

# The Battlefield of the ISIS-PYD Encounter Ayn Al-Arab (Kobani)

CAN ACUN • HÜSEYİN ÖNER

- **When has the PKK and the PYD's relation with the Asad Regime started and how has it evolved?**
  - **Why has ISIS begun to target the PYD?**
- **What are the possible implications of the fall of Ayn Al Arab?**

Heavy clashes between the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS or IS - Devlet'ul Islamiyye fil'l Irak ve's Şam)<sup>1</sup> and the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD, or in Kurdish, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat) the YPG (People's Defense Units, or in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) and the power struggle in the region have taken a critical turn. Following the US-led airborne attacks against ISIS in Iraq, the operation has been expanded inside Syria; and this has carried the conflict into a different dimension, therefore making an analysis necessary in the light of the latest developments. This study aims to describe the series of events immediately after the revolt against the Asad regime in the Kurdish regions in the north of Syria, and the PYD's emergence and development, its relations with the Asad regime and controversy with the opposition groups will also be discussed Alliance between the PYD and ISIS, and the conflict in the environment

afterwards, also the power struggle over Kobani will be examined in this paper.

## BEGINNING OF THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION AND THE STATUS OF KURDS

Kurds make up around 10 percent of the total population in Syria, and are concentrated in the regions generally located in the north of the country. These regions have geopolitical importance since they form the Turkey-Syria borderline and Iraq-Syria border through the regions controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) via Rabea-Sinjar. It should be noted, that significant oil reserves are located in the Kurdish populated regions – eastern Syria in particular.<sup>2</sup>

The Bashar al Asad regime regarded Kurds as a threat not only due to the geographical importance of the region Kurds lived in, but also of demography of the Kurds, being the largest minority group and

1. For detailed information about ISIS, see: Can Acun, "Neo el-Kaide: Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti (İŞİD)", SETA Perspektif, Ankara, June 2014.

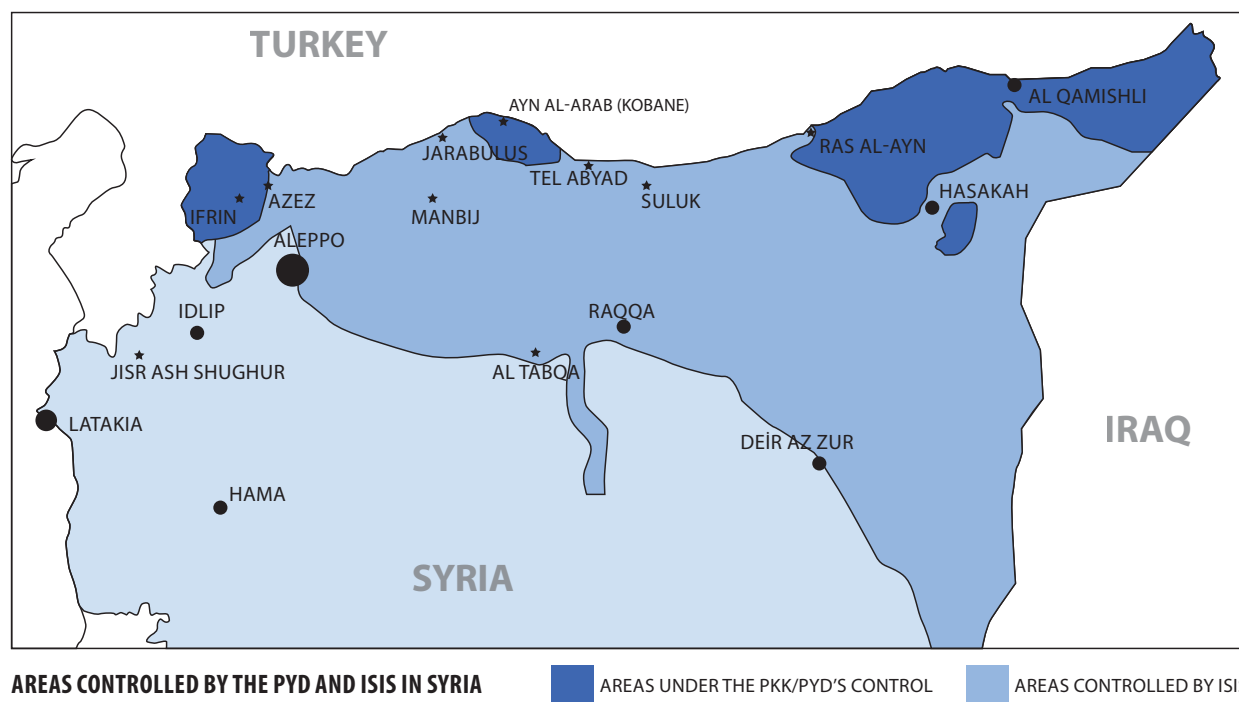
2. Suriye, CIA World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

