence, sovereignty, commitment to eliminate extremist militant groups, and a Syrian-led political process.

- **March 29**

President Trump said that the United States would “be coming out of Syria like very soon.” He said it was time to let others take care of Syria. “We are going to get back to our country, where we belong, where we want to be,” he told supporters in Ohio. He made similar comments at a press conference on April 3. But a White House statement released the following day said the United States would “continue to consult” with allies and friends regarding plans for Syria. White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said the administration would not commit to “arbitrary deadlines.”

- **April 9-10**

In an overnight strike, Israel reportedly hit the T-4 airfield and command center near Palmyra with missiles. Seven Iranian military advisors were reportedly killed.

- **May 2**

FSA rebels in an enclave near Homs agreed to a Russia-brokered deal to evacuate. They agreed to hand over their heavy weapons and either reconcile with the government or relocate near the Turkish border in Idlib province, a rebel-held area.

- **May 9**

Iranian forces in Syria fired some 20 rockets toward Israeli military positions in the Golan Heights. Several rockets were intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome missile defense system. The next day, Israel struck dozens of Iranian targets in Syria. It was Israel's largest engagement in Syria since the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Prime Minister Netanyahu said Israel's air strikes were appropriate because Iran had crossed a red line. "We will not allow Iran to establish a military presence in Syria," he warned.

- **May 14-15**

The 10th round of the Astana peace process concluded with Russia, Iran and Turkey reaffirming their support for a political settlement based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

- **May 17**

During a meeting with President Putin in Sochi, President Assad expressed appreciation for Russian military support. Putin said the political process should continue in parallel with the "war on terrorism."

- **June 19**

The U.N. special envoy for Syria, de Mistura, met with senior representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey in Geneva to discuss the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. De Mistura said "some common ground" was beginning to emerge.

- **July 6**

As part of a Russian-brokered cease-fire in southern Syria, rebels, including the FSA and other factions, agreed to surrender their arms to allow the government to resume control of Daraa province. Government forces took control of the Nassib border crossing with Jordan, which had been held by rebels for three years.

- **July 26**

A delegation from the SDF's political wing met with government officials in Damascus for the first time. The discussions were part of their efforts to maintain political autonomy in northern Syria. The Kurdish-led group said it decided with the government to "chart a roadmap to a democratic and decentralized Syria," but Damascus did not confirm that commitment. In early August, another delegation met with government officials in Damascus to continue discussions. As of September 1, the co-chairman of the SDF political wing, Riad Darar, said initial negotiations with the government had not yielded tangible results.

- **July 30-31**

Representatives from Russia, Iran and Turkey held two days of talks in Sochi, Russia, on the Syrian conflict. The U.N. special envoy, the HNC, Jordanian officials, and Syria's U.N. ambassador participated in the talks. Russia, Iran and Turkey reaffirmed their support for Syria's independence and territorial integrity as well as a Syrian-led political process toward a settlement consistent with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. De Mistura agreed to convene another round of consultations on the constitutional committee in Geneva in September.

- **August 17**

Ambassador James Jeffrey began work as the new U.S. special representative for Syria engagement, the lead State Department contact on all aspects of the Syrian conflict apart from the campaign to defeat ISIS. On the same day, the Trump administration ended some \$230 million in aid for Syria stabilization projects. On September 27, Jeffrey said U.S. goals included defeating ISIS, reinvigorating the political process, and removing all Iranian-commanded forces, including proxies, from Syria.

- **August 22**

ISIS leader Baghdadi released his first audio message in nearly a year to rally fighters after months of military defeats. "For the Mujahideen (holy warriors), the scale of victory or defeat is not dependent on a city or town being stolen or subject to that who has aerial superiority, intercontinental missiles or smart bombs," he said. "Oh, Caliphate soldiers.... trust in God's promise and His victory... for with hardship comes relief and a way out." He called on followers to keep up attacks on Shiites and other "apostates," a reference to Sunnis fighting ISIS. Baghdadi also appealed to sympathizers in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain to overthrow the monarchies.

