

THE IMPACT OF THE WEST–PYD/YPG RELATIONSHIP ON REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY DYNAMICS: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AND NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS

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Abstract

This study analyzes this relationship in the context of international law and security dynamics by focusing on the PYD/YPG, which is supported politically, militarily, and economically by the West under the US umbrella. For this purpose, relevant literature, field data, and intelligence reports available from open sources were utilized. The findings show that Türkiye and EU countries use the organization in line with regional interests. The organization, which has adopted an asymmetric warfare strategy, is waging proxy wars in Syria with the support of the West and acting on its behalf. On the other hand, it easily organizes and continues its activities in the West, especially in Europe. These activities cover a wide range of areas such as lobbying, finance, propaganda, and the recruitment of militants. The Western media, on the other hand, positions the organization as a fighter for freedom and democracy on the grounds of the fight against DAESH and mediates the formation of public opinion in its favor. However, the organization's terrorist acts targeting NATO member Türkiye, its relationship with the PKK, and the mass migrations it causes are ignored. It is understood that the West tries to legitimize the organization to justify its support, which erodes international law and order. While the support provided to the organization deepens regional instability and conflicts, the regional and global security architecture is negatively affected by mass migration, foreign fighters, and cooperation with organized crime networks. Moreover, this relationship causes strategic incompatibilities and trust crises within the Western and NATO alliance, damaging alliance relations and making collaboration difficult.

Keywords: Asymmetric Warfare, Terrorism, Non-State Actors, Proxy War, Hybrid Warfare.

Jel Codes: D74, F02, H56.

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Atıf/Citation

Yaşar, İ.H. (2025). The impact of western–PYD/YPG relations on regional and global dynamics: An analysis from the perspective of asymmetric warfare and non-state armed actors. *Dicle Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 15(30), 995-1032.

BATI – PYD/YPG İLİŞKİSİNİN BÖLGESEL VE KÜRESEL GÜVENLİK DİNAMİKLERİ ÜZERİNE ETKİSİ: ASİMETRİK SAVAŞ VE DEVLET DIŞI SİLAHLI AKTÖRLER PERSPEKTİFİNDEN BİR İNCELEME

Öz

Bu çalışma, ABD şemsiyesi altında Batı tarafından siyasi, askeri ve ekonomik olarak desteklenen PYD/YPG'yi merkeze alarak, bu ilişkiyi uluslararası hukuk ve güvenlik dinamikleri bağlamında analiz etmektedir. Bu amaçla ilgili literatür, saha verileri ve açık kaynaklardan erişilebilen istihbarat raporlarından yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular örgütün, ABD ve AB ülkeleri tarafından bölgesel çıkarlar doğrultusunda kullanıldığını göstermektedir. Asimetrik savaş stratejisini benimsemiş olan örgüt, Batı'dan aldığı destekle ve onlar adına Suriye'de vekâlet savaşları yürütmektedir. Öte yandan Avrupa başta olmak üzere Batı'da rahatça örgütlenmekte ve faaliyetlerini sürdürmektedir. Bu faaliyetler lobicilik, finans, propaganda ve militan temini gibi geniş bir zemine yayılmaktadır. Batı medyası ise örgütü DEAŞ'a karşı mücadele gerekçesiyle özgürlük ve demokrasi savaşçısı olarak konumlandırmakta ve örgüt lehine kamuoyu oluşmasına aracılık etmektedir. Bununla birlikte örgütün NATO üyesi olan Türkiye'yi de hedef alan terör eylemleri, PKK ile ilişkisi ve sebep olduğu kitlesel göçler ise göz ardı edilmektedir. Batı tarafından sağlanan desteği haklı göstermek amacıyla örgütün meşrulaştırılmaya çalışıldığı ve bu durumun uluslararası hukuku ve düzeni aşındırdığı anlaşılmaktadır. Örgüte sağlanan destek, bölgesel istikrarsızlık ve çatışmaları derinleştirirken kitlesel göçler, yabancı savaşçılar ve organize suç şebekeleriyle işbirlikleri dolayısıyla bölgesel ve küresel güvenlik mimarisi olumsuz etkilenmektedir. Ayrıca, bu ilişki Batı ittifakı ve NATO içerisinde stratejik uyumsuzluklara ve güven bunalımlarına neden olmakta, müttefiklik ilişkilerini zedeleyerek işbirliklerini zorlaştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asimetrik Savaş, Terörizm, Devlet Dışı Aktörler, Vekâlet Savaşları, Hibrit Savaş.

Jel Kodları: D74, F02, H56.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, international security and conflict dynamics have evolved from traditional wars between states to hybrid warfare strategies, such as asymmetric warfare and proxy wars, in which non-state actors are actively employed (Hoffman, 2007; Özer, 2018; Fayganoğlu & Fayganoğlu, 2021). As the leading actors in international relations, states intensively support non-state armed actors in protecting their interests and maintaining their military capabilities. In different conflict zones of the world, it is possible to encounter such cooperation and conflict concepts frequently (Abrahms, 2006; Cronin, 2009). On the other hand, the Middle East is the area of rivalry and conflict where states most often work with non-state armed actors as proxy forces. One of the typical examples of this relationship is the cooperation between the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization, and Western states, particularly the United States. In fact, in addition to the US, EU countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium support and use the PYD/YPG in line with their regional interests. The West's relationship with and support for the organization are concentrated in the political, economic, and military fields. Based on the West's multidimensional cooperation with the PYD/YPG, it is possible to say that the organization acts on behalf of Western states as a proxy power in dominating regional rivalries and conflicts. The asymmetric warfare waged by the PYD/YPG

with the support of Western powers under the US umbrella has significant impacts on regional and global security dynamics (Gunter, 2014; Phillips, 2016).

Since 1984, Türkiye has been actively combating the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization by Türkiye, the United States, the European Union, and NATO. Internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, the PKK is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people, including civilians, in terrorist attacks both in rural areas and urban centers (Cantenar & Tümlü, 2016; Crisis Group, 2025). With a separatist agenda, the organization claims to establish a Kurdish state in Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. It operates under the names of PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê) in Iran, PÇDK (Partiya Çareserî Demokratik Kurdistan) in Iraq, and PYD/YPG in Syria (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025; Yılmaz & Tetik, 2020).

The Turkish state strongly rejects the claim of the US and other Western powers that the PKK terrorist organization and the PYD/YPG are two different structures (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2017). It is known that both organizations accept Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the PKK terrorist organization, as their leader, and that the PYD/YPG is led and managed by PKK executives (Karaağaç & Acar, 2020). Their visual identity elements, ideological publications, sources of nourishment, and terminology are the same. The PYD/YPG accepts Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the PKK, as its leader, and posters of Abdullah Öcalan are frequently seen in the organization's military and political centers and in the areas it controls in Syria (Acun & Keskin, 2017). However, the PYD/YPG has been responsible for numerous direct and indirect attacks against Türkiye during the war in Syria. Some of these are direct attacks against Turkish security units and residential areas on the border. Others are bombings and armed attacks carried out by PYD/YPG militants in Turkish metropolises and tourist areas. Many Turkish citizens were killed and injured in these attacks (Acun & Keskin, 2017; Özkızılcık & Görücü, 2021).

Türkiye, which is a NATO member and a candidate country for the European Union, has been targeted by the PYD/YPG, which is supported by the West, through asymmetric warfare methods. In some of these attacks, the organization has used weapons provided to it by countries that are allies of Türkiye. Despite Türkiye's objections, the support of its Western allies, especially the US, to the organization has not stopped (Acun & Keskin, 2017; Demir, 2021). Türkiye's cross-border military operations against the organization were tried to be prevented or limited by its Western allies (White House, 2019; Stanicek, 2019).

The PYD/YPG, whose military capacity has transformed into a relatively conventional force with the support it receives from the US, is perceived as a significant security threat to Türkiye. Türkiye's high perception of the organization as a threat and the West's persistent support create a severe crisis of confidence between the parties, which affects relations, including NATO activities. In addition to its direct cross-border operations against the PYD/YPG, Türkiye has tried to maintain balance in the region by organizing Syrian groups. Türkiye, which has further increased its influence in Syria after the fall of the regime led by Bashar al-Assad, continues to work on the dismantling of the PYD/YPG. To this end, while keeping its military forces ready on the border line and inside Syria, it is working with the new Syrian administration and effectively utilizing groups sympathetic to it in the field.

The military, logistical, political, and economic support provided by the United States and European countries to the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK, under the pretext of fighting the DAESH terrorist organization, increases the security concerns of the countries in the region, especially Türkiye. On the other hand, the support provided by the West to the organization has brought many debates in terms of international law. The PKK, the umbrella organization from which the PYD/YPG has grown, has been held responsible for various organized crimes and terrorist acts in regional countries and Europe since 1984, although it mainly targets Türkiye. The PKK has been designated as a terrorist organization by the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations due to the acts it has perpetrated. Despite this, the fact that the organization is accepted and supported by the West under different names as an ally in the fight against DAESH creates profound contradictions in the context of law and security in international relations.

