



Rojava-Peshmerga

**Bader Mustafa**

Background Paper

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## Introduction:

This research aims to provide a background on the Rojava-Peshmerga<sup>1</sup> in Iraqi Kurdistan and the potential for the group to be used by the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in the case that a consensus is reached with the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The Rojava-Peshmerga card for the KNC was always present on the table as a backing force capable of making a comeback in Rojava and engaging in politics without facing any obstacles or threats that PYD-affiliated forces may pose. Additionally, some also view the Rojava-Peshmerga as a regional guarantor in any future agreements capable of preventing the PKK from using the Syrian borders to threaten Turkey.

Rojava-Peshmerga or Roj-Lashkre (meaning Soldiers of the Sun) also known as Rojava's Peshmerga, was first founded by Iraqi Kurdistan's president Masoud Al-Barzani back in 12/3/2012. Between 6,000-7,000 fighters<sup>2</sup> make up the Rojava-Peshmerga forces who are subordinate to Deluvan Robari and they're supervised by Zeravan (the KRG protection forces which are directly managed by Masoud Al-Barzani) via Major General Aziz Weisi, the Peshmerga leader. Undoubtedly, Mr. Masrour Al-Barzani, Masoud Al-Barzani's son, has some influence over the forces in terms of management, direction and actions as he is the chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council. The majority of Rojava-Peshmerga are loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, due to their covert political ties to Erbil.

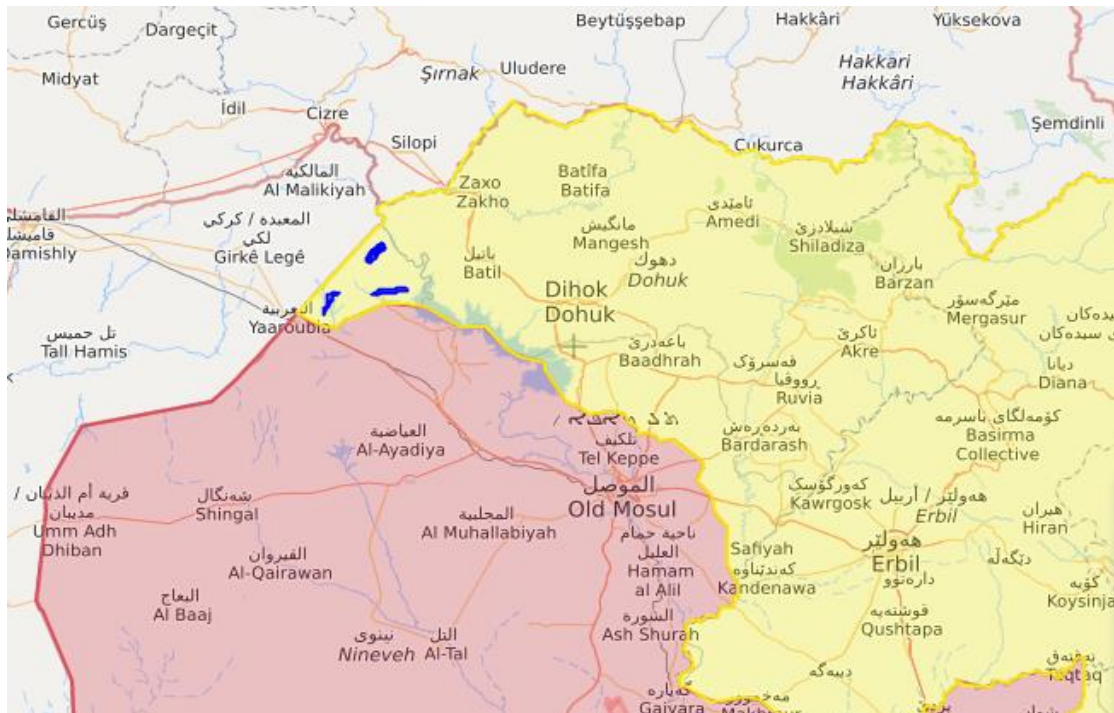
The Rojava-Peshmerga forces operate alongside the Peshmerga in the area stretching from the Semalka-Peshkhabur border crossing in the north up to the highest point near Al-

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term Rojava-Peshmerga is used to refer to the armed group comprised of Kurdish Syrian Army defectors based in Iraq. Not to be confused with the Peshmerga, the military forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq who, along with their security subsidiaries, are responsible for the security of the region. Pêşmerge [p'ɛʃmærgə], Kurdish, the word means "Those who face death." (source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peshmerga>)

<sup>2</sup> This only applies to young Syrian Kurds who formed the Rojava-Peshmerga in KRG. The information within the report are all related to Syria. The Peshmerga in KRG consist of more than 150 thousand while some estimate their members to be more than 200 thousand.