- **September 4**

Russian planes launched airstrikes against rebels in northern Idlib province. On the same day, the Israeli military acknowledged that it had conducted more than 200 airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria since 2017.

- **September 6**

The U.S. special representative for Syria said the United States no longer planned to pull out of the country by the end of 2018. The announcement meant "we're not in a hurry to pull out," Jeffrey told journalists. "We're going to stay in until we have an enduring defeat" of ISIS. His comments came amid a report that President Trump had agreed to a new strategy that included indefinite U.S. military deployment and a major diplomatic push.

- **September 7**

The presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Tehran to discuss the final warfront in Idlib province as well as Syria's political future. Putin called for the establishment of a U.N.-monitored constitutional committee. Rouhani demanded that U.S. forces withdraw from Syria.

- **September 11**

Senior officials from Russia, Iran, and Turkey met with the U.N. envoy for Syria in Geneva to discuss the formation of the Syrian constitutional committee and procedural rules. Turkey's foreign ministry said the representatives agreed "in principle" to lists of participants submitted by the Syrian government and the opposition.

- **September 17**

Turkey and Russia agreed to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Idlib province that extended nine to 13 miles from the Turkish border south into Idlib. The agreement stipulated that Turkish troops and Russian military police would jointly oversee security in the area to forestall military action by Syrian government forces. In turn, extremist rebels, such as Hayat Tahrir al Sham, would leave the zone. Idlib was home to some three million Syrians, at least half of whom had already fled other parts of Syria.

Israeli F-16 jets struck a Syrian weapons facility in northwest Latakia province. Syrian forces, slow to return fire, accidentally shot down a Russian military plane, killing 15 servicemen. Russia accused Israel of using its plane as cover and said it was given less than a minute's warning before the attack.

In response, on September 28, Russia delivered the advanced S-300 anti-air missile system to beef up Syria's air defenses. The S-300 system would pose a more formidable challenge to F-16s and other older fighters. But Israel's regional cooperation minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, told Army Radio that the S-300 batteries "are not even able to detect" stealth fighters, a reference to Israel's state-of-the-art F-35 Joint Strike Fighters.

- **October 27**

The leaders of Turkey, Russia, France and Germany held a summit in Istanbul to discuss the future of Syria as the cease-fire declared in September in Idlib province had largely held. Idlib was the last province controlled by various rebel forces, including an al-Qaida affiliate. "The eyes of the entire world have now turned toward this meeting. I believe we won't fail these expectations," said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who hosted the meeting. The four nations have been particularly divided over a future role for President Assad.

- **November 20**

The U.S Treasury sanctioned six individuals and three entities for providing millions of barrels of oil to Syria. The Office of Foreign Assets Control said that Russia facilitated the delivery of Iranian oil to Syria. The Assad government then transferred money to the IRGC Qods Force, which forwarded funds to Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas. “Central Bank of Iran officials continue to exploit the international financial system, and in this case even used a company whose name suggests a trade in humanitarian goods as a tool to facilitate financial transfers supporting this oil scheme,” said Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

- **November 24**

A toxic gas attack reportedly injured some 100 people in Aleppo. Syria and Russia claimed that rebels were responsible, but rebel groups denied the allegation. Russia said it launched airstrikes on “the identified positions of terrorist artillery in the area that shelled civilians.”

- **November 29**

The 11th round of Astana peace talks concluded, but the opposing sides failed to agree on the composition of the constitution drafting committee. “This ... has, sadly for the Syrian people, been a missed opportunity to accelerate the establishment of a credible, balanced and inclusive, Syrian-owned, Syrian-led, U.N.-facilitated constitutional committee,” said the office of the U.N. special envoy for Syria.

- **December 19**

President Trump signaled his intent to withdraw the 2,000 U.S. forces from Syria. “We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump presidency,” he tweeted. The White House then announced that the pullout has already begun. “We have started returning United States troops home as we transition to the next phase of this campaign,” the White House press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said in a statement.