On 1 March 2025, the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire, a move subsequently welcomed by UN human rights experts, who urged a just and sustainable peace process in Türkiye (OHCHR, 2025). On the same day, Al Jazeera reported that the organization would implement the ceasefire in line with a call to disarm and dissolve, framing it as a potential end to decades of conflict (Al Jazeera, 2025a). During the summer of 2025, debates intensified around the integration of the YPG/SDF into the Syrian state; Türkiye publicly called on the YPG to stop delaying this integration, linking it to broader regional security adjustments (Reuters, 2025a). Parallel reporting highlighted Ankara's expectation that the SDF demonstrate compliance with the integration arrangement (Reuters, 2025b). Across 2025, Israeli air operations in Syria fluctuated. ACLED tracked a decline in August (10 strikes) compared to July (33 strikes), indicating a temporal shift in the intensity and targeting profile (ACLED, 2025a).

Complementing these figures, an Al Jazeera mapping piece documented the geographic spread and cadence of Israeli strikes since late 2024, averaging one strike every three to four days through the spring of 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025b).

These developments indicate a transitional phase in the dynamics of proxy and hybrid warfare: while an insurgent ceasefire and integration agenda suggest potential de-escalation pathways, cross-border strike patterns and alliance-management frictions signal a contested and uncertain reconfiguration rather than a stable settlement (ACLED, 2025a; Al Jazeera, 2025b; Reuters, 2025a).

Today, the tendency of states to engage in conflicts through proxy forces instead of direct conflict points to a radical change in contemporary war strategies. This approach, known as proxy warfare, is defined as a state utilizing local armed groups to advance its interests, rather than engaging in direct warfare (Mumford, 2013). Asymmetric warfare is a struggle waged by irregular elements against a regular army. An analysis of the PKK and its Syrian branch PYD/YPG's struggle strategy against Türkiye clearly shows that it is an asymmetric war (Byman & Wittes, 2016). In this context, the US-led Western relationship with the PYD/YPG is a typical example of both proxy wars and asymmetric warfare.

2. METHOD AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

This study employs a qualitative, document-based approach to elucidate the Western–PYD/YPG relationship, drawing on evidence informed by theory, without resorting to normative labeling. The phenomenon cannot be reduced to singular indicators because it encompasses the dimensions of legal interpretation, military-strategic practice, and alliance management; instead, it requires interpretive synthesis (Snyder, 2019).

The analysis is based on (a) peer-reviewed literature on proxy wars, asymmetric/hybrid warfare, and non-state armed actors, (b) official documents and records of institutions such as the UN, EU, and NATO, as well as national parliamentary materials, and (c) think tank reports and open-source intelligence (OSINT). Institutional documents have been prioritized as reference texts; opinion pieces have been included only when they are traceable and relevant to the propositions.

The source universe is limited to the period 2014–2025, targeting the period when the PYD/YPG (and SDF/YPJ) became central to discussions on the fight against ISIS and regional security. Records meeting at least two of the following criteria were included: direct relevance to the PYD/YPG/SDF/YPJ; explicit engagement with the concepts of proxy/surrogate or

asymmetric/hybrid warfare; verifiable origin (peer-reviewed journals, UN/EU/NATO, or established research institutes). Opinion pieces that did not provide traceable evidence were not considered. A literature review structured with field-specific keywords was conducted; chain searches were performed on the bibliographies of key studies and institutional reports (Snyder, 2019).

On the other hand, the findings were analyzed using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A predefined code set (proxy logic, deniability, cost transfer, asymmetric capacity, hybrid threshold, principal–agent drift, alliance friction, legal conflict, legitimizing framing) guided the first-cycle coding; axial coding linked the codes to empirical claims. Uncertain data were excluded unless verified by at least one independent source.

Coding notes and inclusion/exclusion decisions have been recorded. When competing readings exist, they are reported side by side, along with an indication of the weight of the evidence. In the text, assessments are presented with attribution to sources. Five complementary lenses were used together in this process: proxy warfare (Mumford, 2013), asymmetric/hybrid warfare (Hoffman, 2007; 2009), non-state armed actors (Kalyvas, 2006), principal–agent (Salehyan, 2010), and rational choice/cost-benefit (Byman et al., 2001). These lenses collectively reveal the cost dynamics that shape the cost reduction/risk management logic of external support, the hybrid threshold effect of capacity building, the bargaining power outcomes of organizational linkages, the risks of target misalignment/moral hazard, and sponsors' indirect support preferences.

Based on this framework, the current study aims to analyze the relationship between the PKK terrorist organization and its Syrian affiliate, the PYD/YPG, and the West through the framework of asymmetric warfare and non-state actors' theory. The study examines the impact of this relationship on international security, global and regional stability, and international law, and seeks to address the following questions.

1. What is the meaning of Western support for the PKK/PYD-YPG in the context of asymmetric warfare strategies?
2. Why has the PKK/PYD-YPG become an important proxy war tool for Western states?
3. What are the security threats posed by the West's support to the PKK/PYD-YPG for Türkiye and the countries in the region?
3. What are the implications of Western support for the organization regarding international law?

4. What are the effects of the use of non-state actors in proxy wars on the international system?

The theoretical framework explores concepts such as asymmetric warfare, proxy wars, hybrid warfare, and non-state actors to address the aforementioned questions. In addition, the study aims to analyze and explain why states prefer proxy wars as a war strategy and how they utilize non-state actors.

The support of the PYD/YPG by states that are allies of Türkiye warrants analysis in terms of security policies, international law, war strategies, and state sovereignty. In fact, the Western states' disregard for Türkiye's security concerns and the controversy surrounding international law norms, due to their military, political, economic, and logistical support for the organization, is a case that needs to be emphasized. This study aims to analyze the relationship between the PKK/PYD-YPG and Western states within the framework of asymmetric warfare and non-state actors' theory, and to evaluate the consequences of this relationship for international security, regional stability, and international law. Accordingly, the study examines the West's relationship with the PYD/YPG in terms of its military, political, and legal dimensions, aiming to elucidate the impact of this relationship on the regional and international security architecture.

Based on the qualitative analysis method, the study examines the relationships between Western states and the organization through a literature review, international reports, legal documents, security analyses, intelligence reports, and regional conflict data. To establish the theoretical framework of the study, the concepts of asymmetric warfare and non-state actors were first discussed, followed by an explanation of the multidimensional relations between the organization and Western states. The remainder of the study examines the consequences of this relationship in terms of regional and international security, as well as international law.

3. FINDINGS

Conceptually, asymmetric warfare is used to describe a type of conflict in which there are significant differences between the conflicting parties in terms of power, capacity, resources, and strategic capabilities. The difference in power between the warring parties represents a type of conflict that departs significantly from traditional doctrines of warfare (Byman & Wittes, 2016). Asymmetric warfare mostly takes place between regular state armies and non-state armed organizations, rebel groups, guerrilla units, and terrorist organizations (Mack, 1975; Arguilla et al., 1999; Walter, 1997).

A review of the relevant literature reveals that asymmetric warfare is not only considered as an extension of military conflicts but also as a structural transformation in the way non-state armed actors engage in conflict (Salehyan, 2010; Mumford, 2013; Gerges, 2016). In asymmetric warfare, one side has conventional military power while the other side has much more limited capacity. The main characteristic of asymmetric warfare is that, due to its lack of capacity and resources, the weaker side carries out its struggle through unauthorized methods (Arguilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Fazal, 2013; Staniland, 2014). In this type of conflict, the weaker side makes extensive use of tactics such as terrorist activities, guerrilla warfare, cyber attacks, and media manipulation based on psychological warfare and hybrid warfare strategies (Walt, 2005; Hoffman, 2006). Accordingly, asymmetric warfare can be considered a phenomenon that reshapes the conflict capabilities of non-state actors and thus expands the boundaries of traditional warfare.

It would be useful to discuss the basic components of asymmetric warfare to explain its conceptual and theoretical framework. In this context, the nature and basic principles of asymmetric warfare are explained in the following subheadings based on the relevant literature.

