

DANGEROUS “LOCAL PARTNER” THE YPG’S TERROR CAMPAIGN IN NORTHERN SYRIA

NAVVAR SABAN, ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on how the YPG adapted to the new reality in northern Syria and adopted terrorist tactics.

This report sheds light on the YPG's attacks within the areas of the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring Operations in the period between July 2018 and November 2019. It focuses on how the YPG adapted to the new reality in northern Syria and adopted terrorist tactics, primarily in the form of assassinations and car bomb attacks which are becoming more frequently used by the YPG in the place of direct military action.

The increase of attacks by the YPG is posing the question of whether the YPG is going back to the tactics of the PKK after it changed its way of engagement in Syria due to the civil war and the U.S.-backed operation against DAE-SH. The YPG's use of car bombs, IEDs, and assassinations is clearly from the textbook of the PKK. The methods, aims, and the strategy of the YPG in Syria do not differ greatly from those of the PKK in Turkey. After losing territory, the switch towards PKK tactics that were used for years in its terror campaign in Turkey, does not only reveal the real nature of the YPG but also underlines the Turkish arguments against it. With the increase in attacks, the U.S., Russia and other supporters of the YPG will have to answer as to why they are backing and engaging with a terrorist entity.

Since the Operation Peace Spring, the YPG has conducted 9 car bomb attacks, engaged in 10 cross-border attacks on Turkey, and planted several IEDs, in total killing at least 113 civilians and wounding at least 178. To put this in perspective, this number is 2.3 times larger than the actual civilian combat fatalities (49) on all sides during Operation Peace Spring.

This report urges the backers of the YPG to address its terror strategy, and to investigate, arrest, and punish those responsible for random attacks and war crimes resulting in the death of civilians. If these countries, most notably the United States, Russia and France, are unable or unwilling to do so, they have to re-evaluate their support to the armed group or be held accountable for the war crimes of the YPG.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Northern Syria after DAESH was exposed to several changes. The first was the Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo, followed by Operation Olive Branch in the Afrin region, and Operation Peace Spring northeast of the Euphrates.
- Each of these changes were characterized by their own external and internal characteristics, but in all situations the local population were forced to deal with assassinations and car bomb attacks. These were among the most important threats to the stability of the security of each region and, thus, of the entire region.
- There were numerous entities that were the cause of the assassinations and IED attacks, starting from DAESH cells, the YPG-affiliated Wrath of Olives, the Afrin Liberation Forces (ALF), and the YPG itself - which does not claim responsibility for the attacks.
- The Wrath of Olives and the ALF are not officially part of the YPG, but for several reasons they are believed to be its front groups. The most important of these reasons is that the tactics of their attacks are similar to those of the Kurdistan Workers'

Party (PKK), the militia group that has been fighting Turkish forces since 1984 and helped found, organize, and staff the YPG. The PKK has a history of using front groups such as the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons for its urban operations, in which civilians are targeted.¹

- Attacks in Afrin and its region had a day and a night approach: during the day they used IED, and at night, they used kidnapping and ambushes with small firearms. However, in the first half of 2019, both the ALF and the Wrath of Olives started using anti-tank guided missiles - the same ones the U.S.-led coalition gave to the YPG.²
- The attack tactics of the YPG (as well as those of the Wrath of Olives and the Afrin Liberation Forces) differed during the various stages in the change of control of the region and began to appear clearly after the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Turkish army captured the Afrin region.
- Attacks increased before the start of Operation Peace Spring, which targeted the area between Tal Abyad, which is part of Al-Raqqah province, and Rasulayn, which is part of Hassaka province.
- In the first quarter of 2019, the YPG escalated its attacks and targeted civilian gatherings with the aim of hitting the security system in areas controlled by the national army and Turkish forces.
- The YPG in the eastern part of the Euphrates does not intend to deal quickly with the DAESH prisoners in the area, and the lack of action on the part of the YPG has allowed

1. Alexander McKeever, "Turkey Faces Growing Kurdish Insurgency in Syria's Afrin", *Al-Monitor*, March 4, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2spHCZt>.

2. Interview of a member of the Afrin Local Council by the authors, Skype, December 11, 2019.

several DAESH members to escape the area and infiltrate the Euphrates Shield area and the Afrin region. Some of them were able to reach Idlib and Western Aleppo. Eventually the presence of these DAESH terrorists will create new security dilemmas that will impede the work and development of the security apparatus in the region.

- The Ministry of Interior of the Syrian Interim Government works in cooperation with the National Army to limit these attacks, despite the difficulty in controlling the activity of sleeper cells connected to the YPG and DAESH, which have managed to penetrate the community structure in the three areas (regions of Operations Peace Spring, Euphrates Shield, and Olive Branch).

INTRODUCTION

The areas in the northern parts of Syria held by the Syrian National Army (SNA) have been witnessing a significant increase in the rate of attacks, such as IED attacks and assassinations attempts, which began to appear in the Euphrates Shield forces-held area between Jarablus, Al-Bab, and Azaz. These attacks escalated after the National Army took control of the Afrin region with the support of the Turkish Armed Forces and intensified after the beginning of Operation Peace Spring in the east of the Euphrates.

The increasing number of the attacks is an important indication of the deteriorating security situation. Attacks are usually characterized by secrecy in terms of the executing party; however, the YPG or YPG-affiliated groups such as the Wrath of Olives and ALF publicly claim responsibility for most attacks in areas controlled by the SNA.

This report sheds light on the YPG attacks within the areas of the Euphrates Shield, Olive

Branch, and Peace Spring Operations during the period between July 2018 and November 2019. The report is based on figures published in several separate reports by the Information Unit at the Omran Center for Strategic and Studies, and on interviews conducted by the authors with local police figures in Jarablus and Azaz in November and December 2019, and with civilians and SNA personnel in the areas of Tal Abyad and Rasulayn.

The report focuses on the developments in the control of northern Syria (the areas of Operation Olive Branch, Euphrates Shield, and Peace Spring) by offering a deeper analysis of the control changes which affected different local and international forces in the region and how some forces disappear, and some became dominant. The report will mainly focus on how the YPG adapted to the new reality in northern Syria and how it adopted terrorist tactics such as assassinations and car bomb attacks. These are becoming more frequently used by the YPG in the place of direct military action.