- **December 27**

The United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy in Damascus. It was the first step in renormalizing ties between the Assad regime and a major Gulf state.

2019

- **February 22**

U.S. officials stated that 400 U.S. troops would remain in Syria to prevent the resurgence of ISIS, reversing President Trump’s initial signal that all U.S. forces in the country would withdraw.

- **April 26**

The 12th round of Astana peace talks concluded. The members of the group welcomed detainee swaps between the Assad regime and opposition groups that occurred in November 2018, February 2019 and April 2019.

- **April 28**

Assad regime and Russian forces intensified airstrikes on rebel-held northwest Syria, which began on March 13. The offensive broke the de-escalation zone deal that Turkey and Russia agreed on in September 2018. Approximately 270,000 civilians were reportedly displaced, and 25 hospitals and health centers were rendered useless after pointed targeting, according to the United Nations.

- **April 29**

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi acknowledged the defeat at Baghuz, Syria. But he urged his followers to keep up attacks around the world. Baghdadi congratulated the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. It was Baghdadi's first publicly shared appearance in nearly five years, since the video of him declaring the creation of the caliphate was released in 2014.

- **May 17**

The Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations-USA released a statement declaring that 19 health care facilities had been targeted since April 28. The attacks highlighted an ongoing tactic by the Syrian regime to intimidate populations in the northwest to force their displacement from the area. Many of the attacked facilities' locations were on a no-strike list in the U.N.'s deconfliction mechanism, but sustained attacks, nonetheless.

- **June-July**

In an attempt to convince countries to repatriate their citizens, the Red Cross released a statement, calling the situation in al-Hol camp "apocalyptic" and warning of the potential ramifications of such an unstable environment. The displacement camp, controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, holds individuals displaced from ISIS-controlled territory. Eight Americans were repatriated from the camp, and at least 800 Syrian and Kurdish women left al-Hol for their hometowns, but many European nations remain reluctant to repatriate their citizens. At the start of 2019, the camp's population was less than 10,000, but the fall of Baghuz, ISIS's last stronghold, led to a new influx of displaced. By mid-2019, the camp's population exceeded 70,000, primarily women and children.

- **July 4-Sept. 7**

British marines seized an Iranian-owned and Panamanian-flagged oil tanker called Grace I off the coast of Gibraltar for transporting oil to Syria in violation of E.U. sanctions. The seizure was conducted at the request of the United States, according to the Spanish

government. Tehran condemned the act as an illegal seizure and said the vessel was not heading to Syria. On August 15, Gibraltar released the Grace I, despite a U.S. bid to prolong the detention. On September 7, the vessel was photographed near the Syrian port of Tartus. The United States and Britain accused Iran of selling oil to the Syrian regime.

- **August 1-2**

Representatives of Turkey, Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition met in Kazakhstan for the 13th round of the Astana peace talks. The parties did not make any breakthroughs, but Turkey, Russia and Iran said they had made progress on forming a committee to write a new Syrian constitution.

- **May-August**

In a series of attacks, Israel reportedly struck military facilities manned by Syrian forces, Iran's Qods Force, Hezbollah, or other Iranian-backed militias near Damascus and in southern Syria. On August 24, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged an Israeli airstrike in Syria against drone capabilities of the Qods Force and Iranian-backed militias. The strike killed at least two Hezbollah operatives, according to the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

- **August 31**

U.S. forces attacked an al-Qaeda facility north of Idlib. More than 40 militants were reportedly killed. "This operation targeted AQ-S leaders responsible for attacks threatening U.S. citizens, our partners, and innocent civilians," Lt. Col. Earl Brown, chief of media operations for Central Command, said in a statement. The strike followed a U.S. attack on an al-Qaeda training facility on June 30 in Aleppo province. The United States had rarely conducted operations west of the Euphrates River due to Russian and Syrian regime control of airspace in this area.