Yaroubia crossing. The forces also have a presence along the axis connecting Al-Mosul dam lake in the east to the northern borders of the Al-Yaroubia crossing to the west.



*Rough explanatory map*

### **Weapons, training and fighting capabilities**

The Rojava -Peshmerga's arsenal is made up of light and medium infantry weapons as well as several American-made Hummers, 60, 80 and 120 caliber mortars and anti-armor weapons. Fighters receive light training in field artillery. The Rojava-Peshmerga forces receive their weapon supplies from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, in addition to arms they seized during their clashes with the Islamic State, particularly the battle that took place near Mosul dam.

The arsenals of the Rojava -Peshmerga and the YPG are no match to one another, as the latter has managed during the last years of the conflict to seize various types of weapons,

from light firearms such as machine guns: Kalashnikov, medium machine guns of various calibers such as 12.7mm, 14.5mm PKC machine guns, 23mm Doshkas, while cannons include: 120 mm in small numbers, 57 mm mortars, and small-caliber mortars in larger numbers, in addition to a number of tanks that were purchases or seized from ISIL. Furthermore, after the International Coalition agreed to support the YPG, their weapon arsenal was boosted as they obtained a large number of mortar artilleries, armored vehicles and HEAT anti-tank warheads. Additionally, YPG fighters also appeared to possess “Javelin” missiles on several occasions which they probably use under the coalition’s supervision.

The Rojava-Peshmerga are directly funded by the KRG which holds regular drills for its fighters. On one occasion, one of those exercises was conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces as part of a NATO mission in Iraqi Kurdistan. By observing Rojava-Peshmerga’s battle performance, it is clear that its fighters have managed to gain high level of fighting expertise which sets it apart as one of the best forces operating in the region. The Peshmerga fighters, in addition to having a national motive for joining its ranks, also regard recruitment as a sort of day job owing to the fact that during times of peace, they’re only required to clock in a few hours every day. On the other hand, Rojava-Peshmerga are mainly drawn from volunteers and their monthly salaries are low compared to the Peshmerga, which explains why the latter’s fighters are more eager to advance on frontlines and were praised for their enthusiasm by the KRG’s leadership on numerous occasions. However, these forces haven’t been known to have their own heavy weaponry.

A number of individual Rojava-Peshmerga defections or desertions were documented, the reason behind which remains that during lulls in battles, no drills were carried out as in the case of national armies which perform periodic military drills for their different factions to ensure their constant readiness and alertness, however for paramilitary organizations or semi-militarized forces opportunities to conduct military maneuvers are

low and in the absence of strict military discipline, the cessation of battles leads to decreased enthusiasm among the group's members, as they go back to leading a semi-civilian life and move away from military corps, this also applies in part to the Peshmerga.

The fact that the fate of Rojava-Peshmerga fighters seems undetermined drives the group's members to dissent or to entirely abandon work in the military field. Initially, the principal disclosed reason for forming the Rojava-Peshmerga forces was to bring together local young men who defected from the Syrian Army to fight together until they can go back to their areas and defend them. However, while Syrian Peshmerga forces were fighting against the terrorist group (ISIL) in KRG, the YPG managed to take full control over Syrian Kurdish cities. And as ISIL was starting to emerge and as no political consensus was looming on the horizon, Rojava-Peshmerga fighters were faced with obstacles that prevented their home coming while this phase was characterized by a vague political and military fate. Ever since the formation of their force, Rojava-Peshmerga fighters in their conversations, would always discuss their desire to return home and defend their areas.

A stable and more secure situation in Kurdish areas in Syria would translate into unwillingness for people to enroll in the military field, as the main reason behind Kurdish fighters taking up arms was to defend their areas and Kurdish-majority territories against the threat of extremist groups and, particularly ISIL, as well as preventing the Syrian regime from controlling the area with an iron fist as it had before the uprising. However, as ISIL was beginning to recede until it was later defeated, willingness to fight among many Rojava-Peshmerga members started to diminish, as they yearned to go back to their families, either in the KRG or Syria, or sought to go to Europe to search for stability and a better life.