### Can ACUN

Can Acun is an RA at SETA Foreign Policy Department. He has received a BA from the International Relations Department of the Eastern Mediterranean University and an MA from the Department of Political Science and International Affairs at Yeditepe University. Acun also had education in Intercultural Dialogue in Canada, and conducted research for SETA at the Center for Turkey Research in Cairo, Egypt. Acun currently works at SETA-Ankara on Egypt and the Middle East.

### Hüseyin ÖNER

Hüseyin Öner graduated from the Public Administration and Political Science Department at the Eastern Mediterranean University and is currently pursuing a master's degree in the Department of International Relations at the University of Vienna.



demands for rights, thus monitored them closely. To this end, the regime associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), supported it against Turkey and tried to neutralize Syrian Kurds with the PKK's help in return. Ironically though, the Asad regime hosted the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in Syria while pressuring Kurds up in the north, and adopted discriminatory politics against them. In parallel to this, the regime tried to keep Öcalan close by as an advantage against Kurds in Syria. The regime, under heavy Turkish pressure, signed the Adana Agreement with Turkey in 1998, deported Öcalan from Syria, closed down the PKK camps, finally arresting and prosecuting the PKK members and its proxies in Syria. During the process, the PYD was founded in 2003 as an offshoot of the PKK.<sup>3</sup>

The Syrian Kurds' democratic struggle has continued despite the PKK. Before the anti-Asad protests began in Syria in the town of Qamishli, which is heavily populated by Kurds, the demonstrations following a football game turned into a riot. Ac-

cording to some sources, 30 people, or over 100 according to some others, died due to police brutality.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, Kurdish regions joined anti-Asad protests that started under the influence of the Arab Spring, but the Kurdish participation in the demonstrations remained relatively low compared to those in other regions.<sup>5</sup> Kurds were left out of the riots against al Asad due to dominating Arab identity as the anti-Kurdish propaganda launched by al Asad and the association with the PKK were also quite effective.

### THE PYD'S DOMINANCE IN KURDISH REGIONS

Kurdish groups too have supported the Syrian Revolution; Islamist Kurds along with the leader of the 'Kurdish Future Movement' Mishaal al Tammo have become part of the revolt against the regime. However, al Tammo was shot dead by masked gunmen in a targeted killing and his supporters held the Asad re-

3. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party, Carnegie Middle East Center, March 1, 2012.

4. James Brandon, The PKK and Syria's Kurds, *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 5 Issue: 3, February 21, 2007.

5. Michael Weiss, New Republic: Will Kurds Determine Syria's Fate?, November 16, 2011.

gime responsible.<sup>6</sup> The PYD has been accused of, tacitly cooperating with the Syrian regime in the murder of al Tamma according to some sources.<sup>7</sup> As the Kurds against the regime have begun to lose ground, the PYD having good relations with the regime has taken the center stage; and as the PYD's leader Salih Muslim says, the impression of a de- facto agreement between the Asad regime and the PYD has been created.<sup>8</sup> In June of 2012, the PYD and the groups close to Massoud Barzani signed an agreement in Erbil, but it failed.<sup>9</sup> Political organizations close to the KDP were liquidified by the PYD elements. The KDP leader Barzani, in an address in the southeastern Turkish province of Diyarbakır in 2013, targeted the PYD and implied that the regime in Syria agreed to leave some regions to the PYD. Barzani as well interpreted the PYD's move for a temporary government as collaboration with al Asad to push Kurds into the fight. The KurdWatch Internet site has posted abundance of human rights violations, such as: The PYD dissident Kurdish groups' opening fire on the demonstrators in Amude and killing civilians, the torture of activists who were arrested, pressure against Azadi and Yaqidi groups, and cooperation with the regime militia and the intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