The increase of attacks by the YPG is posing the question of whether the YPG is going back to the tactics of the PKK after it changed its way of engagement in Syria due to the civil war and the U.S.-backed operation against DAESH. The YPG's use of car bombs, IEDs, and assassinations are clearly from the textbook of the PKK. The methods, aims, and the strategy of the YPG in Syria do not differ much from those of the PKK in Turkey. After losing territory, the switch towards the tactics used by the PKK for years in its terror campaign in Turkey, does not only reveal the real nature of the YPG but also underlines the Turkish arguments against the YPG. With the increase in attacks, the U.S., Russia and other YPG supporters will have to answer as to why they are backing and engaging with a terrorist entity.

The YPG's *New Modus Operandi*: Assassinations as a Way to Undermine the Opposition Forces

The first phase that affected the situation in Syria's northern region began with the Operation Euphrates Shield taking control of the city of Al-Bab on February 23, 2017.³ It became clear that the region was of high strategic importance to Turkey as it had supported the battle of the opposition forces logistically and through airstrikes, in addition to direct involvement in battles against DAESH on the ground.

After eliminating the territorial presence of DAESH, the entire area between Jarablus, Al-Bab, and Azaz, which covers an area of 2,200 square kilometers,⁴ the new reality has put the opposition forces and Turkey in front of a new dynamic. This reality is represented by the necessity of a direct military engagement with the YPG, located in the city of Manbij, its countryside, and in Tel Rifaat and its surroundings. Moreover, all opposition forces had to deal cautiously with the regime forces south of Al-Bab city as the YPG had coordinated with the regime more than once in order to create additional pressure on the opposition forces and Turkish forces in that region.⁵ The region witnessed direct clashes between the Turkish-backed forces and the YPG in the period between March 2017 and January 2018 when the Operation Olive Branch by the opposition forces backed by the Turkish army against the YPG began in Afrin. It can be said that 2018

witnessed a high frequency of clashes between the opposition forces and the YPG.⁶

During that time, the YPG relied on direct attacks and did not hide behind their affiliates' attacks. The operations varied between light weapon clashes and the use of mortars against civilian and military targets.⁷

YPG Attacks in the Euphrates Shield Region

The YPG did not resort to a secretive mechanism of action and planting booby traps in the Euphrates Shield area. It is worth noting that the YPG did not play their role in securing the eastern borders of the Euphrates, which gave way to many DAESH cells crossing the borders and carrying out several bombings and attacks mostly targeting civilians.⁸

The Euphrates Shield region witnessed 46 assassination attempts,⁹ which reached a maximum in September 2018 with a total of 38 attempts. The region is supposed to have better security control due to the supervision of the Turkish guarantor and the institutionalization of a local military and security force, namely the SNA and the Syrian Free Police. However, assassination attempts continued by cells affiliated with DAESH, the YPG, and sometimes by a third unknown party.

In regard to the unknown attacks, sources from the region confirmed that in the mid-2018, the local police forces in the Euphrates Shield re-

3. "Syrian Town of Al-Bab Falls to Free Syrian Army, Backed by Turkish Military", Anadolu Agency (English), February 23, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2PhajXN>.

4. "Erdogan Crowned His Rapprochement with Iran and Russia with an Incursion in Idlib ... Dangerous Stakes and Eye on Afrin", *An-Nabwa*, October 7, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2YMLr70>.

5. "Who Will Take al-Bab?", *Washington Institute*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-will-take-al-bab>.

6. "Wrath of the Olives: Tracking the Afrin Insurgency through Social Media", *Bellingcat*, March 1, 2019, <https://bit.ly/38FLaHl>.

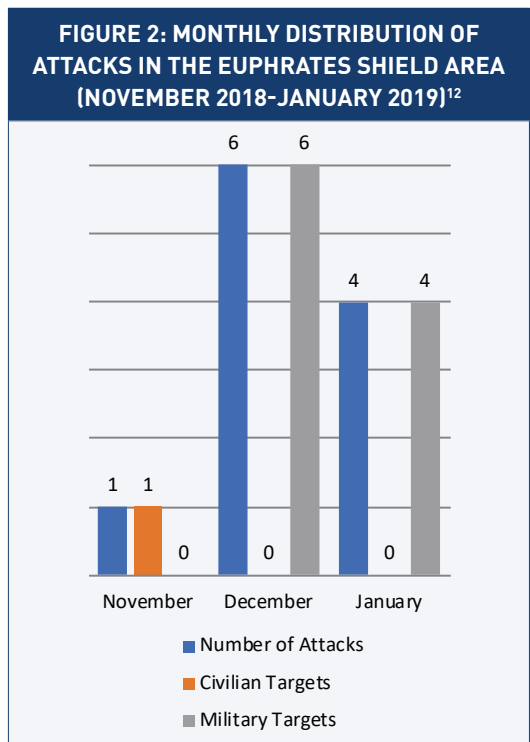
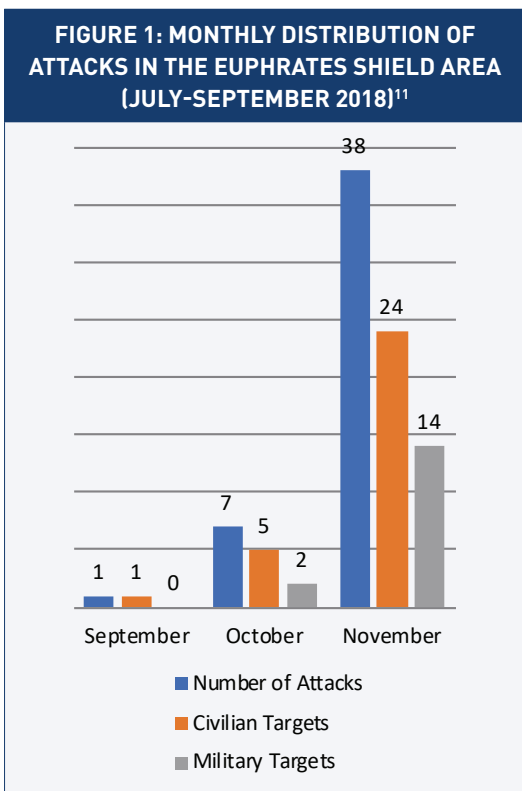
7. "US-Backed PKK/YPG Terrorists Attack Refugee Camps in Syria's Idlib, Azaz", *Daily Sabah*, February 6, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2PQEo9s>; "YPG-Dominated SDF Militants Shell Turkish Base in Afrin Village with Mortars", *Daily Sabah*, October 8, 2019, <https://bit.ly/38zAbzw>; "8 Civilians Killed, 14 Injured in Suspected YPG Attack in Syria's Afrin", *Daily Sabah*, October 31, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2PkhtUB>.