### **Rojava-Peshmerga's ties with political and armed Kurdish components:**

There are no direct ties that link the Rojava-Peshmerga to the Kurdish National Council, as the forces' main affiliation is limited to the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria. The Party in turn provides access to members wishing to join the Rojava-Peshmerga, thus the KNC doesn't have any actual influence to manage or control the Rojava-Peshmerga, meanwhile the government did not grant its approval of such an arrangement. If, by any means, the KRG government agrees to put such a structure in place, the lion's share of the fighters that will make up this force will hail from the ranks of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria since most of the Rojava-Peshmerga members respect Mr. Al-Barzani and pledge allegiance to him describing themselves as (Barzaniyoun, i.e. Barzanians), while at the same time they're encouraged to join the ranks of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria. However, despite their political loyalty to the party, the actual control over these forces remains in the hands of the KRG since funding such forces poses a challenge.

There are no official ties that connect the Rojava-Peshmerga leaders and members with the YPG commanders. Although on the individual level, some family relations may exist. The nature of the relationship governing both groups is feudal. Meanwhile, the Rojava-Peshmerga forces have never entered Syria even when their support was needed during the battle for Kobani. On the other hand, the Peshmerga provided artillery and logistic support to the YPG after Turkey's objection to the idea of handing over such weapons to the YPG. At the time, coalition forces had no actual on ground presence, while fighters in Kobani were not fully trained on how to provide coordinates for the coalition warplanes, therefore the Peshmerga were tasked with the following:

- ◆ Maintain peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK.
- ◆ Show the world it had not abandoned those who fought against ISIL

- ◆ Provide an exit for Turkey on how to send aid to Kobani after it turned into a global public opinion issue
- ◆ Provide logistic support to YPK forces
- ◆ Provide logistic support to coalition forces

Although Rojava-Peshmerga forces haven't entered Syrian territories, on 03 February 2017 they engaged in clashes with the PKK and its affiliate group in the Chenkal/Şingal area (Sinjar) which are positioned in part of the city of Sinjar, the Snouni district and Khansour region on the Iraqi-Syrian borders. In 2015, the PKK formed a local force in Sinjar under the title Sinjar Resistance Units. The group consists of 5,000 male and female fighters who received training from Party members. The force was formed in order to fight ISIL and control the city of Chenkal and its surroundings. At the time, several Rojava-Peshmerga factions advanced in the area backed by the Peshmerga to seize the town located on the road connecting Iraq and Syria. This came following statements made by the Region's government and Mr. Al-Barzani who ordered them to fully take over the area since it is part of Kurdistan (Sinjar is a disputed area between the KRG and the Iraqi Government). The Sinjar Resistance Units refused to relinquish control and hand over their area to the advancing Rojava-Peshmerga, which led to intensified clashes between both groups resulting in 7 casualties among the Chenkal Resistance Units in addition to a number of injuries among the Rojava-Peshmerga. Fighting was halted following a political order calling on the Rojava-Peshmerga to end their advances.

### **Future of relationship between the two forces:**

There are several scenarios that could play out in terms of the relationship between the two groups:

- ◆ **Merging Rojava-Peshmerga with the YPG:** Both the PYD and the YPG insist on adopting this option, however the endorsement of such a measure hinges on

whether the Rojava-Peshmerga are absorbed into the ranks of the YPG, provided that they also vow to refrain from forming any military bloc within the YPG as well as pledging to steer clear of any frontlines in Syria and to be fully submit to the YPG authority in terms of leadership, orders and movement. However, this scenario is completely ruled out by the Rojava-Peshmerga forces since they view the YPG as a mere taskforce that will be dissolved sooner or later after a Syrian-Turkish deal is reached which may stipulate a U.S withdrawal from the area. Or the YPG's termination may come as a result of a deal between the U.S and the KRG government that would boost the Iraqi Region's influence in Syria since this mainly may help ease Turkish concerns, that is why some parties hope that Rojava-Peshmerga would fill in the vacuum that may come a result of the YPG's withdrawal from the area, and they suggest instead the following steps:

- ◆ **Forming a joint military council (scenario #2)**
  - ◆ Each party maintains their political affiliation
  - ◆ The PYD severs ties with the regime and the PKK
  - ◆ Military leaders are independent with no political party affiliation.
  - ◆ A restructuring of the forces.

The United States' over a year-long efforts to restructure the SDF can be counted upon as they will eventually lead to the PKK's clout over the YPG receding after they no longer hold the power to declare war as a result of their reliance on U.S support, in addition to the fact that the Americans now have taken direct control of all frontlines which makes the times ripe for the Rojava-Peshmerga to be brought into the equation in coordination with the U.S in order to achieve the following goals:

- ◆ Allaying Turkish concerns
- ◆ End the presence of another foreign military force in Iraq
- ◆ Relieving the KRG from the financial burdens it had been shouldering.