3.1. Power Imbalance and Strategic Adaptation

As mentioned earlier, the most fundamental hallmark of asymmetric warfare is the power imbalance between the parties to the conflict. In the case of states, the warring parties have similar, if not identical, strategic resources and conventional military capabilities. In the case of asymmetric warfare, on the other hand, one party - often a state - is superior to the other, a non-state armed actor/irregular military force, in terms of both technology and military capacity (Mack, 1975; Arreguín-Toft, 2005). This difference in balance between the two sides makes it necessary to adapt the strategy of struggle to this reality. In this case, the weaker side tends to avoid direct confrontation as much as possible and to fight on the basis of irregular warfare methods. As a matter of fact, non-state armed actors often engage in low-intensity and attrition-based strategies instead of conventional warfare methods (Arreguín-Toft, 2005; Staniland, 2012). In contemporary conflicts, particularly in the context of the Middle East, armed non-state actors such as the PKK have evolved into hybrid entities with both military and political capacities. These groups not only challenge state authority through irregular warfare but also seek international legitimacy by exploiting humanitarian discourses and global governance gaps (Duran & Yeşiltaş, 2023). The PKK, for instance, has been categorized as a terrorist organization by Türkiye, the US, and the EU, yet operates under different labels such as PYD/YPG in Syria, aiming to secure territorial control and political recognition (SETA, 2024).

3.2. Irregular Front Line and Disorganized Battlefield

One of the main features of asymmetric warfare that distinguishes it from conventional warfare is the absence of a clear front line. In other words, asymmetric warfare is characterized by the irregularity of the front line and the fact that the battlefield is largely uncertain and dispersed (Arguilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). In fact, while traditional wars mostly take place on a certain front line, the battlefield in asymmetric wars is dispersed (Arguilla & Ronfeldt, 1999). Fighting in asymmetric warfare spans a wide range of areas, including rural areas, urban centers, energy fields, production centers, economic facilities, and conventional and digital media platforms (Hoffman, 2006). The ambiguity and complexity of the battle lines and the battlefield in asymmetric warfare are important factors that make it challenging to combat armed formations that resort to this method. Non-state armed actors, who are unable to establish superiority over regular armies in frontline warfare, instead aim to wear down the other side and break its determination to fight through simultaneous attacks and sabotage in different regions (Clausewitz, 1976; Arguilla & Ronfeldt, 1999; Metz, 2007). On the other hand, the inclusion of civilians in conflicts by taking the war to urban centers, the active use of traditional and digital media platforms for propaganda purposes, and cyber-attacks cause the traditional war concept to evolve into hybrid warfare. In this context, the concept of hybrid warfare is discussed and explained in the following section.

3.3. Hybrid Warfare

Conceptually, hybrid warfare is used to describe a type of warfare in which asymmetric/unconventional warfare methods are used together (Hoffman, 2007). Hybrid warfare, which is a method of warfare waged by states in partnership with non-state actors, is a method of warfare in which different elements, including political, economic, and information struggle and cyber warfare, are employed in addition to military activities (Nye, 2002). In addition to conventional military power, hybrid warfare involves the integrated use of unconventional warfare techniques, economic pressure, and propaganda (Weissmann, 2019). Therefore, hybrid warfare refers to a multidimensional method of struggle in which many parameters are at stake. As a matter of fact, while conventional troops of air, land, and naval forces conduct operations based on traditional warfare methods, unorganized warfare techniques such as guerrilla warfare, terrorist attacks, and sabotage are simultaneously employed (Gerasimov, 2013). On the other hand, military and cyber attacks against the enemy's economic and strategic infrastructure and manipulation of public opinion through mass media are considered important components of hybrid warfare (Arguilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Nye, 2002).

Today, examples of hybrid warfare in which elements of conventional and asymmetric warfare are used together are frequently encountered. Accordingly, Russia's intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 can be cited as one of the recent examples of hybrid warfare. During the occupation of Crimea, Russia utilized armed local militias alongside regular army units and effectively coordinated cyber attacks and propaganda activities (Renz & Seuring, 2017). Another example of hybrid warfare is the combat strategy adopted by Hezbollah during Israel's 2006 military campaign against Lebanon. Hezbollah, which is militarily incomparably weaker than Israel, supplemented its conventional capacities with unconventional warfare methods and effectively utilized psychological warfare techniques, including rocket attacks against Israel and propaganda activities (Byman, 2011). As a matter of fact, Israel was unable to break Hezbollah's influence and resistance and had to retreat after failing to achieve its strategic objectives.

Hybrid warfare, which combines elements of asymmetric and conventional warfare, is reshaping security policies and defense strategies in terms of its strategic and operational consequences. This transformation in security and defense approaches necessitates regular armies and states addressing their security policies in the context of hybrid threats. In this context, in addition to military measures, technological developments, digitalization, cybersecurity, and strategic communication elements need to be taken into consideration.

Hybrid warfare, a method frequently used today, is a widely used strategy that reshapes the traditional war paradigm. Hybrid wars have the potential to seriously impact the functioning of the international system and security policies (Hoffman, 2007). Accordingly, hybrid warfare threats should be taken into consideration when planning defense and security policies.

3.4. Proxy War

Instead of directly confronting each other, great powers often try to produce influence by using local militias and armed groups acting as their proxies. According to the relevant literature, this method, which is closely related to asymmetric warfare, is defined as proxy warfare (Mumford, 2013). Accordingly, proxy warfare is defined as the use of armed organizations and groups fighting against a rival state, rather than engaging in direct conflict, to weaken another rival state and protect its own interests (Salehyan, 2010). In such conflicts, a state supports these groups through funding, training, or intelligence to pursue its geopolitical goals while avoiding the costs and risks of confrontation. This strategy has been widely observed in the Middle East, where, for example, the Syrian civil war saw major powers backing various non-state actors to advance their interests without clashing directly (Byman & Wittes, 2016). Especially after the

Cold War, instead of fighting each other directly, states started to resort to proxy wars in which non-state armed actors are used effectively. The efforts of states to utilize proxy forces in order to protect their interests have naturally made asymmetric warfare strategies more important (Metz & Johnson, 2001). Today, the economic and human costs of wars are quite high. With the widespread impact of globalization and digitalization, the destructive effects of war quickly reach all parts of the world and disturb public opinion. In this situation, a state's direct entry into war creates a great cost in human and economic terms, and it becomes difficult to withstand the public pressure for a long time. In this situation, states try to avoid direct confrontation as much as possible while turning more to soft power elements to protect their interests. In cases where the use of military force is necessary, they turn to local groups that they can use on the ground against rival actors instead of engaging in a direct conflict if possible (Mumford, 2013; Byman & Wittes, 2016). By supporting militarily, politically, and economically armed non-state actors in conflict and of interest, it takes advantage of them in line with its interests. Instead of fighting itself, it puts the structures it supports on the field as a kind of proxy and makes them fight (Staniland, 2014). In this way, it minimizes direct warfare's human, political, and economic burden and limits possible pressures. On the other hand, proxy wars are also a way to avoid responsibility for possible criminal acts under international law (Talmon, 2004). This is because the actor, who does not directly participate in the war but utilizes proxy forces, also avoids responsibility for possible war crimes committed by the groups it supports. However, such proxy relations are problematic for the norms and functioning of international law, including the United Nations Charter (Cassese, 2005; Schmitt, 2010; Crawford, 2013).

3.5. PYD/YPG's Asymmetric Warfare Strategy And Activities

When the examples of recent conflicts are examined, the increasing role of non-state armed actors in terms of international security and defense paradigms draws attention. Approaching the activities of the PYD/YPG, a non-state armed actor, within this framework will make the issue more understandable. The asymmetric warfare strategy adopted by the organization and the relations it has established shed light on the increasing role of non-state armed actors in terms of international security, defense approaches, and war strategies. The analysis of the organization as a case study within the framework of asymmetric warfare reveals how non-state actors are strategically instrumentalized in terms of proxy wars and conflict dynamics.

In general terms, asymmetric warfare can be defined as a model of warfare that is characterized by elements such as an imbalance of forces, a dispersed battlefield, proxy wars, and irregular warfare tactics, and thus differs from conventional war doctrine (Watts, 2004). The terrorist

organization PKK and its Syrian branch PYD/YPG are non-state armed actors that have adopted asymmetric warfare as a war strategy and shaped their organizational structures accordingly (Gunter, 2019; Şahin & İrdem, 2017). The PKK terrorist organization, which constitutes the central umbrella of the PYD/YPG, has been carrying out armed attacks mainly against Türkiye since 1984. As a method of struggle, it has adopted asymmetric warfare elements such as guerrilla warfare, irregular warfare tactics, sabotage, kidnappings, assassinations, bomb attacks against civilian targets, psychological warfare tactics, and propaganda against Turkish security units (Gunter, 2019; Şahin & İrdem, 2017). The organization's Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG, is an armed actor supported militarily, logistically, and politically by the US and some European countries. Although the organization has increased its conventional warfare capacity with support from the West during the Syrian Civil War, it has not abandoned its asymmetric warfare doctrine (Knights, 2016). As an armed non-state actor, it is important to understand the fighting strategy of the organization that wages a proxy war on behalf of the countries that support it. Thus, the effects of asymmetric warfare strategy and proxy wars on security dynamics and regional balances can be made more understandable.