The PYD's newly formed armed group, the YPG, took over Amude and Afrin on July 20 and Ayn al Arab on July 19 without a serious encounter upon the withdrawal of the regime forces from the Kurdish regions in northern Syria.<sup>11</sup> The YPG militants proceeded around Qamishli, in the north of Hasakah, and took over al Maliki and Ras al Rayn in west Hasakah. Again, an easy encounter occurred against al Asad forces in these regions.<sup>12</sup> In the downtowns of Qamishli

and Hasakah, all military bases and state institutions of the Asad regime remained untouched, but the Asad regime and the PYD ruled these cities together. The Asad regime currently controls 10 percent of Qamishli including the Airport, Security units and intelligence buildings; pays the salaries of civil servants and provides services to the city.<sup>13</sup> As the PYD easily took the Kurdish regions under control and had almost no fight with the Asad regime in this period, it was claimed that both sides had reached an agreement.<sup>14</sup> This period, however, ended with heated encounters between the Syrian opposition and the YPG forces.

### THE YPG-SYRIAN OPPOSITION CONFLICT

Early clashes between the PYD's armed wing, the YPG, and the Syrian opposition started on July 16, 2013 when the YPG took over the town of Ras al Ayn in the province of Hasakah after pushing out the Syrian opposition groups.<sup>15</sup> Skirmishes which initially took place between the YPG and Al Nusra Front (Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria) continued with the YPG expelling the Syrian opposition from the town first, and then taking control of the border crossing with Turkey.<sup>16, 17</sup> Following the clashes, opposition groups withdrew from Ras Al Ayn to Tel Halef, Asfar and Najar where they were in control. The Syrian opposition tried to take Ras Al Ayn back; however, the YPG managed to repel the opponents' attack just at the outskirts of the town. In August 2013, opposition groups mostly consisting of Islamists announced the siege of Ayn Al Arab (Kobani), where the YPG headquarters are located, and deployed militants to the town from Manbij and Jarabulus.<sup>18</sup>

Towards the end of August skirmishes concentrated on the Yarubiya border crossing on the Syria-Iraq border;

6. Syria security forces 'open fire at Kurd's funeral', *BBC*, October 8, 2011.

7. PYD, Carnegie Middle East Center, 1 Mart 2012.

8. Bruneau, Eric "Kurdish Leader: We Oppose Foreign Intervention in Syria", *Rudaw*, November 13, 2011.

9. *Rudaw*. 17 July 2012. Retrieved 27 July 2012.

10. Kurd Watch. <http://kurdwatch.org>

11. After quiet revolt, power struggle looms for Syria's Kurds, *Reuters*, November 7, 2012.

12. Ban: Syrian regime 'failed to protect civilians', July 2012.

13. Barfi, Barack. The Fractious Politics of Syria's Kurds. The Washington Institute, December 18, 2013.

14. *Charlotteobserver.com*. July 23, 2012. Retrieved July 27, 2012.

15. Syrie: les Kurdes combattent les jihadistes pour imposer leur autonomie, *AFP*, July 19, 2014.

16. Kurdish fighters 'seize' Syrian border town, *Al Jazeera*, July 18, 2013.

17. Jihadists expelled from flashpoint Kurdish Syrian town, NGO says, *AFP*, July 17, 2013.

18. الجيش الحر يعلن بدء الحصار لمدينة عين. <http://www.rihabnews.com>

Islamist opposition groups took over the settlement and the border crossing, expelling the YPG from the region. During the encounters here, Syrian opponents substantially expelled the YPG from the towns of Raqqa and Aleppo in particular.<sup>19</sup> Clashes continued in the province of Hasakah, the YPG forces successfully took over Aluk, east of Ras al Ayn, and the fights flared up again near Al Yarabiyah settlement along the Iraqi border.<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, the YPG forces unexpectedly attacked the refugee town of Atma on the border with Turkey's Hatay province and hit the town with artillery shootings from a hill they took over. Shortly after, the YPG forces were driven out and this time the town of Jandaras under the YPG's control became the target of artillery attacks. The YPG asked for a ceasefire and ended fights in the area.<sup>21</sup>