8. "Death among Civilians in the North Due to IED Attacks", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat (aawsat)*, November 17, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2tkD0nX>.

9. This figure includes both assassinations and assassination attempts. Whether the action is successful or not does not detract from the security issue it poses and from the need that these actions are addressed and solved.

gion, captured a smuggler near the city of al-Bab with a car loaded with humanitarian aid and 3 boxes of self-made IED. The smuggler claimed that they were planned to be delivered to Manbij and that he had no further information regarding the IEDs. This incident raises the hypothesis that regime-affiliated persons play a part in the attacks in the region or that they have a direct relationship with the YPG that supplies them with IEDs to continue their attacks.¹⁰

cal forces in managing the security situation in a more effective and professional way compared to previous months. This may be the result of the increased efficiency of institutions in the Euphrates Shield area (the SNA and the Syrian Free Police) and their increasing experience in dealing with the local conditions.



While the Euphrates Shield region in the time period of November 2018 to January 2019 witnessed 15 attacks, the month with the most attacks was December with a total of 6 attempts. The numbers indicate an improvement of the lo-

However, when the YPG increased its efforts to conduct attacks after regenerating from the battle of Afrin after the Operation Olive Branch, the opposition forces represented by the SNA and the local police forces tried to stop the attacks in the Euphrates Shield areas. The Wrath of Olives and other parties, however, managed to conduct several attacks.¹³

10. Interview of an ex-member of the Jarablus Local Police by the authors, Skype, December 5, 2019.

11. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas during the Period from July to October 2018", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, October 30, 2018, <https://bit.ly/34pj67X>.

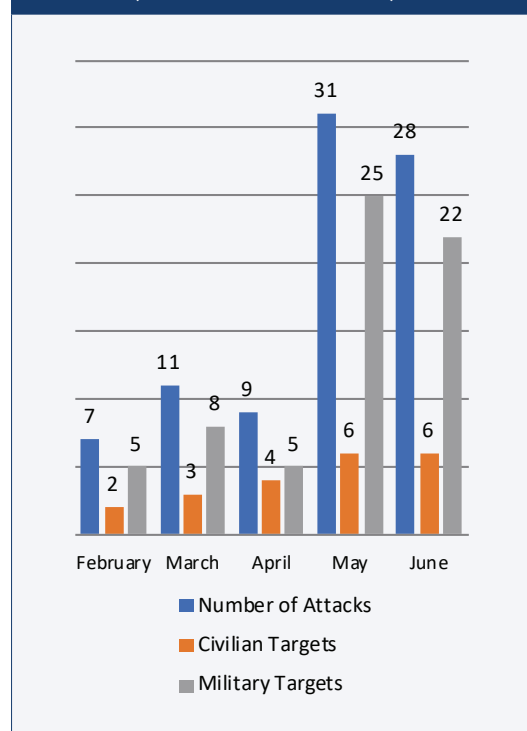
12. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas during the Period from November 2018 to January 2019", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2T8R3I6>.

13. Interview of A. al-Mushin, a business owner in the cities of Azaz and al-Bab who has a strong connection with the local police, Skype, December 7, 2019.

Between February and July 2019, the Euphrates Shield area witnessed 86 attacks, 29 of which succeeded in killing the targeted party and 57 failed in so far as the targeted party survived the attack. The opposition forces were the target of 65 of the 86 attempts, compared to 21 attempts that targeted civilians.

According to the reported data, the tools for carrying out the attacks in the Euphrates Shield area relied primarily on IEDs (89% of all attacks); the attacks carried out by gunfire constituted 9% of all attacks; and hand grenades were used in 2% of the attacks. The data shows that 69% of the total attacks carried out by the YPG were within the Euphrates Shield area.

FIGURE 3: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN THE EUFRATES SHIELD AREA (FEBRUARY-JUNE 2019)¹⁴



14. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas during the Period from February 2019 to June 2019", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, September 17, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2FzEQ78>

YPG Attacks in the Afrin Region

The YPG attacks in the Afrin region started in the last week of March 2018, which is the time during which the opposition forces and the Turkish army announced that their forces were able to control the center of Afrin and expel the protection units. This stage is considered the cornerstone of the emergence of the hidden military action of the YPG in the Euphrates Shield and Afrin regions and was represented by the following:

- The announcement of the formation of the "Wrath of Olives" forces¹⁵ in June 2018. Through several statements they declared that the opposition forces, the Turkish army, and all of the civilians dealing with them are considered as targets of their attacks. The group announced that it operated throughout the Afrin region and the Euphrates Shield area. They also claimed to carry out attacks in Idlib although no solid confirmation for those attacks has been presented.
- The announcement of the formation of the Afrin Liberation Forces (ALF) in mid-December 2018. The group represented itself like the YPG's Plan B. Its formation coincides with the obvious decline of the Wrath of Olives' attacks in the Afrin region. The ALF had a major advantage/difference from the Wrath of Olives: the use of anti-guided missile (ATGMs) attacks and thermal U.S.-made snipers, and the launching

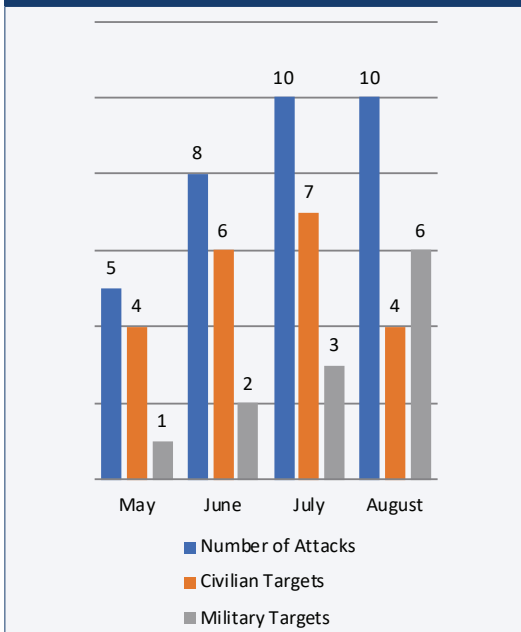


15. "Wrath of Olive Finally Reveals Its Identity", *Lez News*, August 24, 2018, <https://bit.ly/34i9PP6>.