- ◆ Removing any future pretext for the regime (Russia) should it use the units' affiliation with the PKK to attempt to destabilize the region east of the Euphrates.
- ◆ Despite the Rojava-Peshmerga's sentimental ties with President Masoud Al-Barzani and contrary to the YPG, it was formed both ideologically and sentimentally with the objective of protecting Kurdish regions in Syria. Meanwhile, PKK policy constitutes deploying these forces as (cross-border) foot soldiers to any front the party is fighting at, which is not the case for Rojava-Peshmerga as it answers to a Syrian hierarchical military leadership.

The challenges facing the second scenario can be evaluated via several determinants:

- ◆ The presence of the United States forces without resolving this issue. Taking into account the inability to assess what both the U.S and the coalition end goals and policies in the region are as well as their oftentimes seemingly contradicting policies, especially with regards to whether to pull outtroops or remain in the country. Therefore, without edging towards a political solution with the regime or an agreement between the SDF/YPG and Turkey, the continued presence of American forces poses a fundamental challenge.
- ◆ Taking into account the historical relationship between the PKK and the Syrian regime, except for the period following the Adana agreement of 1998, the PYD and AA bloc realizes that in the absence of any international or regional guarantees with regards to their project, suspending communication with the Syrian regime will not work out in their favor.
- ◆ The PYD and the YPG failed to reach an agreement on power-sharing after their governance project took hold, and they demand that others join their bloc based on the AA's own terms and mechanisms. They also expressed an initial objection to sharing military responsibilities since losing control over that power or sharing this trump card with other parties would simply turn them into another political entity.

- ♦ Turkey wholly rejects maintaining the YPG at its current structure and leadership considering the ongoing conflict between the PKK and the Turkish Government. However, the Manbij Roadmap has unveiled lists of PKK leaders who operate in the area (Manbij) while dozens of filed PKK leaders and fighters in Manbij were requested to fully evacuate the city. This request provides a glimmer of hope with regards to minimizing the risk of Turkish threats which can be achieved through the withdrawal of PKK members, particularly those belonging to Turkey's Kurds, from the area.

### **Implementation methods:**

- ♦ Efforts should be focused on convincing the United States to follow either of the two following paths: Pressure the regime to accept and officially recognize the Autonomous Administration or take serious measures to go ahead with the aforementioned steps in order to allay Turkish concerns and in the process eliminate its pretexts for threatening and invading the area or other parts of the region.
- ♦ Place more pressure on both the PYD and the YPG, considering that the AA, now that the main threat after ISIL's defeat had been dealt with and following the change in the American stance with regards to withdrawing troops, has marked a return to its rigid attitude towards the KNC and the Rojava-Peshmerga. Additionally, prior to recent U.S sanctions, the regime had no intention of making any political concessions in order to receive reconstruction funding, nor was the Autonomous Administration, which now fully controls the entire region, contemplating making any concessions to the council. Thus, the U.S could pressure the AA to proceed in that direction based on the aforementioned reasons coupled with other incidents that can be used as arguments with which to confront the administration:

- ◆ The recurrent protests that broke out against the AA in areas it recently seized in Deir Al-Zor can potentially be exploited by external parties, and may develop into a military confrontation, or the formation of cells targeting members of local councils, military figures, etc. ISIL attacks are one example of what may transpire which could lead to more organized assaults backed by the regime or Iran or others. Thus, the Autonomous Administration, at its current state and financial capacities, won't be able to provide livelihoods for communities recently liberated from ISIL, in addition to the ban placed by the U.S preventing the selling of oil to the regime which could in turn negatively impact the relationship between the two parties if the AA is unable to find other markets to which it could sell the regime's oil share.
- ◆ The Autonomous Administration's position could suffer as a result of strengthened ties between Ankara and Suleimaniyah (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), the latter therefore may halt any PKK activities in Suleimaniyah in addition to potentially closing down the party's headquarters and the bureaus of its affiliates.

### **Rojava-Peshmerga's potential role in Syria:**

- ◆ **Syrian-Turkish borders:** In this regard, there is a potential for Rojava-Peshmerga to take control over border regions with Turkey, especially considering that smuggling traffic, which used to constitute a major source of income for the Autonomous Administration in the past, has dwindled on both sides of the border. If a deal with Turkey is reached with regards to including other Turkey-friendly and Turkey-affiliates into the Rojava-Peshmerga forces, the likelihood of enforcing this scenario is high. However, having two opposing forces in a politically-fractured society in one geographical area poses a great risk as such an

arrangement could lead to a conflict of interests and goals and may eventually create internal strife.