In October 2013, the YPG forces entered the town of Yarubiyah and took over the border crossing at the Iraqi border. The YPG seized the ISIS-controlled oil-rich region of Girhok, Yusufiyah and Safa, near Qamishli; therefore, managed to push the Syrian opposition out of the region and ISIS had to withdraw to Tel Hamis and Tel Baraq.<sup>22 23 24</sup> The Syrian opposition claimed -during the loss of this region to the YPG- that the Assad regime in Syria and Nouri al Maliki government in Iraq helped the YPG by air bombardments in particular. In November and December 2013, the YPG seized about 40 settlement areas, dominated Hasakah and soon after announced the plan for the creation of an 82-member parliament elected from three cantons across the region and that Assyrians and Arabs would also be included in this plan.<sup>25 26</sup>

19. The Civil War Within Syria's Civil War, FP; August 28, 2013.

20. Syrie: les Kurdes chassent des jihadistes d'un village du nord-est, *AFP*, September 18, 2013.

21. Arabs battle Syrian Kurds as Assad's foes fragment, *Reuters*, September 27, 2013.

22. Kurds rout Syria jihadists on Iraq border: activists, *The Daily Star*, Middle East, October 26, 2013.

23. Kurdish Fighters Gain Control of Syria-Iraq Border Town, *Rudaw*, November 26, 2013.

24. Operasyona YPG'ê didome: 6 gund hatin rizgarkirin – Hate Nukirin, October 28, 2013.

25. Thousands rally in Nusaybin, Support Kurds, Support Kurds, November 7, 2013.

26. Syria's Kurds move towards autonomy with announcement of transitional government, *The Independent*, October 9, 2014.

## THE YPG-ISIS CONFLICT

In the early days of January 2014, following the clashes with the Syrian opposition fighters, ISIS seized territory starting with Raqqa, Hasakah and a part of Aleppo stretching in the north-east direction from the east of the city towards the Turkish border reaching Kurdish regions. The skirmishes between ISIS and the YPG followed. In January 2014, ISIS launched an attack against the YPG position in Hasakah causing losses for YPG, but the YPG stopped ISIS in the town of Manajir.<sup>27</sup>

YPG forces engaged in attacks against Tel Abyad, which is a region dominated by ISIS across from the Turkish town of Akçakale, but the attacks failed, and PYD had to withdraw after heavy losses. On the other hand, PYD has claimed that they have killed many ISIS militants and top-level commanders during their attacks.<sup>28</sup> In mid-February, YPG also attacked Tel Hamish with the help of the local Arab tribe of Şammar, but failed to take the town. Again, it has been claimed in the media favoring the PKK that many ISIS militants have been killed and ammunition has been confiscated as a result of this attack.<sup>29</sup>

The YPG attacked Tel Brak on February 23, 2014 and took the region under control with the support of Arab tribes in particular, and announced the end of military operations on February 26, 2014.<sup>30 31</sup>

From there on, heavy fights occurred in Tel Abyad, Ayn al Arab and the north of Aleppo as the YPG cooperated with some of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups against ISIS in the area. Fierce clashes took place along the Euphrate River in Ayn al Arab, particularly on a line stretching from Jarabulus on the Turkish border to the Karazuk Bridge in the south.<sup>32</sup> In late March 2014, ISIS managed to take back a big part of Tel Abyad from the