of these attacks from YPG-held areas in the Tal Rifaat region.¹⁶

The Afrin region witnessed 20 attacks during the monitoring period extending from July to the end of September 2018. All attacks were successful and led to the death of the target; in all cases shooting was the preferred method of attack. The Wrath of Olives claimed responsibility for 17 operations that occurred during this time.¹⁷

FIGURE 4: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN THE AFRIN REGIONS (MAY-AUGUST 2018)¹⁸



The increased activities of the YPG in the Afrin region and the lack of security in some locations led to the continued activity of the

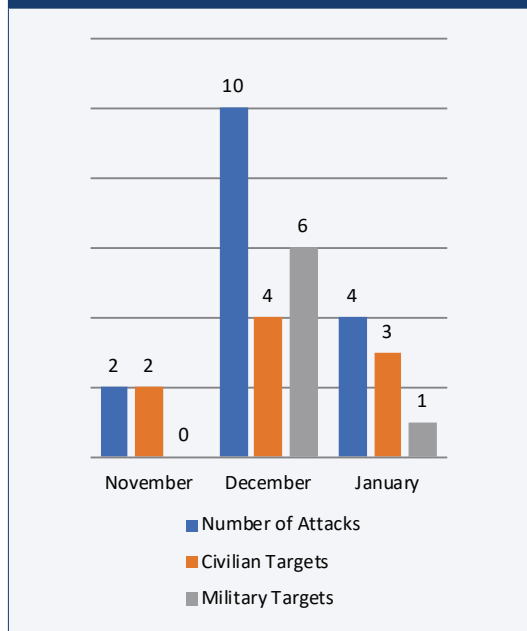
16. "Afrin Liberation Forces Target a Turkish Army Base with Guided Missiles", *karwan cudi* (Non-official account), YouTube, June 26, 2019, <https://bit.ly/36Ck4iz>; "Afrin Liberation Forces (ALF) Attacked Two Positions for Pro-Turkish Forces with ATGM's", *Alex R.* (Non-official account), YouTube, December 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/35oVBx1>.

17. Based on the previous source and on information from Ihsan Relief and Development main headquarters in the region, and an interview of a member of the Free Police.

18. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas during the Period from July to October 2018", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, October 30, 2018, <https://bit.ly/34pj67X>.

Wrath of Olives, the expansion of their activity, and the emergence of the ALF. In the period between November and December 2019, these areas witnessed 16 attacks which resulted in 10 deaths. Six attempts were unsuccessful in killing the target. As a result of the participation of the ALF, the implementation tool that was used in this period was different from that of the previous period: IEDs were used in 75% of the attacks, 24% of the attempts were sniper attacks, and 1% were ATGM attacks. All these attacks targeted armed opposition personnel except for one target that was a member of the Syrian Free Police. Moreover, the Wrath of Olives and the ALF claimed responsibility for all attacks.¹⁹

FIGURE 5: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN THE AFRIN REGIONS (NOVEMBER 2018-JANUARY 2019)²⁰



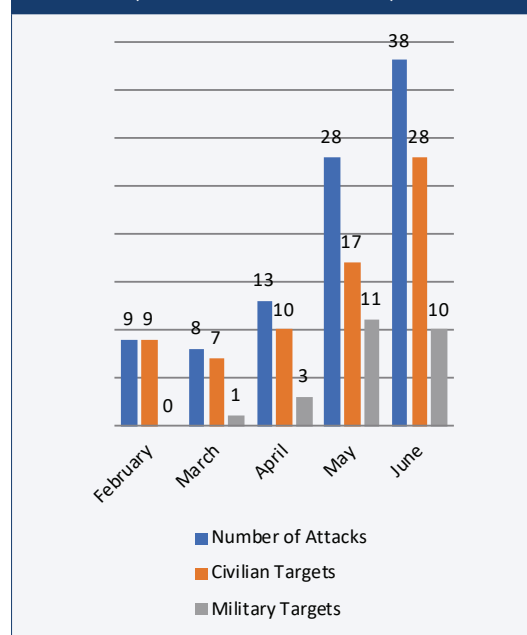
19. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas During the Period from November 2018 to January 2019", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, March 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YMRDm>.

20. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas during the Period from November 2018 to January 2019", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2T8R316>.

In the period between February and July 2019, the Wrath of Olives increased its activities, which targeted more civilian areas than military targets. The Afrin region witnessed 96 attacks, 41 of which succeeded in killing the targets, while 55 failed and the targets survived. Civilians were the primary targets of these attacks (71 attempts).²¹

The data analysis indicates that IEDs were the most used tools in these attacks, as 82 attacks used IEDs as an implementation tool, 11 attempts were carried out with weapons, and 3 attempts were carried out by hand grenades. The data shows that 89 of the attempts were carried out and adopted by an YPG-affiliated organization (Wrath of Olives 88% - ALF 12%), while the perpetrator(s) of 7 attempts remains unknown.

FIGURE 6: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN THE AFRIN REGION (FEBRUARY-JUNE 2019)²²



21. "Assassinations in Opposition Areas During the period from February to July 2019", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, September 17, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2rNljgd>.

22. Interview of A. al-Mushin, a business owner in the cities of Azaz and al-Bab who has a strong connection with the local police, Skype, December 7, 2019.

The last stage of the YPG's attacks is also the most complicated one. It extends between August 2019 and the current time, in other words the period that preceded the start of Operation Peace Spring by the SNA and the Turkish Armed Forces in October 2019 which targeted areas east of the Euphrates between Tel Abyad in Raqqa province and up to the city of Ain Issa in the Hasakah province. Given the importance of this stage and its coverage of all areas of the Operation Euphrates Shield, the area of the Operation Olive Branch, and the region of Operation Peace Spring, its events will be analyzed in a separate section.

Operation Peace Spring and the Impact of the YPG's Attacks in the Opposition Areas in Northern Syria

Operation Peace Spring began on October 9, 2019 with the participation of the opposition forces, the National Army, and the Turkish army. This coincided with the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from northeastern Syria after several years of military intervention in the region as it was supporting the SDF in its war against DAESH.²³

On October 17, 2019, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence announced that the United States and Turkey had reached an agreement to halt the Turkish military operation for 5 days in order for the YPG to withdraw from a proposed safe area south of the Turkish border.²⁴

On October 22, 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached another agreement to extend the ceasefire for an additional 150 hours

23. "Operation Peace Spring Launched to Eliminate Terror Threats in Syria", *Daily Sabah*, October 10, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2EkNtBP>.