- ◆ **Border crossings administration:** in the absence of a cohesive agreement, it is unlikely for this option to be implemented. The suggestion for the Rojava-Peshmerga to run the crossings was proposed back in 2013 and 2014, however Turkey completely ruled out the idea and stipulated that the party stays away from any border crossings. Additionally, internal checkpoints and crossings are managed based on agreements with the regime, in any case these crossings are some of the major sources of income for the Autonomous Administration which lack transparency, that's why in both cases, it is crucial to reach a political consensus between both Kurdish and Arab parties and the AA.
- ◆ **Afrin:** Turkey has repeatedly said that it will not be withdrawing its forces from Afrin and the Euphrates Shield area until a political solution is reached in Syria. In the absence of a political transition and as long as chances of resolving the conflict remain low, it is unlikely that Turkish forces will exit the area anytime soon. It would be reasonable to consider a cooperative approach between Turkey, the Rojava-Peshmerga and SDF in order to minimize the numerous and frequent transgressions against the Kurds in Afrin. This proposition would be in turn beneficial for the SDF as they will halt their attacks on the Turks and armed forces in Afrin, stabilizing the situation in the region as a result. Additionally, this approach will help the Peshmerga make both popular and regional gains by putting an end to a highly-charged period in the area, which for the same reasons would also signify a win for Turkey. Furthermore, instability and injustices in Afrin will always jeopardize security in the region while Turkish presence will always be a target if Turkey-backed forces, which turned kidnappings and looting into a source of income, continue to control the city. This might also push the regime to ask Turkey to withdraw from the region since Rojava-Peshmerga fighters are local to the area and have the right to defend their region.

- ♦ **Manbij:** The Manbij military council constantly works on bolstering its forces. The city provides a two-way trade crossing which makes it difficult for the Autonomous Administration to pull out of the area. However, the Arab-majority demographic composition of this region should not be overlooked, as a heavy Kurdish military presence would cause recurring confrontations.

### **Prospects for a potential Kurdish-Turkish cooperation in Northern Syria:**

In the event that Turkish-Russian ties become strained, a formula for a solution could materialize as a result of that divergence, which might look as follows (US+Turkey+SDF+Peshmerga), considering the fact that any rapprochement in US-Turkey relations would accordingly affect the Syrian conflict especially in northern Syria and AA-controlled areas.

The Rojava-Peshmerga forces can in turn play a role in reassuring the Turks, and only then would it be possible to bring together the entire northern region including Manbij, the Euphrates Shield areas and the Olive Branch region as well. However, despite the fact that the implementation of such a solution seems unattainable, the SDF has repeatedly expressed its desire to cooperate with Turkey. Furthermore, taking into account ongoing Turkey –US cooperation in Manbij, the aforementioned obstacles can be overcome through a cohesive solution by bringing the Rojava-Peshmerga into the equation and deploying their fighters in the north (the area separating Manbij and Afrin).

This scenario is certain to pave the way towards resolving all pending SDF issues. However, the Syrian Democratic Forces need to restructure their hierarchy in order to accommodate the Rojava-Peshmerga in addition to the Arab Turkey-backed groups. In this context, it would be better to maintain the SDF's current hierarchy as it has proven to be effective in absorbing and ending the factional state in favor of forming a disciplined

institutional military structure. This solution would benefit all concerned entities, however as a result it can reduce the economic gains for all sides as it will decrease the number of crossings currently used, which constitutes an essential financial resource for all parties in question.

## **Appendix: Rojava-Peshmerga's military hierarchy**

- ◆ Peshmerga= Soldier (equivalent to “First Soldier” not used by the Peshmerga)
- ◆ Deputy Corporal
- ◆ Corporal
- ◆ Chief Corporal
- ◆ Deputy Officer (from 1-4) ranks, it starts from the 4th(lowest rank), up to 1<sup>st</sup>. Salary and military benefits vary according to rank, while ranks are awarded based on length of service and training courses.
- ◆ Lieutenant: has another equivalent Kurdish rank that is not currently in use (on the ground he is considered as Infantry Commander)
- ◆ First Lieutenant (on the field, he may be considered the co-commander of the infantry company, and, as needed, he can be promoted to company commander)
- ◆ Captain (infantry commander)
- ◆ Major (can be a company commander, co-commander of a regiment or even a regiment commander as needed)
- ◆ Lieutenant Colonel (Regiment Commander)
- ◆ Colonel (brigade commander)
- ◆ Brigadier General (brigade commander and brigade commander as needed)
- ◆ Brigadier (squad commander, known as “Soba”), there is also another division equivalent to “legion in Arabic known as the “Al-Lashkar” which ranks higher than squad.”
- ◆ Lieutenant General (certain members received the rank as an honorary title, while the remaining few received it through standard promotion in military hierarchies).
- ◆ First Lieutenant.