27. YPG successfully defends Manajir from ISIS, *Transnational Middle-East Observer*, January 26, 2014.

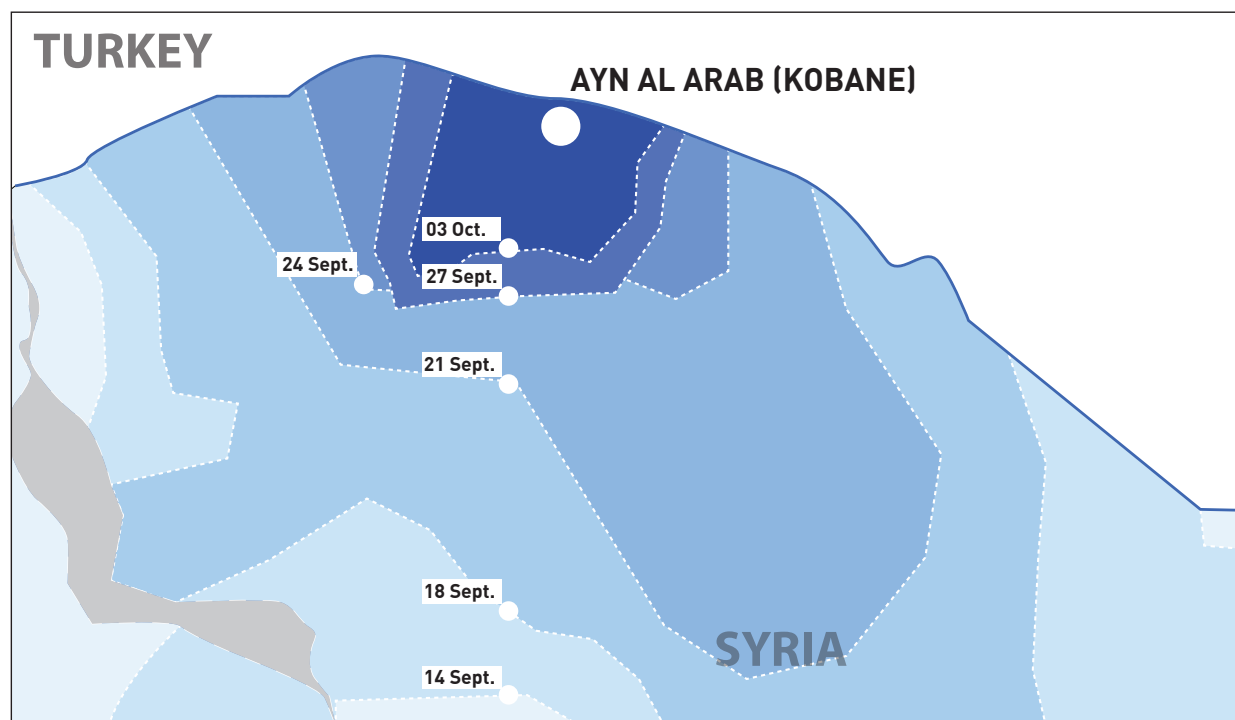
28. Clashes in Girê Spi: 8 ISIS members killed, *Anha*, February 3, 2014.

29. Y P G: 30 gang members captured in operations, *Anha*, February 17, 2014.

30. Syrian Kurds take town from Islamists: watchdog, *Reuters*, February 22, 2014.

31. Gang groups attacking Til Merûf, *Anha*, February 27, 2014.

32. Y P G: 35 Daesh elements killed, *Anha*, March 14, 2014.



**ISIS' PROGRESS IN KOBANI (SEPTEMBER 14 – OCTOBER 2014 ,3)**

YPG and took Ayn al Arab under siege from the east. Civilians were affected by the clashes here and it has been reported that some Kurdish families have left the region.

In April 2014, ISIS sieged Ayn al Arab from three sides (starting from Jarablus in the north to Sarrin in the south and to Tel Abyad in the east). Under the circumstances, the YPD called for international help.<sup>33</sup> In May 2014, nearby Ras Al Ayn, the YPG and ISIS were involved in low-density fights. As ISIS gained control inside Iraq, it attacked Ayn Al Arab at the beginning of June 2014 and captured Zor Magar, Al Zayara and Bayadiyah towns; then again it attacked the YPG on June 9, 2013 and inflicted heavy losses on the YPG forces, and seized the villages of Abdi, Kevi, Kendal, Kri and Sor.<sup>34 35 36</sup> In the midst of July 2014, ISIS made a move again and captured 10 villages nearby Ayn Al

Arab<sup>37</sup>; on the other hand, the YPG forces managed to avert this attack. Although the figures released by the YPG seem exaggerated, (600-700), ISIS appears to have suffered casualties in the area.<sup>38</sup> The latest ISIS attack started in September 2014 and they captured almost all of the villages in Ayn Al Arab surroundings as the ISIS terrorist were engaged in dogfights in the town. The PYD leadership, Salih Muslim in particular, under the fierce ISIS attacks sought international support and requested arms aid from the coalition forces.<sup>39</sup>

The new wave of attacks<sup>40</sup> after the capture of a strategically important bridge on the Euphrate River on September 17, 2014 helped ISIS progress further with the use of heavy armor confiscated in Iraq and Syria. ISIS fighters seized 21 villages and 39 more in

33. Syrian Kurds appeal for help to prevent fall of Kobani, *Al Monitor*, April 4, 2014.

34. Jihadists control all main Syria oilfields: NGO, *AFP*, July 4, 2014.

35. الدولة الإسلامية تسيطر على قرى كردية وتستخدم أسلحة جديدة, Syrian Observatory, October 9, 2014.