The organization, which traditionally wages guerrilla warfare, has transformed in line with the dynamics of the era and adopted hybrid warfare tactics, thus re-establishing its relations with regional countries and global actors on the plane of asymmetric warfare. In this context, the organization builds its operational struggle on military, political, economic, and propaganda activities within an asymmetric warfare strategy framework. Since it is an armed actor, the organization's activities are mostly addressed within the framework of its military actions. A proper analysis of the PYD/YPG's armed struggle strategy is only possible by understanding the PKK, from which it evolved. In this context, the organization's war strategy should be analyzed in terms of rural warfare, guerrilla warfare, trans-border warfare, and urban warfare. The PKK terrorist organization, which directs and manages the PYD/YPG, traditionally has a strategy based on guerrilla warfare with high rural capability, cell-type organization, and dispersed and mobile groups (Marcus, 2007). Although Türkiye's increased military and intelligence capacity, especially due to technology, has significantly limited the organization's activities in the countryside, the organization has not given up on guerrilla warfare. The PYD/YPG has adopted the PKK's guerrilla warfare strategy and conducts its activities in Syria accordingly. In addition, the tactics and experiences learned from the PKK's urban warfare in the provincial and district centers in eastern and southeastern Türkiye have been applied by the PYD/YPG in Syria.

3.5.1. Enlargement Activities of the PYD/YPG in Western Countries

The PKK is considered an internationally active terrorist organization that has been targeting Türkiye since 1984 and has been held responsible for various criminal and terrorist acts in many countries. The PKK is on the list of terrorist organizations of the EU and the USA. Yet, it continues its political, economic, and propaganda activities in Western countries (Derviş & Demir, 2016). The PKK, which is used and supported by the West as a proxy force in Syria, and PJAK, which operates in Iran, directly directs and manages these structures. Although their names and acronyms are different, their aims and methods are the same, and their activities are coordinated from a single center (Şahin & İrdem, 2017). This situation is not different in terms of the organization's activities in the European Union, the United States, and other Western countries. The material, political, and diplomatic gains it has achieved serve the agenda of a single separatist center. In this context, the term “PKK's relations with the West and its activities in Western countries” is used in this study to describe a single structure that includes the organization's Syrian, Iranian, and Iraqi extensions.

The organization's multidimensional activities in the US and European countries are noteworthy. These can be categorized under four headings: lobbying activities, financial activities, media and propaganda activities, and recruitment of militants.

3.5.2. Lobbying Activities

The lobbying activities carried out by the organization in EU countries and North America constitute one of the important topics to be emphasized. The organization primarily tries to strengthen its political ground and gain legitimacy in the West by using its own allied structures. While trying to gain legitimacy through contacts and initiatives in both the European Parliament and national parliaments, the organization also endeavors to create an agenda against Türkiye (Çelik, 2022). In this context, although it tries to contact different segments of the political spectrum, it mostly cooperates with parties with a leftist and/or socialist identity. In this context, by positioning itself as a “freedom and independence movement” (Dalay, 2021), the organization tries to gain sympathy and camouflage its terrorist acts that also target civilians. On the other hand, the organization tries to expand its legitimacy through meetings, symposiums, conferences, and congresses, including Western academic circles.

Even the PKK, which the West considers a terrorist organization, let alone the PYD/YPG, which the West distinguishes from the PKK, can easily organize in Europe. It develops and implements strategies to influence political circles, media, and public opinion. The

organization's activities in this direction are frequently reflected in academic studies, security reports, and media analyses (Gunter, 2019; Marcus, 2007). When the organization's lobbying activities are examined, it is seen that its goals focus on the legitimization of the organization, removal from terrorist lists, obtaining financial and logistical support, and manipulation of Western public opinion (Yıldız, 2022). To this end, the organization has conducted intensive lobbying activities through non-governmental organizations, academic circles, media, and political actors, and has formed an organized structure, especially in countries such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium (Berkowitz & Mügge, 2014).

The organization, which tries to camouflage its acts of violence through lobbying activities, strives to build an image based on values such as human rights and democracy. Some media outlets and non-governmental organizations in Europe and the US support the organization's efforts to create a positive image of itself as a resistance movement. The organization, which cannot operate directly under the PKK name in the US due to its inclusion in the list of terrorist organizations, tries to fill this gap through its Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG (Larrabee, 2009). Some of the US-based think tanks try to portray the PYD/YPG as a legitimate organization by ignoring its relationship with the PKK and the terrorist acts it has carried out, and by addressing the PYD/YPG through concepts such as secularism and democracy. On the other hand, some academics working at US universities present a framework that supports the organization's theses in their studies (Gunter, 2019). In the US Congress, it is seen that some political actors try to legitimize the PYD/YPG under the name of “Syrian Democratic Forces” by presenting it as a separate entity from the PKK (US Congressional Reports, 2022). It is also known that the PKK organizes human rights and refugee-themed campaigns and raises funds to finance its lobbying activities in the US. Despite all this, in the West, government officials and security experts at different levels state that the PYD/YPG is not a separate entity from the PKK but poses a threat, and argue that the organization should be closely monitored. Ultimately, experts point out that the PKK, under any name, is a threat to security policies and the healthy functioning of international relations. On the other hand, it is also argued that the PKK and its offshoots, such as the PYD/YPG, are not concerned with human rights and democracy, but use this rhetoric to camouflage their violent and massacring methods. In this framework, it can be said that there is a significant discrepancy between the organization's rhetoric and its actions. This contradiction calls into question the credibility and sincerity of the US and other Western states that support the organization in the international arena. This situation may lead to severe crises in the medium and long term regarding regional and global security.

3.5.3. Financial Activities

The organization uses its income by taking advantage of legal loopholes in European countries or being ignored to finance its armed struggle, lobbying, and propaganda activities. The organization is known to generate income by using established institutions and structures in the West and using this resource to support the armed struggle (Europol, 2022). While some of these revenues have a legal appearance, some of them are obtained directly from criminal acts. Accordingly, the organization resorts to various methods such as voluntary and compulsory donations, extortion, drug trafficking, arms and human trafficking, tax evasion, and forgery (Akartuna & Thornton, 2021). The organization, which has a diaspora spread across various cities in Europe, generates financial income through campaigns and organizations organized through non-governmental organizations, such as foundations and associations affiliated or allied. On the other hand, according to the reports of security units, it benefits from many illegal activities across Europe (Europol, 2022). Some of the activities of the organization that are reflected in the reports of security sources are that it organizes the entry of illegal immigrants to Europe in exchange for money, and traffics in weapons and drugs.

In addition to obtaining financial resources by working with aid organizations based in Europe, the organization generates income by organizing donation campaigns through social media platforms. When these activities are examined, it is observed that they are often masked under the guise of humanitarian aid. It is stated that the organization plays a leading role in the drug trade in Europe and uses the revenues it obtains in this way to finance its armed activities (Yılmaz & Tetik, 2020). According to Europol's 2023 report on Terrorist Financing, the PKK actively cooperates with other criminal organizations to bring the black money it launders into the system through its established mechanisms (Europol, 2023). This situation indicates that the organization poses a security threat to the countries in which it operates. Studies show that the organization cooperates with criminal organizations in drug and human trafficking, forges documents and passports, and provides significant financing in this way (Roth & Sever, 2007). On the other hand, it is also known that the organization collects compulsory donations from the European diaspora (Gunter, 2019) and obtains financial support from businessmen either voluntarily or under pressure.

3.5.4. Media and Propaganda Activities

Media and propaganda activities constitute another key area of the organization's activities. It actively uses conventional and digital media platforms to spread its theses and realize its agenda. The organization already has many media outlets broadcasting and serving its

propaganda from European countries. Among these, Firat News Agency (ANF) and Serxwebün Magazine are based in the Netherlands, Sterk TV in Belgium, Medya Haber TV and Yeni Özgür Politika Magazine in Germany, Ronahi TV and Newroz TV in Sweden. In these media outlets, which are not interfered with on the grounds of freedom of expression, members of the terrorist organization are romanticized and innocitized with the conceptualizations of freedom fighters and guerrillas, while terrorist acts are ignored. On the other hand, media outlets aligned with the organization portray Türkiye as a ruthless, genocidal, and war-criminal state. Some of these broadcasts reach large masses via satellite, consolidating and manipulating the sociological basis of the organization. In addition, the organization actively uses the internet and social media platforms for propaganda. Social media, which makes everyone accessible at any time and from anywhere with its bidirectional and interactive structure, is a handy communication tool for the organization. Through individual and/or institutional social media accounts, young people are targeted and engaged in the organization's agenda (Kürkçü & Erendor, 2022). Digital platforms, including social media, are suitable for manipulation and black propaganda activities, in addition to their features such as speed, dynamism, and ease of use, which facilitate the organization's work. Additionally, the organization seeks to establish legitimacy in international public opinion by organizing and reporting on cultural and artistic events, as well as academic meetings, to disseminate its ideology and propaganda (Yılmaz & Tetik, 2020).