24. "Turkey Agrees to Pause Military Operations in Northern Syria", *WJS*, October 17, 2019, <https://on.wsj.com/2EgIUsp>.

in order for the YPG to complete its withdrawal 30 kilometers from the border area and from the cities of Tal Rifaat and Manbij. The agreement also included Russia and Turkey conducting joint patrols 10 kilometers from the Syrian side of the border with the exception of the city of Qamishli. The new ceasefire began on October 23 at 12 noon local time.²⁵

This period witnessed several events that had a direct impact on the security situation. The YPG's attacks targeted civilians in order to push people out of the area. These occurred concurrently with the advance of the SNA and the Turkish army in the area making the region from Rasulayn to Afrin a fertile ground for YPG's attack.²⁶

- Perhaps the most prominent development was the YPG abandonment of DAESH prisoners in the al-Raqqa province²⁷ whose escape was one of the most dangerous events that affected the security situation and helped the return of DAESH.
- In addition to the direct military attacks with light and medium weapons, the YPG stepped up its dependence on its sleeper cells in the Operation Peace Spring area, and carried out several explosions in the period between October and December 2019. In the areas of Euphrates Shield and Afrin, it was noticeable that the YPG resumed its attacks in addition to the resurgence of DAESH cells, as mentioned above.

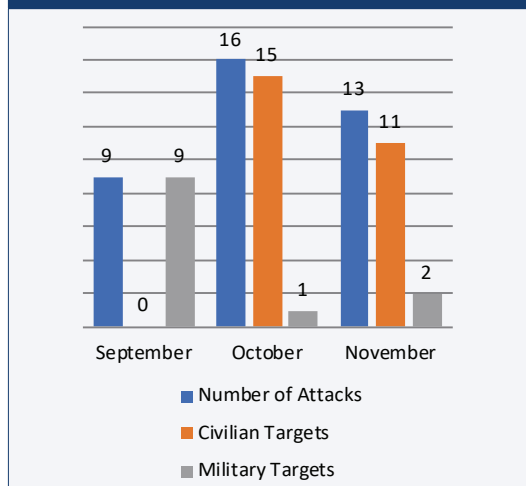
Since Operation Peace Spring, the YPG has followed a clear approach in northern Syria, which, as

we mentioned earlier, is an escalation of IED attacks in areas far from the battlefields (Euphrates Shield and Afrin) which aim to achieve the following:

- to target the SNA,
- to attempt to influence civilians and their relationship with Turkey (after the YPG justified the attacks as a response to Operation Peace Spring),
- to destabilize the security situation in the areas of Operation Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, and thus to attempt to disperse the focus of the opposition forces in their battles in northeast Syria.

The following figure illustrates the operations claimed by the Wrath of Olives forces and the ALF during the period between September and December 2019 in the Euphrates Shield and Afrin areas. The operations indicate that civilians are still the main target for the YPG-affiliated organizations, while the Syrian National Army and the Syrian Free Police forces form a secondary target.

FIGURE 7: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN THE EUFRATES SHIELD AREA (SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 2019)²⁸



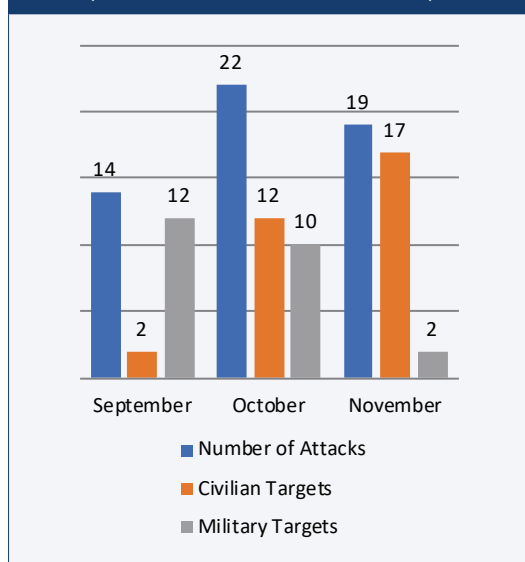
25. "Turkey and Russia Agree on Deal over Buffer Zone in Northern Syria", *The Guardian*, October 22, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2PpRYRO>.

26. Interview by the authors of five members of the National Army regarding the security situation in the area of Operation Peace Spring, Skype, December 13, 2019

27. "Turkish Military Captures Daesh Prisoners Released by YPG/PKK", *TRT World*, YouTube, October 18, 2019, <https://bit.ly/36EjVeF>; "Turkey: YPG/PKK Freed 800 Daesh/ISIS Prisoners in Syria", *Anadolu Agency*, November 11, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2RSbyYD>.

28. Interview by the authors of five members of the National Army regarding the security situation in the area of Operation Peace Spring, Skype, December 13, 2019

FIGURE 8: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN AFRIN (SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 2019)²⁹



In Operation Peace Spring, the YPG approach was different in dealing with the joint Syrian-Turkish military forces. The YPG used a military response to both the SNA and the Turkish Armed Forces on several frontlines in cooperation with the Assad regime.³⁰ It also relied on car bombs that targeted civilians in areas that the SNA had recently captured, including the bombing of Tel Abyad on November 23, 2019, which targeted the central market. The Turkish Ministry of Defense accused the YPG of being responsible for the explosion that killed dozens of civilians.³¹ This incident was the fourth car bomb attack by the YPG in Tal Abyad in about a month. The first car bomb exploded on October 24, 2019. The biggest explosion was on November 2, 2019, which killed at least 18 people.

29. Interview by the authors of five members of the National Army regarding the security situation in the area of Operation Peace Spring, Skype, December 13, 2019

30. "Fierce Clashes Erupt between Syrian Army, Turkish-Led Forces", *Al Jazeera*, October 31, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YOfl1b>.

31. "YPG/PKK Launches Bomb Attack on Tel Abyad", Anadolu Agency, November 23, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2RRHaxw>.

