

Henry Jackson Society does it again: problems with their latest report on the PYD

by Meghan Bodette - 24/12/2017 14:28



The latest Henry Jackson Society [report](#) on Northern Syria is riddled with inaccuracies and lacks the context needed to report on the movements and conflicts that define the political situation there today.

The report's premise is that a "long-term alliance" between the PKK and Syria, Russia and Iran poses a problem for U.S. support for the SDF. It reduces the PYD's skilled diplomacy and clear-eyed understanding of its best options for survival to a relic of this supposed "alliance", while misunderstanding the ideological goals and political structures of various Kurdish political and military organizations involved in the conflict. In doing so, it denies the agency of these groups, suggesting that all of them are proxies of foreign powers and, in turn, that the legitimate causes they represent are not worthy of consideration in the resolution to the Syrian conflict.

The author, Kyle Orton, begins with a questionable history of the PKK, calling the movement a “child of the Cold War” and referring to its formation as “part of the radical movements of the 1960s,” without any mention of the repression of Kurds in Turkey in the decades prior to its founding. Cold War competition and 1960s radicalism did not force Turkey to ban the Kurdish language, suppress Kurdish culture, and massacre those who stood up to the state’s policies of forced assimilation.

Orton’s breathless assertion that “for the PKK, states aligned to the West like Turkey and Israel were fundamentally illegitimate, mere extensions of Western colonialism and racism that History would terminate” is similarly lacking in historical context. Turkey’s alignment with the West was not what made it illegitimate; its occupation of Kurdistan did. To an oppressed group living in the conditions that the Kurdish people in Turkey did at the time, a Marxist-Leninist vision that rejected the economic and political forces that led to the occupation of societies like their own was a solution based in material reality. It did not, as Orton claims, make them a “weapon against Turkey” for the Soviet Union, despite a shared communist ideology. This is not the first time that the report reduces the Kurdish struggle to proxies for other powers—a dangerous and reductive conclusion.

While leaving out the historical context and motivations, Orton frames the war in the 1980s and 1990s by highlighting the most objectionable acts committed by the Kurdish side as a defining characteristic of their movement, while referring to the Turkish destruction and depopulation of Kurdistan as “more effective conventional tactics.” By ignoring the reasons for which side fought, and writing as though the Turkish state were responding in self-defense rather than trying to crush a self-defense movement, the analysis obscures the reality of the conflict.

The report does mention that, by the end of the 1990s, the organization had lost support from Syria and Iraq—contradicting the idea of a “long-term alliance” that forms its thesis. It also, bizarrely, suggests that the PKK allied with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in order to fight the Iraqi Kurds. Turkey’s support for the Iraqi Kurdish parties against the PKK is not mentioned here, nor is the Turkish-Iraqi military [cooperation](#) against the organization that existed throughout the 1980s and 1990s and the Turkish military bases throughout the country that made it possible.

Throughout this section of the report, Orton tries to argue that the Kurdish struggle is merely an extension of the geopolitical ambitions of other states in the region, and reduces their agency and motivations. It is clear that little of this is true, and what is true is presented without necessary context.

His treatment of the Syrian conflict is the same. The PYD is introduced as a PKK

splinter group invented to circumvent terrorist designations, and Orton notes that there are no markers of Kurdish ethnicity in the names of the PYD and YPG. He claims that this was done to appease Assad—while, in reality, it was the ideological change from Marxism-Leninism to [democratic confederalism](#), a political ideology that rejects the nation-state and ethnic nationalism, that would account for such a choice of name. Orton does not account for any possibility of pluralism in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria—despite reports from the ground that indicate otherwise.

The report also ignores YPG and YPJ's defeat of ISIS across Northern Syria in order to document every possible instance of military and political collaboration between the PYD and the Syrian government. He discusses the siege of Kobani without mentioning the role of Turkey in aggravating the conflict, and suggests that without the support of the U.S. and Syria, the city would never have been retaken. Re-writing the history of those events—with the implication that surrendering to ISIS would have been better than accepting certain support—is disingenuous. The U.S. did not intervene in Kobani until later stages of the battle, and while Syrian state media [claimed](#) that the Syrian government armed the YPG during this battle, Kurdish leaders denied this.

Actual instances of collaboration or deconfliction are not as suspicious as the report makes them seem. Officials in Northern Syria have explicitly stated that they hope for [autonomous](#) status within a federal Syria—and so they have no reason to provoke the central government more than necessary. In addition, ISIS and al-Qaeda posed imminent existential threats to the safety and security of Northern Syria; the Syrian government did not. There was no strategic reason, then, for the YPG to fight government forces when ISIS still held territory near the areas they controlled.

Northern Syria's prioritization of its security interests in this way does not make it a proxy for the central government. As ISIS loses its final territories in Syria, clashes between the SDF and the SAA have occurred in Deir Ezzor, and the political systems in the territory that each controls differ vastly. Northern Syria has held two rounds of [elections](#) in the past four months, with a third round scheduled for January. The Syrian government did not recognize these elections, and has referred to the Kurds in Northern Syria as “traitors”. The administration in Northern Syria, in turn, views its democratic confederalist model as applicable to the entirety of the country in the future. Though negotiations including representatives from both sides have occurred, it is clear that they are not as interchangeable as the report would argue.

In the end, the PYD will have to maintain a viable negotiating position with all actors in the conflict—including Russia, the Syrian government, and the United States. It

has already forged tactical relationships with states that aided it in the fight against ISIS—just as the PKK has tactical relationships with states that supported its fight against Turkey. Rather than winding down, as Orton writes, U.S. support for the YPG and SDF looks as strong as ever, with half a billion dollars [apportioned](#) in the 2018 NDAA for military support to the groups. At the same time, Russia [supports](#) SDF operations in Deir Ezzor, and recently [invited](#) YPG commander Sipan Hemo to Moscow to receive an award for “heroism” and meet with Russian officials. Fighters on the ground have claimed that having both Russian and U.S. support is militarily and politically reassuring; the KCK [affirms](#) that both relationships are the result of temporarily shared strategic goals, not long-term ideological and political affinity.

Northern Syria’s diplomatic choices are the result of an assessment of facts on the ground today—not any longstanding dependence on Syria and Russia inherited from the PKK. To assert otherwise is to devalue the struggle against ISIS and for democratic autonomy in Northern Syria and to misunderstand the PKK’s history and motivations.

It is worth asking whose narrative of the conflict is served by this reductive reporting.

The Henry Jackson Society has been [paid](#) before to produce pieces serving a certain agenda, and Orton has made [baseless](#) accusations against Kurdish groups before, while aggregating personal information—some of it inaccurate—about international YPG and YPJ fighters in another report for the think tank.

The enemies of democracy and autonomy in Kurdistan and the broader Middle East can use think tanks like the Henry Jackson Society—and the credibility they give to the work they publish—to make their political arguments against Rojava. States that are threatened by the idea of local, anti-capitalist democracy and organized struggle against oppression benefit from analysis that reduces resistance to proxy war and discounts revolutionary movements based on their prioritization of which enemies to fight first. All those who wish to fight terrorism and authoritarianism should not give such states material that lets them do so.