When news and analyses on the PYD/YPG in the Western media are examined, it is seen that the organization is treated as a separate structure from the PKK. The organization's militants are conceptualized and affirmed as heroes and freedom fighters in media representations. While the PYD/YPG is emphasized as a structure fighting against DAESH, its relationship with the PKK is not mentioned (Gunter, 2019). While news and content about the organization are built on the figures of secularism and women fighters, the massacres, arbitrary practices, and mass displacement policy in the regions under its control are ignored. The women's organization, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), has been frequently covered in the Western media, and apart from the news media, documentaries and movies have tried to strengthen the image of women fighters. Documentaries and movies such as "Gulistan, Land of Roses", "The Daughters of Kobani", and the BBC's "Women of the Revolution: The Frontline YPJ" are some of the examples prepared in this context. By presenting YPJ militants as brave women fighting against DAESH, efforts were made to gain the attention and support of feminist groups (Tax, 2016; Gunter, 2019). Major media outlets such as the BBC, The Guardian, and the New York Times have frequently featured images of female YPJ militants in their publications, thereby

increasing public sympathy for the organization. On the other hand, there has been no coverage of the relationship between the PYD/YPG and the PKK, or of the women who are forcibly recruited and forced to fight by the organization. Instead, concepts such as democratic autonomy, secularism, freedom, and democracy, which are incompatible with the reality on the ground, are frequently used, and the organization is identified with these values. This conceptualization is part of a communication strategy to establish an image of the organization as compatible with Western values and a liberal worldview.

Contrary to the representation in the Western media, the PYD/YPG has established a strict one-party regime in the areas it controls and has eliminated those who disagreed with the organization among the Kurds, whose rights it claims to defend. Some of these Kurds were killed, and others were forced to flee their country by being sent into exile (Amnesty International, 2021). A significant portion of those who migrated from Syria to Türkiye are Kurds living in the areas controlled by the PYD/YPG. Around one hundred thousand of them had to migrate to European countries. However, finding news or criticism of the organization's actions in the Western media is complicated.

Although the direct link and relationship between the PYD/YPG and the PKK are reflected in many academic studies and intelligence reports, the Western media ignores this situation as well. When the leadership of the PYD/YPG is examined, it is seen that a significant portion of them were raised within the PKK and continue to maintain ideological and organizational ties with the PKK (Watts, 2010). Although the US Department of Defense reports, which support the PYD/YPG, state that the organization is an extension of the PKK, the Western media again ignored this fact. The Western media tries to legitimize the PYD/YPG and Western support for the organization by claiming that it is an actor fighting against DAESH. In contrast, the media has tried to manipulate Türkiye's operations against DAESH in Syria as being directed against the Kurds. By distorting or ignoring Türkiye's effective operations against DAESH, Western public opinion has been led to believe that the PYD/YPG is the only force fighting against DAESH.

In summary, it is possible to say that the PYD/YPG terrorist organization effectively uses conventional and digital media to influence and manipulate Western public opinion, and that the media supports the organization in this direction. Concepts and themes such as democracy, secularism, feminism, heroism, and freedom fighters constitute the organization's image construction framework. The organization's ties and relations with the PKK and its illegal actions in the regions it controls are ignored or trivialized. By presenting a one-sided

perspective on the PYD/YPG, the Western media avoids showing the real agenda and actions of the organization. The organization's representation in the media effectively gains support and sympathy from Western publics and flexes government policies to favor the organization (Stein, 2017). Opinions that question and criticize the PYD/YPG-PKK relationship are ignored or marginalized. Despite the proliferation of alternative outlets, the Western media based in the US and Europe maintains its power to influence international public opinion. In this context, the Western media's definition and presentation of the PYD/YPG constitute an important factor in the international perception and image of the organization. Indeed, the organization's representation in the Western media effectively shapes Western states' regional policies (Chomsky, 1997; Herman & Chomsky, 2002). This is because the media is not only a tool that conveys information and news, but also a tool that sets agendas and mediates the formation of social opinions. In this respect, the media is considered an ideological apparatus that legitimizes some actors and marginalizes others by presenting actual and intellectual conflicts and political relations within a particular framework (Van Dijk, 2006). The Western media's language and presentation of the organization should be evaluated from this perspective. In this context, it can be said that the organization's representation in the Western media is based on convincing international publics in line with the West's regional interests. As a result, the presentation of the organization as a democratic, secular actor fighting against DAESH and defending Western values while ignoring its PKK affiliation is a manifestation of the communication strategy structured within this framework.

3.5.5. Recruitment

The organization carries out financial, lobbying, and propaganda activities in the West and is known to recruit militants, especially from European countries. It is stated that the organization recruits militants in countries such as Greece, Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands and even has training camps in some of these countries (Europol, 2022). Using its relations with the West, the organization recruits militants from its loyalist base and attracts mercenary fighters consisting of citizens of different countries to the conflict areas.

When examined closely, it is known that the organization develops close relations with leftist and socialist structures in the West. It primarily recruits marginal individuals within these structures and sends them to conflict zones. The organization attracts people with radical leftist tendencies from Europe and North America to Syria, provides them with military training, and then involves them in conflicts (Stein, 2017; Orton, 2018). This reality poses serious security risks not only for the Middle East and the countries in the region, but also for the countries

where these individuals are citizens. After gaining combat experience in conflict zones, they will likely get involved in crime when they return to their countries. Indeed, an analysis of DAESH attacks in the West reveals that a significant number of these terrorists are citizens of European countries who have been involved in Syria and/or other conflict zones. Therefore, it can be said that the same picture poses similar risks for militants who have gained combat experience in the ranks of the PYD/YPG. As in DAESH attacks, there is a possibility that these individuals may carry out individual or organized attacks. The combat experience they have gained in the conflict zone, the ties and relations they have established with the terrorist organization, and the psychological problems caused by the events they have experienced are factors that need to be emphasized. In this context, it is argued that foreign fighters involved in the terrorist structure of the organization lead to the construction of new international crime and terrorist ties through their connections (Tinas & Demirden, 2020). It should not be forgotten that people who are in war zones, especially those who are involved in conflicts, can be radicalized and carry the violence they are a part of to their countries.

The organization organizes street movements by coordinating demonstrations and marches in European cities, utilizing individuals and groups with whom it has already established cooperation. While this power of the organization serves to expand its legitimacy in the West and obtain financial resources (Yüksel, 2019), it threatens social peace and tranquility in the long run. This is because the street movements controlled by the organization create chaos and disorder in European cities, sometimes leading to clashes with security forces. It is observed that some of the actions coordinated or supported by the organization fuel violence in various European cities. Although the countries that are the addressees of these actions recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization, it is considered a contradiction for the West that the PYD/YPG, which operates with the same references, slogans, methods, and visual communication elements, acts freely. This situation, including the countries that give space to the PYD/YPG, threatens international security policies and leads to serious inconsistencies and trust problems in the system.

When the PKK's activities in the US are analyzed, it is seen that lobbying and propaganda activities dominate. The organization builds its activities in this country not under the PKK name but through its Syrian extension, PYD/YPG. Strategically, it focuses on expanding its legitimacy and providing more military and logistical support to the PYD/YPG. On the other hand, the organization's presence and activities in the West pose significant security risks to Türkiye and the countries that protect and support it (Tinas & Demirden, 2020). As reflected

in various studies and intelligence reports, the organization is responsible for many illegal activities in Western countries and threatens social peace and security.

3.6. The West - PYD/YPG Relationship in the Context of Proxy Wars

The support of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization, by Western states, especially the United States, and its asymmetric warfare activities constitute a typical example of proxy wars. Although the organization does not have the capacity of a regular army, it operates as a non-state armed actor with the military, logistical, political, and economic support provided by Western powers. Although the organization is based in Syria, it is stated that as a proxy power, it tries to produce influence in line with the regional policies of Western states (Tinas & Demirden, 2020; Yılmaz & Tetik, 2020).

As one of the most active geographies where non-state armed actors operate, the Middle East is important in regional and global security dynamics. This geography, which includes examples of failed states and collapsed states such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, has a favorable ground for the emergence of non-state armed actors. The instability that emerged with the collapse of state authority in Iraq after the US invasion, the Arab Spring, and the subsequent weakening of the state with the civil conflict in Syria, led to the emergence of many armed groups in the region. In addition, the instability and chaotic environment in the region have led to the strengthening of long-standing terrorist organizations such as the PKK. One of the important factors in strengthening these structures is the external support provided to these organizations. Many states currently develop relations with these organizations in line with their interests and support them militarily, logistically, politically, and economically. In this context, the US-led Western coalition supports the PYD/YPG terrorist organization, the Syrian extension of the PKK (Stein, 2017). The US and its Western partners seemingly recognize the PYD/YPG as an important ally against the DAESH threat. Türkiye, on the other hand, considers this relationship a national security threat and shapes its security paradigm accordingly.