The third largest was in mid-November, near the civilian hospital where 3 civilians were killed.³²

FIGURE 9: MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTACKS IN THE CITY OF TAL ABYAD (OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2019)

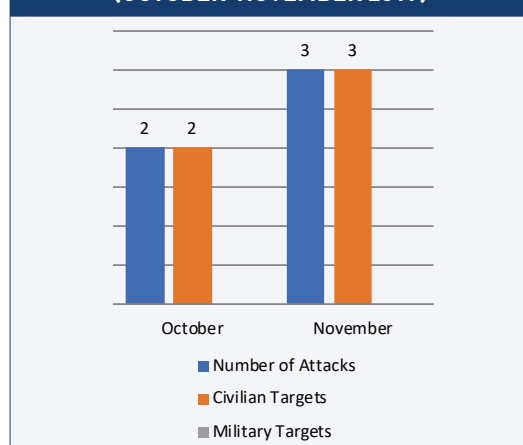
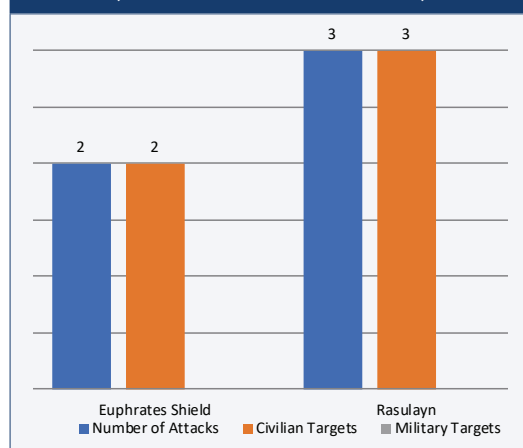


FIGURE 10: CAR BOMB ATTACKS IN THE EUFRATES SHIELD AND RASULAYN AREAS (OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2019)



Other car bomb attacks by the YPG were conducted in Al-Bab,³³ in central Jarablus,³⁴ in the mar-

32. "Civilian Casualties Caused by the YPG Operation Peace Spring", *Suriye Gündemi*, November 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/35pf0xY>.

33. "At Least 18 Killed in Car Bomb in Syria Near Turkish Border", *Sky News*, November 16, 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/at-least-12-killed-in-car-bomb-in-syria-near-turkish-border-11862627>.

34. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, Twitter, November 30, 2019, <https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1200762666807185408>.

ket of Tal Khalaf near the city of Rasulayn,³⁵ and two car bomb attacks inside the city of Rasulayn.³⁶

Another major security problem in the areas between Tal Abyad and Rasulayn is caused by the IEDs left by the YPG. According to the SNA, the YPG has left the IEDs on purpose in civilian buildings or in strategic infrastructure.³⁷ Despite the efforts undertaken to remove all the IEDs left by the YPG, according to the United Nations, the civilians killed by IEDs inside Syria (31) are almost as many as the civilians (49) killed during combat by fire by the YPG, the SNA, and Turkish Armed Forces combined.³⁸ The Turkish Defense Ministry announced on December 6 that the Turkish Armed Forces have identified and disabled 1,381 IEDs and 752 mines in the area of Operation Peace Spring.³⁹

The YPG terror tactics have shifted their focus back inside Syria. At the beginning of the Operation Peace Spring, the YPG conducted several cross-border attacks into Turkey targeting civilians randomly in the border towns of Turkey, killing 21 and wounding 104 civilians including two journalists.⁴⁰

Interviews with security personnel of the SNA and the Syrian Free Police conclude that the YPG has four different methods of conducting car bomb attacks in opposition-held areas:

- The YPG pays collaborators living in the opposition-held areas for conducting car bomb attacks.
- The YPG stops civilian cars at their checkpoints and places a bomb in the car while the civilians are dragged out to be investigated. After the civilians cross into opposition-held areas, the YPG explodes the bomb from a distance.
- The YPG's sleeper cells build the bombs in opposition-held areas and conduct the attacks.
- The YPG militants infiltrate opposition-held areas disguising themselves as civilians and conduct car bomb attacks in coordination with sleeper cells in the region.

In total, (as of December 15) the YPG has killed at least 113 civilians and wounded at least 178 since the Operation Peace Spring started. This number is 2.3 times larger than the casualties on all sides during the combat period of Operation Peace Spring.

The Strategic Ambitions behind the YPG's Terror Attacks in Syria

In order to understand the reasoning and motives of the YPG's attacks in opposition-held areas protected by Turkey in northern Syria, one has to look into the reasoning behind the PKK's attacks in Turkey. To evaluate the strategy of the PKK's previous attacks in Turkey will help to understand the motives of the YPG attacks and will provide a suitable framework to put the attacks into context as the YPG does not conduct attacks for the sole purpose of conducting them.

In the First Congress of the PKK, the statement of foundation mentioned that the organization is adopting Mao's "Protracted War Strategy" and the Marxist-Leninist ideology. This strategy insists that guerilla warfare is only an interim phase which enables the building up

35. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, Twitter, November 26, 2019, <https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1199351707811155975>.

36. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, Twitter, November 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1202209180029014019>.

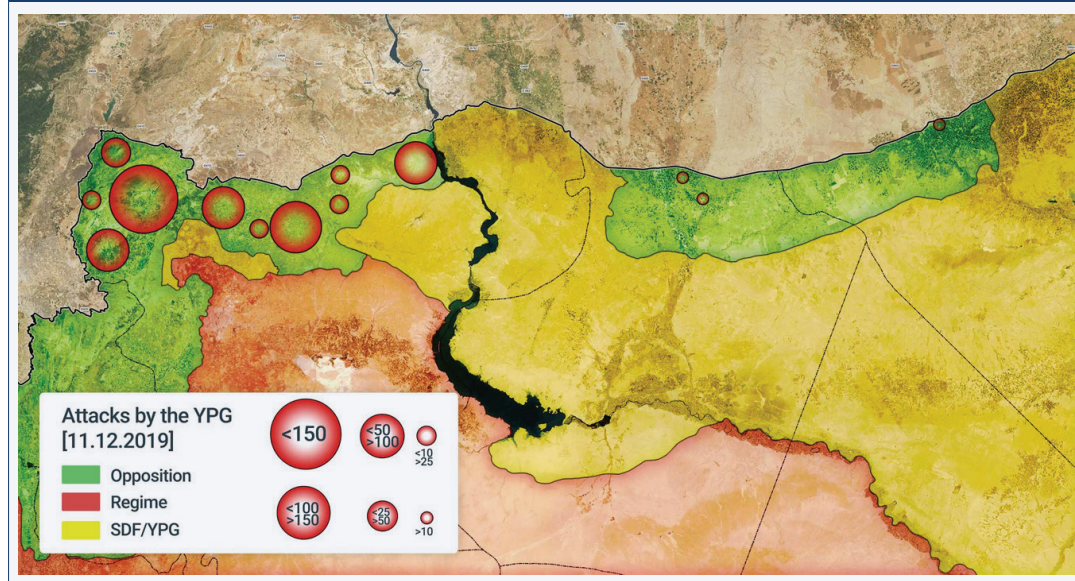
37. Interview of anonymous member of Fırka Muattasim in Rasulayn, Syria, November 24, 2019.