- **September 9**

Syrian security officials said that Israeli jets conducted airstrikes in the east of the country. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 18 Iranian and pro-Iranian fighters were killed in the attack on an arms depot and posts of Iranian-backed militias, but the details could not be independently verified. The strike appeared to be the latest in a series of Israeli attacks on Iran-linked targets in Syria and western Iraq to curtail the influence of Iran and Hezbollah in these areas.

- **September 16**

The presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey—who form the core of the Astana process—met in Ankara to discuss a path toward political settlement in Syria. The three leaders expressed their concern on the escalating violence in Idlib in a joint statement and announced that they would be taking “concrete

steps” to ease the tension in the region, including coordination to de-escalate and normalize the situation in Idlib.

The Islamic State released an audio message from leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, calling on the group’s followers to remain vigilant in their mission, despite territorial losses. He urged fighters to free detained ISIS members held in prison camps in Iraq and Syria.

- **September 18**

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced an agreement on the creation of a constitutional committee. He stated that the group’s formation would be “a very important step in creating the conditions for a political solution for this tragic conflict.” The committee would include 150 members, representing 50 members delegated by the Syrian government, 50 members delegated by the opposition, and 50 members delegated by the U.N. to represent civil society.

- **September 24**

In his address to the U.N. General Assembly, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for the establishment of an expanded safe zone for refugees in northern Syria. “If this safe zone can be declared, we can resettle confidently somewhere between one to two million refugees. Whether with the U.S. or the coalition forces, Russia and Iran, we can walk shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand so refugees can resettle, saving them from tent camps and container camps,” he said.

- **October 6**

After a phone call between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Trump, the White House announced that it was removing U.S. forces from northern Syria. In December 2018, Trump had ordered the withdrawal of some 2,000 troops, but the process had been slowed. This announcement sparked outrage from the SDF, with General Mazloun warning of a major Turkish assault. In a tweet on October 7, President Trump warned that he would “destroy” Turkey’s economy if it did anything in Syria that he deemed off-limits. He said that Europe and Turkey should take responsibility for captured ISIS fighters and their families. Two days later, Turkey began “Operation Peace Spring” to seize the 300-mile strip held by the formerly U.S.-backed Kurdish forces. The incursion began with attacks on the narrower 70-mile strip between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. For more information on the dramatic shift in the conflict, see analysis by USIP’s Mona Yacoubian.

- **October 3**

Approximately 750 ISIS supporters escaped an SDF camp in Ain Essa. The ISIS-affiliated women and children began a riot following Turkish shelling near the camp, which scared away the guards.

The camp was quickly evacuated following this incident due to its proximity to attacks. This was one of many incidents of security breaches in SDF-held detention centers.

- **October 14**

Following Turkish military advances into northern Syria, the SDF struck a deal with the Assad regime in an effort to deter a large-scale Turkish incursion. Under the agreement, pro-regime forces would be allowed to return to towns and cities that had been under SDF control for several years.

- **October 16**

Russian forces took over an abandoned U.S. base in an attempt to fill the security void left by the United States' withdrawal. U.S. forces attempted to minimize malign access to leftover ammunition by launching targeted airstrikes on a formerly-U.S.-held storage bunker.

- **October 22**

After a meeting in Sochi on October 22, President Putin and President Erdogan reached an agreement to push back Kurdish fighters from the safe zone along the Turkish border and released a 10-point memorandum outlining key elements of the deal. Specific components included a joint commitment to fight terrorism, voluntary returns of Syrian refugees, and joint patrols in the northeastern area, among other stipulations. The SDF began to withdraw from the Turkish border on October 27. The Russian-Turkish agreement led to the establishment of a roughly 75-mile long swath of land—the Operation Peace Spring zone—under Turkish control. The agreement effectively re-ordered the balance of power on the ground, allowing Russia and the Syrian regime an expanded presence in northeast Syria, along with the newly established Turkish zone.