The West avoids direct warfare in the Syria-centered conflict as much as possible, except for airstrikes, and instead prefers to wage a proxy war through the PYD/YPG as a ground force. As explained earlier, this approach can be explained by the fact that the political, economic, and human costs of engaging in direct conflict are much higher than those of proxy wars. This is because proxy wars are a strategically low-cost method of warfare. Waging a proxy war through local armed forces is less costly and risky than engaging in direct conflict. Indeed, being a direct party to a conflict increases the possibility of the war spreading to other areas of interest. This risk is relatively lower in proxy wars. On the other hand, direct interventions often

lead to greater domestic and international backlash. Instead, it is easier to intervene in the field of conflict through local armed forces and thus conduct operations in line with the dynamics of the relevant region (Stein, 2017).

As a global power, the US engages in direct wars, as in the recent examples of Afghanistan and Iraq, but also utilizes local armed structures as proxy forces in different conflict areas. Thus, it minimizes its military, economic, and political costs (Yüksel, 2019). Proxy warfare and hybrid warfare, which refer to the type of conflict based on the support of local armed actors and dominated by asymmetric warfare methods, are frequently used by the US as a low-cost war strategy (Mumford, 2013; Hoffman, 2007). This method enables the US to reduce its human, political, and economic costs while maintaining its global hegemony and limiting the reactions in domestic politics and international relations. This low-cost war strategy is a method of struggle employed by the US in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Sarı Ertem (2024) emphasizes that this relationship operates as a patron-client model within the framework of surrogate warfare, where the US, as the patron, transfers operational and tactical burdens to the PYD/YPG, which acts as a local client organization. This collaboration has allowed the US to pursue its strategic objectives in Syria indirectly, while generating tensions with its traditional ally, Türkiye, due to PYD/YPG's organizational links with the PKK and the broader regional repercussions of such support.

Another important issue to be emphasized in the context of proxy wars is the issue of international legitimacy. The issue of legitimacy is an important challenge that a state must overcome when supporting an armed non-state actor. It is also problematic in terms of international law for a state to support groups that lack international representation and legitimacy on the battlefield. If the supported structures or groups threaten another sovereign state, especially an ally, new problems are inevitable. In this context, it is important for the actor supporting such structures or groups to give international legitimacy to the proxy force and to ensure that other states support it. One of the methods used for this purpose is to act together with as many allies as possible to support the representation of the proxy power. In this way, it aims to soften the possible reactions of domestic and foreign public opinion internationally. Another method is for the organization to be addressed by military and civilian representatives and politicians of states. Similarly, inviting the organization's representatives to international meetings and organizations to gain representation and visibility manifests the effort to build legitimacy.

In conclusion, the West's effort to portray the PYD/YPG as a separate entity from the PKK is a manifestation of the attempt to legitimize the organization and the established relationship. In order to convince the public opinion, the support given to the organization is built on the perception that the PYD/YPG is a structure that acts on the axis of Western values such as freedom, democracy, and secularism, based on the fight against DAESH.

3.7. The Effects of the Western - PYD/YPG Relationship on Regional and Global Security Dynamics

The relations established by Western powers with the PYD/YPG, by ignoring international law, open the door to many debates in terms of regional and global security and stability. In particular, the fact that there are different perspectives on the organization among NATO allied countries is considered an important problem affecting the balance of the NATO alliance (Şahin & İrdem, 2017). On the other hand, this proxy and alliance relationship with non-state armed actors is an issue that needs to be emphasized in the context of international law. It is observed that many states today base their relations with non-state armed actors on the gray areas of international law. While non-state armed actors are sometimes recognized as strategic allies depending on their functionality, they can be defined as a threat when there is a conflict of interest (Chaliand & Blin, 2016).

The Western-backed activities of the PYD/YPG threaten regional stability and security (Gordon, 2018). The organization operates in Türkiye under the name PKK, in Iraq under the name PÇDK, in Iran under the name PJAK, and in Syria under the name PYD/YPG. Today, the KCK carries out terrorist activities in four regional countries with a separatist agenda under its central umbrella. However, in practice, the PKK carries out the structure's military and political command and coordination. Although Syria, Iraq, and Iran have developed relations with the PKK against Türkiye in the course of the historical conflict, the organization's separatist agenda based on the four countries has ensured that this relationship has remained at a limited level. Although its rhetoric changes cyclically, the organization's ultimate goal is to establish an independent state based on the disintegration of the four countries. This is naturally perceived as a substantial security threat by the countries in the region. However, the countries in the region have periodically supported the organization or ignored its activities, especially in light of their conflicts of interest and disputes with Türkiye. On the other hand, international actors, including Russia and many European countries, have approached the organization in an interest-oriented manner. This approach stems from accepting the organization as an applicable competitive multiplier in the regional equation.

3.7.1. The Impact of the West - PYD/YPG Relationship on Regional Security Dynamics

The United States, a global power, and Türkiye, a rising power, are two actors whose regional interests and expectations sometimes clash despite being allies. Türkiye's foreign policy approach prioritizes its national interests and requires it to establish multifaceted relations and develop policies with international actors. In contrast, the US approach, which wants Türkiye to be more engaged in its interests in foreign policy, has led to strained relations between the two countries. The US and Europe's desire to approach relations with Türkiye in a Cold War-era manner is incompatible with today's realities (Zakaria, 2011; Bremmer, 2012).

Türkiye's purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia, despite US objections, the US exclusion of Türkiye from the F-35 program, the purchase and modernization of F-16s, and problems in procuring various weapons and ammunition are some of the issues between the two allies. The approach of European partners to Türkiye has not differed significantly from that of the US, and they have eroded the alliance law through overt and covert embargoes and stalling methods. On the other hand, tensions between Türkiye and Israel are another factor affecting US policies towards Türkiye. The US has difficulty accepting Türkiye's unique foreign policy preferences, which align with its national interests. Türkiye's cooperation with actors like Russia, Iran, and China, aligned with its national interests, and its opposition to the regional and global security threat posed by Israel, disturb the US and its European allies, who want Turkish foreign policy to align with their interests in every way.

The US arming and protecting the PYD/YPG in Syria as a proxy force, which is considered a national security threat by Türkiye, constitutes another major problem in the relations between the two countries (Stein & Foley, 2016). Türkiye, which has been severely damaged by the instability and insecurity caused by the conflicts in its region and its immediate geography, desires the end of the conflicts and the stabilization of the region. In addition to security concerns, the protracted conflicts have also created a chaotic environment, leading to mass migration in the region and resulting in social, economic, and political problems (Erdoğan et al., 2021).

Since the PYD/YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization, Türkiye opposes any initiative supporting the organization. In this framework, Türkiye has organized and supported some of the Syrian opposition groups in order to break the organization's effectiveness in the field, while at the same time pushing the organization away from its borders to a large extent through direct military operations. As a result of these initiatives, the PYD/YPG attacks on settlements in Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Kilis, and Gaziantep provinces have

been largely eliminated. However, the combination of the military capacity of the organization and the terrorist attacks it has organized inside Türkiye shows that the threat has not been eliminated.

The main objectives and interests of the US in Syria can be described as balancing Russia's gains in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, eliminating Iran's supply and activity area extending to Lebanon, Israel's security, and eliminating organizations such as al-Qaeda and DAESH. In this context, the US first divided the country into two military zones bordering Russia and the Euphrates River. It began using the PYD/YPG as ground forces in the western part of the river, which is along Syria's border with Türkiye. Although there are not many US troops in the bases established in the region, the presence of these bases has enabled the PYD/YPG to grow and expand its sphere of control under US protection. The US has supplied the PYD/YPG with a large number of weapons, military vehicles, ammunition, and various materials, including high-tech systems, via cargo planes and bases in Iraq. In addition, the organization has been accepted as an interlocutor by the military and civilian representatives of the US and some other Western powers at various levels. It has been invited to the parliaments of countries such as France and Germany to be recognized as a legitimate structure. On the other hand, the public opinion has sympathized with the organization through positive news reports, documentaries, and movies in the Western media. This high-level military, political, and economic support from the West, led by the US, has given the organization a capacity and capability that regional actors cannot ignore.