38. "Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria", *Reliefweb*, November 14, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-97>.

39. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, Twitter, December 6, 2019, <https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1202864824839004160>.

40. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, Twitter, December 6, 2019, <https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1202864824839004160>.

FIGURE 11: CIVILIAN CASUALTIES CAUSED BY THE YPG SINCE OPERATION PEACE SPRING AS OF NOVEMBER 2019



of a regular army and winning the war through it. Within this strategy, popular support for the organization and towards their fight against the governing structure is essential.⁴¹

The PKK has encouraged violence as a “revolutionary strategy” to overthrow the regime in military, political, and economic terms. The military strategy of attacks was seen as the first stage of a wider rebellion of the masses to accelerate the political developments and drive the population away from the government. After weakening the opponent’s authority, the strategy would incite a popular uprising, overthrow the rule of the state, and achieve the revolutionary change.⁴² The attacks by the PKK will force the state authority to impose harsher security measures, force the government to be suspicious of its own citizens, and drive the state and the people apart from each other. However,

41. Ariel Merari, “Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 5(4) (1993), pp. 213–251.

42. Nihat Ali Özcan, “PKK (Kürdistan İşçi Partisi) Tarihi, İdeolojisi ve Yöntemi, pp. 3-10.

after the PKK’s initial Maoist strategy failed, it resorted to establishing a democratic autonomy through an all-out people’s war by out-administering the state authority.

In this period of the PKK’s strategy, the organization opted for an urban warfare campaign and failed miserably. The PKK’s strategy backfired or collapsed⁴³ as Kurdish neighborhoods were destroyed by PKK IEDs and bombs and many Kurdish civilians had to leave their homes. The bill for this strategy came afterwards. The voter turnout in southeastern Turkey changed in favor of the ruling AK party.⁴⁴

With the experience and the strategy of the PKK attacks in mind, the use of terror methods by the YPG in Syria becomes more understandable for an outsider as the YPG has been actively

43. Necdet Özçelik and Murat Yeşiltaş, “When Strategy Collapses - The Pkk’s Urban Terrorist Campaign”, SETA, 2018, <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2018/06/36.-Strategy-Collapses-introduction.pdf>.

44. “Elections Done, Time to Look Ahead”, *Daily Sabah*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/editorial/2019/04/01/elections-done-time-to-look-ahead>.

using different types of attacks in northern Syria since Operation Euphrates Shield. The YPG follows an approach in line with the motives and goals of the PKK attacks in Turkey elaborated above. This may not be surprising for those who are aware that the YPG is essentially the PKK in Syria but nevertheless it sets a solid base for further discussion about stability, security in Syria, and the reconstruction of the country.

The YPG has found itself in a dilemma since the beginning of the Turkish military operation. The first operation eliminated its goal to unite its three cantons. The second operation resulted in the loss of one of its cantons, and the last operation has put a wedge between its corridor along the Turkish border east of the Euphrates and sabotaged its policy to change the demographics of the Arab-dominated Tal Abyad-Rasulayn areas in favor of a PKK statelet in Syria.

- The strategy of the YPG's terror campaign can be summarized under three main goals:
- To force the governing body to implement harsher security measures and drive the people away from the governance.
- To prevent a return of Syrians to Syria in order to preserve their prospect of a Marxist-Kurdish statelet in northern Syria reaching from Iraq to the Mediterranean.
- To portray their own areas as relatively more secure than the areas held by the Syrian opposition.

In this manner, one can already see some of the YPG's achievements. For instance, after the car bomb attack in Al-Bab, the people demanded the execution of the perpetrator and tried to storm the security complex of the Al-Bab Free Police.⁴⁵ During the demonstrations, some of

the civilians were arrested by the security forces.⁴⁶ This incident is a clear sign of the outcome of the YPG attacks. Secondly, by conducting car bomb attacks, leaving behind massive IEDs, or committing other forms of attacks, the YPG is harming the country's overall security. For example, the city of Tal Abyad experienced a sizable return of residents. Most of them started to live a normal life. However, after the YPG car bomb attacks, civilians became afraid of going out in the streets or to marketplaces, and urge their children not to spend time playing on the streets, and to avoid crowded areas.⁴⁷ This has two main effects: it slows down the return of refugees to the area and portrays the YPG-held areas as relatively safe. The paradox here is that the SNA is not engaging in activities like the YPG; in other words, the YPG does not have to deal with car bombs or other forms of attacks by the SNA except for random clashes on the frontlines. On the other side, the YPG's extensive terror campaign is disrupting the safety and security in opposition-held areas. This YPG strategy is essential for it to portray itself as the better alternative for the local people and the international community - despite the inherent paradox of this claim. While this strategy is seemingly effective for the international community, it hasn't achieved its full intended goal among the Syrian population. Despite all of the YPG's car bombs, many civilians flee YPG-held areas to opposition-held areas⁴⁸ and many refugees have started returning home.⁴⁹

46. Interview of an anonymous member of the Al-Bab Free Police, WhatsApp, December 14, 2019.

47. Interview of anonymous civilians in Tal Abyad, Syria, November 23, 2019.

48. "What Fate Awaits the Syrian Opposition?", *JPost*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/What-fate-awaits-the-Syrian-opposition-576191>.

49. "Turkey Says 200 Syrian Refugees Returned Home", *Aljazeera*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/turkey-200-syrian-refugees-returned-home-191121155700708.html>.

45. "Syria: Al-Bab Locals Protest YPG/PKK Terror Attack", Anadolu Agency, November 17, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syria-al-bab-locals-protest-ypg-pkk-terror-attack/1647952>.