The joint patrols, which included nine military vehicles, began on November 1, and covered a length of 54 miles, spanning east and west of Turkey's operation zone.

- **October 26**

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S.-led nighttime raid in Syria's northwestern Idlib Province. Trump watched the operation from the Situation Room in the White House with senior advisors and top military officials. On October 31, ISIS publicly confirmed Baghdadi's death and named Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al Quraishi as its new leader. In 2010, Baghdadi assumed leadership of ISIS, then called the Islamic State of Iraq. Under his leadership, the organization seized large swaths of territory across northern Syria and Iraq, at one point controlling an area the size of Great Britain.

- **October 29**

The House of Representatives passed a bipartisan bill to impose a new set of sanctions on Turkey in response to its incursion in Syria. The bill threatened to freeze the assets of senior Turkish officials,

ban arms transfers to Turkey, and slap Turkish banks with penalties. This bill's passage came nearly two weeks after President Trump issued an Executive Order authorizing political and economic sanctions on Turkey in response to its operation in Syria. The sanctions were lifted on October 23, after President Trump announced a cease-fire.

- **October 30**

The Syrian Constitutional Committee convened for the first time, an important milestone toward finding a political solution for the conflict. The 150-member group met in Geneva. On November 4, the subcommittee convened to begin drafting a new constitution. However, progress soon stalled due to differences between the regime and opposition delegations on the agenda.

- **October-November**

President Trump asserted that the residual U.S. forces in Syria were only there for oil. The statement came a few weeks after the Pentagon announced its plan to send tanks and armored vehicles to Syrian oil fields to protect them from ISIS following Defense Secretary Mark Esper's announcement of residual forces in Syria. Trump's approval of the wider oil mission raised questions of legality — he made no mention of the enduring defeat of ISIS in his statement announcing this new mission.

- **November 10**

Turkey claimed to have captured several hundred ISIS fighters, which it planned to repatriate. Turkey announced it had successfully repatriated two ISIS fighters, an American and a German, and expressed frustration with European countries' refusal to take back their citizens.

President Erdogan announced that 350,000 Syrians had returned to Syria to the buffer zone in accordance with his plan to return millions of Syrian refugees to the Turkish-patrolled safe zone. Despite Erdogan's claim, relatively few Syrian refugees had returned to this area. Some reports noted that 50,000 Syrian migrants were forcibly deported due to their illegal residence in Istanbul.

- **December 1—Start of Idlib phase 2**

Clashes between Syrian forces and opposition groups continued in Idlib despite a cease-fire that went into effect in August. Following a relative lull in hostilities, fighting resumed and intensified throughout the month of December, which fully undermined the cease-fire and began a new phase of violence in the northwest.

- **December 3**

UAE Charge d'Affaires Abdul-Hakim Naimi praised Bashar al-Assad for his "wise leadership" at a ceremony marking the UAE's national day. Naimi's words reflected growing ties between the two countries and UAE efforts to counter Iranian and Turkish influence in Syria.

The U.S. military completed its withdrawal from most parts of Syria, maintaining a small troop presence in northern Syria, specifically in the northeast near the oil fields. The troop level remained at approximately 600, including a small number of troops, approximately 100-200, at Al-Tanf, a small military outpost in a remote area where the borders of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq converge.

The Syrian pound reached an all-time low on the black market, 975 pounds to the dollar. The rate was more than double the official rate of 434 pounds to the dollar. The pound continued to decline in 2020. When the conflict started in 2011, the market rate was 48 pounds to the dollar.

- **December 11**

Russian troops entered Raqqa following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the area. The move was one of many deployments of pro-regime forces into areas that were once patrolled by U.S. forces.

- **December 21**

President Trump signed the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act as a part of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. The act authorized a new set of sanctions on Syrian, Iranian, and Russian parties deemed responsible for mass atrocities during the Syrian conflict. The sanctions were slated to go into effect in June 2020.