As a non-state armed actor, the military capacity that the PYD/YPG gained with US support has transformed it into a conventional force, albeit a relative one. The organization's transformation into a conventional military force is seen as unacceptable regarding the regional balance of power. This situation is no different for Iraq, Iran, and Syria, which have turned into a conflict zone, even though their priorities change cyclically. The PKK and its armed branches in the countries of the region are considered a national and regional threat due to their separatist agenda and actions. Despite this attitude of regional countries towards the PYD/YPG, its support by the US and other Western powers has a destabilizing effect on regional dynamics and balance of power.

In the process, the PYD/YPG has become the ground force of the US and other Western states in the region, both in the fight against DAESH and in balancing the Russian and Iranian-backed Ba'athist regime (Phillips, 2016). As a result, the organization increased its military capacity with the strong support it received from the West under the leadership of the United States and

turned into a relative conventional power. This relationship between the organization and the West affected the positions of other states and non-state actors in Syria and opened the door to new alliance relations. Russia and Iran, which support the Syrian regime, started to see the PYD/YPG as a proxy force of the West in Syria as a result of the organization's close relationship with the US, and started to take positions accordingly. Russia and Iran, who do not want the organization to be an effective actor in Syria and a security threat to the regime in the long term, have not taken any serious action against the PYD/YPG (Yüksel, 2019). One of the main reasons for this is that the organization has intensified Türkiye's threat perception with its actions and activities along the border. Thus, it was aimed to prevent Türkiye from focusing on the Bashar al-Assad regime by distracting it with the PYD/YPG. Russia and Iran, who are in favor of the continuation of the regime, saw the PYD/YPG's distraction of Türkiye to their benefit in order to protect their regional interests. Similarly, although the Syrian regime was uncomfortable with the PYD/YPG, it avoided a destructive conflict with the organization. It did not oppose the PYD/YPG's creation of a buffer zone between Türkiye and the regime forces. Türkiye directly intervened in northern Syria between 2015 and 2020 in order to eliminate the threat from DAESH and PYD/YPG terrorist organizations along its southern border and to prevent attacks. With the Euphrates Shield Operation carried out between 2016 and 2017, the DAESH terrorist organization was dealt a severe blow, and the Jarabulus and Al-Bab regions were cleared of terrorism. With this operation, the DAESH terrorist organization was removed from the Turkish border, and the YPG, which captured Manbij, was prevented from establishing a corridor connecting Afrin and Manbij. Thus, the PYD/YPG's strategy of establishing a corridor along Türkiye's southern border line to reach the Mediterranean Sea lost its viability. In sum, Operation Euphrates Shield targeted both DAESH and PYD/YPG terrorist organizations targeting Türkiye and significantly reduced their strategic effectiveness. Subsequently, Afrin was cleared of terrorism in 2018 with Operation Olive Branch against the PYD/YPG, and Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad on the Turkish border were cleared of terrorism in 2019 with Operation Peace Spring. Again in 2017, the Idlib operation was carried out to prevent a possible mass migration through de-escalation. As a result of the Syrian regime's advance into Idlib despite the agreement reached through Russia, Türkiye faced a new wave of migration and security threats. As a result, Operation Spring Shield was organized in February 2020, and the regime forces were pushed back, and the threat was eliminated. On the other hand, throughout the entire process, Türkiye has carried out and continues to carry out numerous operations, large and small, from the air and on the ground.

Türkiye's operations to ensure its national security under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which recognizes the right to self-defense, have been supported or criticized by international actors, but have had a profound impact on Syria and the region. The safe zones created on the Turkish border and the prevention of Russian and regime forces from intervening in Idlib are considered to be an important factor in the Syrian opposition's recovery and victory over the regime in the ongoing process. On the other hand, Türkiye's operations, which mainly targeted the PYD/YPG and DAESH, but also the Syrian regime forces of the period, affected its relations with the countries in the region. While Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and some Gulf countries criticized the operations, Qatar's approach supported Türkiye's security concerns. Ultimately, the presence and effectiveness of the PYD/YPG went beyond an issue between Türkiye and Syria and led to the organization being seen as a force multiplier by other actors.

The support of the organization by Western powers under the umbrella of the United States has enabled it to increase its military and political influence in Syria, and the regional security balances have been affected by this situation. As a result, other actors have endeavored to reorganize their preferences and positions towards the groups they work with on the ground. While the PYD/YPG acted in line with its agenda during the war in Syria, it became an important ally of the US in the fight against DAESH. With the military, logistical, and intelligence support it received from Western powers under the leadership of the US, it has significantly increased its capacity (Phillips, 2016). While this situation paved the way for the organization to become an effective and permanent actor in Syria, it was perceived as a threat by the countries in the region due to its potential to encourage separatist movements.

In the new situation that emerged after 2024, when the Assad regime lost significant territorial control and the US began to openly support the PYD/YPG, will the group become a permanent actor in the country, or will the attitudes and decisions of other regional actors shape a part of the central administration? The US administration change indicates that the organization will no longer receive the US support it received during the Biden era. The Donald Trump administration is reluctant to defend even European countries and NATO allies. Considering that other Western powers support the organization under the leadership of the US, it does not seem very easy for the organization to survive without the US. On the other hand, the increasing security concerns of European countries due to the Russia-Ukraine War cause them to focus their priority agenda on the Russian threat. The Trump administration's approach to European security and Europe's possible need for Türkiye's defense industry and military capacity leads to a reshaping of the equation. In this context, it does not seem easy for European countries to

continue supporting the PYD/YPG without US support. On the other hand, the new Syrian Administration's rejection of options such as federation or autonomy and the support of many actors, especially Türkiye, for the territorial integrity of Syria, make it difficult for the organization to continue its existence.

3.7.2. The Impact of the West - PYD/YPG Relationship on Global Security Dynamics

The primary motivation for resorting to proxy wars is that the cost and risks of fighting through non-state armed actors are lower compared to the high cost and spillover risk of direct warfare. There are increasing examples of states supporting non-state armed actors in line with their interests. However, cooperating with and legitimizing non-state armed actors poses serious risks for international law and global security. When such armed structures are analyzed, it is seen that most of them are terrorist organizations that threaten one or more states with their actions and methods. In this context, the risk is perceived not only between two states or at the regional level, but also directly and indirectly at the global security level.

With the increasing globalization and the widespread impact of digitalization through communication and transportation facilities, limiting the threat to a specific geography is becoming difficult. Violent incidents and conflicts in distant geographies will likely create direct or indirect security threats in other parts of the world. People from different parts of the world get involved in conflicts in another country for various reasons, and at the end of the day, they return to their home countries with the war experience they have gained.

In addition, organizational structures can be organized and coordinated through digital platforms without actual formation, and can operate globally without the notion of time and space. In addition to being a threat to the countries in the region, the organization's existence and activities have caused distrust among NATO allies (Larrabee, 2009). NATO, of which Türkiye is a member, is currently the world's largest military alliance. As one of the most considerable powers in the alliance, Türkiye is uncomfortable with the support of other alliance partners for the organization. The crisis of confidence stemming from the support for the organization affects NATO's agenda and activities, which is reflected in Türkiye's military, political, and diplomatic initiatives. Most recently, Sweden and Finland's request to join NATO was vetoed by Türkiye due to their approach to the terrorist organization. The membership of these countries was only given the green light after lengthy diplomatic negotiations based on their commitments to Türkiye in the fight against terrorism. As can be seen from this example, the support of terrorist organizations harms the expansion and functionality of global alliances beyond regional effects.

The PKK organization, which includes the PYD/YPG, has largely lost its ability to carry out actions inside the country as a result of Türkiye's long years of struggle and operations. However, the organization continues to operate directly and under different names in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The organization, which maintains its presence in the Qandil Mountains and Sinjar region in northern Iraq along the Iranian border and creates a transit between the two countries, weakens the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria and causes deepening conflicts. On the other hand, it cooperates with other armed groups, including DAESH, and criminal networks in the Middle East, causing the spread of terrorism on a global scale. The organization's illicit activities are not limited to the Middle East, but create an international criminal architecture, such as drug, arms, human trafficking, and money laundering that extends to European countries (Roth & Sever, 2007).

Through its allied structures, the organization can carry out political, economic, and propaganda activities in European countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. However, this ground directly and indirectly threatens the security of Europe. On the one hand, this threat stems from the organization's relations with criminal organizations and its ability to mobilize the streets in countries where it is firmly structured. On the other hand, it is another reality that militants who are recruited from Europe and sent to conflicts in the Middle East and gain combat experience return to their European countries of citizenship. It is likely that these individuals, who can easily change countries with their Western passports, may engage in terrorist acts either individually or in an organized manner. There is no guarantee that this threat, which has been experienced in DAESH terrorist acts, will not be carried out by European fighters who have fought in the ranks of the PYD/YPG. Given their organizational affiliations and combat experience, they may be instrumental in the globalization of terrorism.