36. ISIS steps up assault on Kurds in Syria's north, *The Daily Star*, July 11, 2014.

37. Kurds go to Syria from Turkey to fight Islamists, July 14, 2014

38. YPG: Nearly 700 Islamic Militants Killed in Kobane Fighting in July, *Rudaw*, August 3, 2014.

39. So far Western countries have ignored the demands for arms; however, it's been considered that the KRG transferred arms to Peshmerga, although less in number, upon seeing that Germany provided Milan anti-tank systems to the YPG fighters.

40. Thousands of Syrian Kurds Flee Islamic State Fighters Into Turkey, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2014.

Syria by the end of September 19, 2014, approaching 20 kilometers outside the town of Ayn Al Arab.<sup>41</sup> The YPG forces failing to stop ISIS lost 64 villages on September 21, 2014 and had to withdraw. ISIS, on the other hand, was at 10 kilometers away from the city center of Ayn Al Arab.<sup>43 44</sup> In the south and the east, ISIS continued to progress within a 13 kilometer range in the meantime, the number of refugees seeking shelter in Turkey from the ISIS' advance across northern Syria has exceeded 100,000.<sup>45</sup>

As Ayn Al Arab falls slowly, the YPG and some opposition groups in the FSA tried to cooperate and reportedly set up a Joint Action Center in the Euphrate region.<sup>46</sup> However, this initiative called "Burkan Al Fırat" has yielded no result and the formation of a joint front against ISIS has failed. Apparently, the FSA and other groups fighting with ISIS have remained reluctant to create an alliance as the YPG still remains in touch with the Syrian regime. Besides, the fight against ISIS moved to Sinjar and Jazaa, where Yazidis live, on the Iraqi border and to the YPG-controlled Rabia right across the Yarubiyah border crossing; therefore, the Ayn Al Arab siege was depressurized.<sup>47</sup> The YPG in Jazaa, Peshmerge of the KDP in Sinjar, HPG and "Shengal Resistance Units" organized attacks against ISIS. However, the attempt to form a new front did not affect the Kobani siege and no new position was gained in these regions. In the face of the pressures to help Kobani, Barzani said that due to geographic restrictions and the condition in Rojova, they were unable to send in the Peshmerga forces to Kobani<sup>48</sup> and was content to call the US-led coalition for support against ISIS.

41. In Major Assault, IS Fighters Seize Kurdish Villages in Syria, VOA, September 19, 2014.

42. Syrian Kurds warn of mounting crisis as ISIS advances, takes more villages, FOX, September 19, 2014.

43. Kurds issue new call to arms against Islamic State in Syria, Malay, September 21, 2011.

44. Elijah J Magnier, AL RAI Chief International Correspondent. <https://twitter.com/EjmAlrai/status/513593965426524160>

45. Syria refugee flood to Turkey hits 100,000, *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2014.

46. YPG ve ÖSO Ortak Eylem Merkezi Oluşturdu, *Kürsitan Post*, 10-09-2014

47. Kurdish fighters from Syrian Kurdistan in Iraq to battle ISIS jihadists, August 4, 2014.

48. Barzani Kobani için devrede, *Rudaw*, 5.10.2014

The attempts to form a joint front with the FSA and other opposition groups and the efforts to ease Ayn Al Arab siege of ISIS by increasing numbers of Peshmerge attacks against ISIS have failed. As of October 5, 2014, ISIS completely captured 300 villages in the rurals of Kobani, reaching the outskirts of the town as bloody dogfights took place. From the hills overseeing the entire city, such as Mishtenur, ISIS' artillery shells assault the YPG positions. International coalition forces increased the airstrikes, none was sufficient to stop ISIS neither from capturing a big part of the town nor from advancing in the area. The attempts of the PYD leader Salih Müslim to open a corridor via Turkey and deploying the YPG forces from Jazeera and Peshmerge from Northern Iraq in addition to arms transfer to the region also failed. It is estimated as of October 13, 2014 that ISIS captured almost half of the city center in Kobani. As the YPG and ISIS forces engage in close combat, both sides face heavy losses. ISIS organized suicide attacks by heavy vehicles and tries to destroy the YPG defense lines. The PKK/PYD and its affiliate political parties in addition to NGOs have launched protests to create an international awareness in the countries with high Kurdish population. They tried to start a riot in Turkey and engaged in fierce street fights disturbing public order. Although Kobani is not the priority for the International Coalition's strategy in Syria, attacks against ISIS positions increased due to increasing political pressures.<sup>49</sup> Despite heavy air bombardments, however, ISIS continues to advance though it has slowed down.