How to Deal with the YPG Terror in Syria

In order to combat the YPG's terror campaign, it became clear that the SNA should cooperate with the Syrian Free Police, local councils, and the Ministry of Interior of the Interim Government in the region to reduce these security breaches. These breaches are likely to continue due to the presence of YPG sleeper cells in the region and the continued presence of its elements in areas surrounding Tal Abyad and Rasulayn, which make it difficult to control the security situation in the area. Not dealing with these breaches in an orderly manner will allow the YPG to expand and persist in its terror campaign. The Ministry of the Interior of the Interim Government is primarily responsible for the security situation in the areas of Operation Peace Spring where the Syrian Interim Government is currently working through the ministry to form public security forces and police stations in the cities of Tal Abyad and Rasulayn in parallel with the formation of the Ministry of Local Administration and Services and several local councils to manage these areas. However, due to the fragility of the security situation, the ministry must deal directly with the SNA and other local bodies in order to uncover the activity of the YPG cells, and in order to establish a rapid communication mechanism between the different regions of Operation Peace Spring, Euphrates Shield, and Olive Branch. All these security institutes should be connected to a centralized security apparatus, which facilitates the transfer of security information, and increases the quality of the information and how this information is used in order to control the security situation in all these areas.

Another main angle in the fight against YPG terrorism needs to be the international community and the international condemnation of the

methods used by the YPG. The U.S., Russia and the European Union need to address the YPG strategies and to question their engagement with the YPG. To stop the YPG's attacks is the obligation, to an important extent, of the states that are officially backing it. If these states do not intervene in favor of the lives of civilians, they need to be held accountable for the crimes committed by the YPG. The bombings of the YPG in opposition-held areas are part of a planned and systematic strategy, and should be considered as war crimes and terrorism. Until today, not one single person involved or responsible in a YPG attack in opposition-held areas has been investigated, arrested, and punished by the YPG or its backers, most notably the U.S., Russia and France. If these countries are unable to stop the YPG and held the responsible accountable, they have to re-evaluate their support to the armed group or become part of this terror and these war crimes.

CONCLUSION

This report shed light on the YPG-affiliated attacks in the opposition held-areas in the northern part of Syria (Afrin, Euphrates Shield, and Operation Peace Spring areas), their impact on the security structure, and the possible affects on the future of the entire opposition-held areas in the north. The report offered a summary account of the attacks from July 2018 to November 2019, which were as follows:

- The Euphrates Shield area witnessed 181 attacks during this period.
- The Afrin region witnessed 200 attacks during this period.
- Since the beginning of the operation until the end of November 2019, the area of Operation Peace Spring witnessed 7 car bomb attacks.⁵⁰

50. Ibid.

The attacks by the YPG in opposition-held areas follow the strategic rationale of the PKK's Maoist strategy laid out by the organization in its First Congress. By conducting these attacks, the YPG aims to force the governing body to implement harsher security measures and drive the people away from the governance; to prevent a return of Syrians to Syria in order to preserve their prospect of a Marxist-Kurdish statelet in northern Syria reaching from Iraq to the Mediterranean; and to portray their own areas as relatively more secure than the areas held by the Syrian opposition.

Among the attacks of the YPG, the most destructive and inhuman ones are the car bomb attacks. Between the start of the Operation Peace Spring and December 15, as part of its strategy, the YPG has conducted 9 car bomb attacks, engaged in 10 cross-border attacks on Turkey, and planted several IEDs. In total, the YPG has killed at least 113 civilians and wounding at least 178. Furthermore, this number is 2.3 times larger than the civilian combat fatalities (49) on all sides during Operation Peace Spring.

In face of these massive war crimes, the report clarifies the need for the Interim Government, the SNA, and the local Free Police to act seriously and to accelerate the actions for establishing a centralized security mechanism characterized by effective cooperation and information

transfer between the different agencies in the different regions in the north in order to limit the assassinations and the sleeper cells attacks. In addition, a security mechanism that collects and analyzes information in order to dismantle the secret networks that carry out these attacks is necessary.

This report urges the backers of the YPG to address its terror strategy and to investigate, arrest, and punish those responsible for random attacks and war crimes that kill civilians.

This report urges the backers of the YPG to address its terror strategy and to investigate, arrest, and punish those responsible for random attacks and war crimes that kill civilians. If these countries, most notably the U.S., Russia and France, are unable or unwilling to do so, they have to re-evaluate their support to the armed group or be held accountable for the YPG's war crimes.

At the current stage of the Syrian conflict, the need for security stability has become a necessity for the return of refugees, the country's reconstruction, and the political process. Therefore, any attack that aims to affect the security should be opposed, and should be addressed promptly and effectively.

DANGEROUS “LOCAL PARTNER” THE YPG’S TERROR CAMPAIGN IN NORTHERN SYRIA

NAVVAR SABAN, ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

SETA | ANALYSIS

This report sheds light on the YPG’s attacks within the areas of the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring Operations in the period between July 2018 and November 2019. It focuses on how the YPG adapted to the new reality in northern Syria and adopted terrorist tactics, primarily in the form of assassinations and car bomb attacks which are becoming more frequently used by the YPG in the place of direct military action.

The increase of attacks by the YPG is posing the question of whether the YPG is going back to the tactics of the PKK after it changed its way of engagement in Syria due to the civil war and the U.S.-backed operation against DAESH. The YPG’s use of car bombs, IEDs, and assassinations is clearly from the textbook of the PKK. The methods, aims, and the strategy of the YPG in Syria do not differ greatly from those of the PKK in Turkey. After losing territory, the switch towards PKK tactics that were used for years in its terror campaign in Turkey, does not only reveal the real nature of the YPG but also underlines the Turkish arguments against it. With the increase in attacks, the U.S. and other supporters of the YPG will have to answer as to why they are backing and engaging with a terrorist entity.

Since the Operation Peace Spring, the YPG has conducted 9 car bomb attacks, engaged in 10 cross-border attacks on Turkey, and planted several IEDs, in total killing at least 113 civilians and wounding at least 178. To put this in perspective, this number is 2.3 times larger than the actual civilian combat fatalities (49) on all sides during Operation Peace Spring.

This report urges the backers of the YPG to address its terror strategy, and to investigate, arrest, and punish those responsible for random attacks and war crimes resulting in the death of civilians. If these countries, most notably the United States, Russia and France, are unable or unwilling to do so, they have to re-evaluate their support to the armed group or be held accountable for the war crimes of the YPG.

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