In addition, the organization's existence, activities, and support cast a shadow over the UN, NATO, EU, and inter-state cooperation and create mistrust. Considering Türkiye's geopolitical position and military capacity in terms of the security of Europe and the West, it can be argued that the tension created by the organization between allies has turned into a problem on a global scale. Türkiye is an important country that is a bridge between conflict-ridden regions and European countries. In addition to the fight against international terrorism and other criminal organizations, Türkiye's position and role are better understood when the increasing mass migration movements towards the West are considered. Based on this framework, it is evaluated that the organization, although supported by the West, is a structure threatening the countries supporting it.

Especially in recent years, Western support for the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK under the US umbrella, has created a serious strategic dissonance in NATO (Larrabee, 2009). The chaos and instability created by the organization's regional activities create migration pressure on European countries (Demir, 2021), which also affects the political sphere. It is observed that extremist tendencies are increasing in Europe, and parties with racist discourses are on the rise. This change in the EU, an important political and economic organization, is likely to have effects on a global scale. On the other hand, it is argued that supporting armed non-state actors would legitimize terrorist organizations and encourage the spread of terrorism. As in the West-PYD/YPG relationship, states' support for terrorist organizations based on short-term interests affects the regional balance of power and creates risks for global security in the long run. It is stated that supporting such structures, whose legitimacy is questionable regarding international law and security architecture, can have serious consequences (Lake, 2010). It is argued that states' cooperation with terrorist organizations in the context of proxy wars can have devastating consequences for global security and international order in the long run (Hoffman, 2006; Cronin, 2009).

Bending international law to support terrorist organizations threatens the global security architecture. The relationship between the U.S. forces and the PYD/YPG is a typical example of this situation. The interest-driven bending or disregard of international law by states and the double standards in its implementation call into question the legitimacy of the international order. On the other hand, the increasing role of non-state actors such as the PYD/YPG in the balance of power leads to security threats that are complex and difficult to resolve. In this context, interlocutors must refrain from eroding international law and universal values and ensure the consistent implementation of these norms. Supporting armed non-state actors leads to the global proliferation of asymmetric warfare threats and the reshaping of international alliances. Indeed, the support of actors such as the PYD/YPG by legitimate actors leads to the strengthening of these structures within the international system and the weakening of state sovereignty (Mumford, 2013). On the other hand, such organizations challenge traditional security paradigms with the hybrid warfare methods they adopt, making it difficult to eliminate the threat. For this reason, the tendency towards asymmetric warfare and non-state armed actors is increasing, and asymmetric threats are becoming more widespread. Supporting such structures, especially against or despite allies, leads to reshaping international alliances. The US-led Western support for the PYD/YPG is an important example of this. This relationship has led Türkiye to question its NATO partners and relations with the West and reconsider its

traditional alliance relations (Stein, 2017). Finally, despite being a part of the Western alliance, Türkiye is trying to build new collaborations with different actors in its near and far geography due to the crisis of confidence. When all these factors are taken together, it is seen that the PYD/YPG's Western-backed asymmetric warfare strategy affects global security and diplomacy beyond regional effects.

3.7.3. Current Affairs

On March 1, 2025, the PKK's unilateral ceasefire declaration was welcomed by UN human rights experts and evaluated alongside calls for a fair and sustainable peace process in Turkey (OHCHR, 2025). News reports published on the same day stated that the organization had announced it would comply with the call to lay down arms and disband; this development was interpreted as “a new chapter” in the conflict cycle that had lasted over forty years (Al Jazeera, 2025a; Reuters, 2025a). In this context, it is seen that the emphasis on a “Turkey free of terrorism” in political discourse is framed in official statements as an uncompromising and transparent approach (Daily Sabah, 2025a; Daily Sabah, 2025b).

Throughout the summer of 2025, negotiations surrounding the integration of the YPG/SDF into the Syrian state structure gained momentum; Ankara emphasized that integration should not be “delayed” and drew attention to the lack of progress on the implementation timetable (Reuters, 2025b; Reuters, 2025c). In this context, it is seen that there are uncertainties between the scope of integration (the status of military units, the transfer of border crossings and energy infrastructure, etc.) and the actual alignment on the ground, and that this is interpreted as “resistance”; while the statements of actors on the ground highlight security concerns and the lack of clarity regarding administrative arrangements (Reuters, 2025b; Al-Monitor, 2025).

On the other hand, throughout 2025, fluctuations were observed in the monthly intensity and geographical spread of Israel's air operations targeting Syria. ACLED reports indicate that the number of attacks increased in July 2025, while a clear downward trend was observed in August 2025. Parallel visualizations reveal that the geographical spread produced periodic intensification starting from the end of 2024 (ACLED, 2025a; ACLED, 2025b; Al Jazeera, 2025b). This pattern indicates that externally driven risks of violence continue to undermine regional stability in Syria.

Although the ceasefire declaration and integration agenda have opened channels for détente, uncertainties regarding the implementation steps of integration and the periodic intensity of cross-border attacks indicate that the dynamics of proxy/hybrid warfare are still in a transitional

phase. This situation intensifies the pressure to reassess policies in the areas of principal–agent misalignment, legitimacy production, and alliance management, as addressed in the study (OHCHR, 2025; Reuters, 2025b; ACLED, 2025a).

4. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The West's support for the PYD/YPG, citing the threat of DAESH, affects the regional balance of power and leads to an increase in conflicts that generate instability (Yüksel, 2019). On the other hand, the capacity of the PYD/YPG in Syria, which has turned into a laboratory for proxy wars, disturbs regional actors and other local groups. The support and protection shields provided to the organization have privileged the PYD/YPG over other local actors on the ground. Local and international actors who demand a united Syria and continue their struggle accordingly recognize the PYD/YPG's separatist agenda and demands as a threat. This picture deeply affects the Middle East, which is on a delicate balance, and the spread of the Syria-centered instability and conflict environment to the region.

Endless conflicts, instability, and the inability to establish an environment of trust trigger mass migrations and make returning difficult. In addition to the effects of this situation in the field of conflict, it is evaluated that this situation has led to the spread of racist discourses and extremist policies in the West due to migration. A considerable part of the mass migration took place from the areas controlled by the PYD/YPG. Arbitrary practices, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and mass killings are commonplace in PYD/YPG-controlled areas, and the environment of insecurity and repression has resulted in people leaving the region.

The existence of the organization and the consequences of its practices are not sustainable in terms of regional balances and pose significant risks for international relations and security dynamics. Not only is it not possible for the organization to be accepted as a legitimate actor by regional actors, but the new post-Assad Syrian administration also wants the organization to disband itself, surrender its weapons to the Syrian state, and recognize the state authority. The Turkish presence in northern Syria and the pressure from local groups aligned with Türkiye force the organization to reconcile with the Syrian state. In addition, it is assessed that the support provided by the US to the organization will weaken with the Trump administration. Without US leadership, the support that other European countries can provide to the organization is expected to remain limited. In the near term, the Trump administration is likely to conclude that the PYD/YPG is not a profitable investment in the cost-benefit analysis.

The neutralization of DAESH, the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in Syria, which had deep ties with Russia and Iran, and the decline in the influence of these two countries in the region, with the new administration in power, weaken the US justification for its presence in Syria. Russia's influence in the Mediterranean weakened after the Ukraine War, while Iran lost its supply and influence area extending to Lebanon, where it posed a threat to Israeli and US bases. In this context, there is no significant purpose for the US to be present in Syria for the time being. However, the tense relations between Türkiye and Israel and the future vision of the new Syrian administration are issues that are being monitored by the US.

As a NATO member, Türkiye is an important part of the Western alliance in political, economic, and military terms. However, the fact that its allies support an organization that threatens its national security worries Türkiye and creates a crisis of confidence. The positioning of the organization as an ally and ground force by the West in the war against DAESH has seriously damaged the strategic cooperation between Türkiye and the West. The direct US military material and training support to the organization has led Türkiye to question NATO's credibility (Stein, 2017). Türkiye lost confidence in its allies, it focused on developing its national capacity, suspending or limiting its cooperation, including its activities in NATO.

As a result, this situation has led to increased strategic incompatibilities within NATO and questioning of NATO in Türkiye. The validity of the alliance's security guarantees has become a serious question for Türkiye. On the other hand, NATO's inability to determine a coherent and standard policy on the fight against terrorism, the double standards and contradictory approach it applies among its members make the alliance's consistency and reliability questionable (Gürbüz, 2016). Ultimately, the support provided to the PYD/YPG as an armed non-state actor negatively affects regional and global security dynamics, erodes trust in international law, and calls into question its legitimacy.

Declaration of Research and Publication Ethics

This study, which does not require ethics committee approval and/or legal/special permission, complies with research and publication ethics.

Researcher's Contribution Rate Statement

The author is the sole author of the article; therefore, the contribution rate is 100%

Declaration of Researcher's Conflict of Interest

There are no potential conflicts of interest in this study.

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