## CONCLUSION

The on-going fights between ISIS and the PYD/YPG in Syria have turned in favor of ISIS following the developments in Ayn Al Arab in particular. Considering military capabilities, logistic infrastructure and munitions, ISIS has an upper hand against the YPG as the geographical positions, i.e. cantons' being surrounded by sieges, consolidate ISIS' position. In the face of the US-led coalition's heavy air bombardments in Syria as well, ISIS tries to minimize its possible casualties with

49. Kerry: Kobani stratejik değil, *Al Jazeera Türk*, October 13, 2014.

a new military strategy and makes efforts to resume its expansion. The organization (ISIS) distributing its army around, tries to neutralize the impact of the bombardment, spreads out its mechanized units, evacuates its centers, avoids forming positions, and distributes infantaries in the battle fields instead of forming big convoys. In case of heavy airstrikes by the international coalition, ISIS will suffer logistic, munition and human losses. Besides, targeting oil wells and food storages will strain the group in the upcoming period. On the other hand, it is quite difficult to say that the air bombardment prevented ISIS from advancing.

The impact of the airstrikes during the clashes between ISIS and the YPG in Ayn Al Arab is quite clear. In the statements issued by ISIS sources, the group had planned to take the entire region under control in late September or early October, including downtown Kobani. ISIS clearly has failed in this due to the airstrikes. Still, if a ground attack does not take place or the number of airborne attacks is not increased considerably, ISIS will likely take over Ayn Al Arab. Obviously, the PYD cannot repel this attack by itself. After the defeats and heavy losses before ISIS, the perception that the HPG and the YPG militants are better warriors than the Peshmarga fighters is seriously harmed. The PYD facing the risk of losing Rojava has started mandatory recruitments of young men, aging between 18 and 30, in the Jazeera and Ifrin cantons.<sup>50</sup>

If Ayn Al Arab falls, ISIS may undertake a thorough offensive against the YPG in the Hasakah province. For now, low density fights in Ras Al Ayn, Tel Hamis/Yarubiyah line have a potential to turn into fierce clashes in the upcoming period. It is seen that ISIS has already reached a point of critical gains by completely cutting off the logistic between Ifrin and Jazeerah cantons and increasing dominance along the Turkey-Syria border. Another assessment may be that

ISIS, by targeting the YPG, achieved a pre-emptive intervention to stop the international coalition to use Kurdish elements as part of a strategy of the international coalition to deploy friendly combatant ground forces. In addition, ISIS has tried to direct the international community's attention to the Kobani siege, thus to tactically hide its operations in Iraq from the eyes. ISIS increased attacks last week in Anbar and Diyala, making another attempt to capture Baghdad.

In conclusion, the PYD, as a PKK affiliate in Syria, has regarded the riots launched against the Asad regime as an opportunity, dominated Ifrin, Ayn Al Arab, Jazeera and Hasakah regions by taking advantage of the communication network formed as a result of a past alliance with the regime against Turkey in the regions populated by Kurds, and unilaterally declared self-autonomy under the banner of "Rojava Revolution". As PYD's competition with the KDP over domination and influence in the Kurdish regions continue, military clashes in Iraq-Syria line also spread in the Kurdish regions; therefore, the military wings of the PKK and the PYD have become critical actors together with the HPG and the YPG. As a consequence of its relations with the Asad regime, the PYD turned against other Kurdish opposition groups, fought with the FSA and other opposition resistance groups. In this regard, being isolated and having no friends but the regime in Syria, the PYD has failed in the face of ISIS' advancement and come to the point of losing the strategically important town of Ayn Al Arab, one of the three cantons the YPG is in control. Ifrin is surrounded by the FSA, the Islamic Front and the Nusra Front, and therefore is isolated. Elsewhere, in Jazeera which it shares with the regime, the YPG's dominance is at risk.

50. PYD zorunlu askerlik yasağını uyguluyor, *Rudaw*, October 12, 2014

Original Title: *İŞİD – PYD Çatışmasının Sıcak Cephesi:*

*Ayn El-Arab (Kobani)*

Translated by Handan Öz