

SYRIA AND NARRATIVES OF PROXY WARS: THE CASE OF CURDS AS AN ELEMENT OF COMPLEXITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify alternative ways of the civil confrontation in Syria (2011-present), indicating that the materialization of the discourse on proxy wars represents a too simplification of what happens in the field. Unlike a two-sided, state-led confrontation, we emphasize that it is a fluid conflict, with alliances and goals changing over time and making room. In this sense, we emphasize the Kurdish case, highlighting their multiple affiliations.

Keywords: Syria. Proxy Wars. Internal Armed Conflicts.

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INTRODUCTION

The civil war in Syria, officially started in March 2011, is to date the largest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century (HRW, 2017). With more than 500,000 dead and generating the most significant refugee crisis since World War II, the conflict destabilized the region, with direct and indirect consequences for Europe and the Americas. The analysis of this state of violence, despite its importance and dimension, faces severe challenges. Coverage of the international press has been hampered, either by the difficulty of access or by clear ideological choices of the media. The profusion of information — often generated by actors involved in the conflict — produces different interpretations and disputes for truth. As an example, in April 2017, a chemical weapons attack in the southern province of Idlib sparked discussions on virtually every issue involving the action: from the real perpetrators to the motivations behind the bombing. The fact that US President Donald Trump ordered an attack on the country based on this act further heightened the discussions.

Despite the differing interpretations of the facts that occur in Syria, one element remains virtually unquestionable when analyzing conflicting movements: the confrontation in this country of the Levant² would be a representative of the so-called Proxy Wars (PW). Within this analysis, the conflict would involve a number of external actors who, barred from acting directly in Syria, would finance domestic actors on two separate fronts. Proxy wars, then, would be rational calculations made by States that, with their strategic objectives in mind, would avoid paying direct costs of wars while ensuring their position³.

Within this narrative, shared extensively by the global press (Al Jazeera, 2016; CNN, 2017; Wintour; Mason Dehghan, 2017) and some academics (Brown, 2016; Hughes, 2014; Berti and Guzansky, 2014), Syria would be the scene of a binary confrontation, with well-defined positions and actors with similar goals. On the one hand, we would have the United States, Gulf countries and Turkey funding Sunni rebels — while on the other hand Russia, Iran, Kurdish groups and Shiite militias would support the government of Bashar Al-Assad. The actions of such actors would be

² The term “Levant” is used to describe historically the region of the Middle East that encompasses Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

³ A good embodiment of this argument is in a cartoon by Brazilian cartoonist Carlos Latuff, aired in various media in England and the United States in 2013. See <<https://goo.gl/XN9TMP>>.

coordinated and put into practice taking into account rational choices made by all involved.

This article aims to point out alternative ways to observe the confrontation in Syria, indicating that the materialization of the proxy war discourse represents an oversimplification of what happens in the field. Unlike a two-sided, State-led confrontation, we stress that it is a fluid conflict, with alliances and goals changing over time and space. Moreover, far from purely state rational calculations, touted by the PW speech, the Syrian civil war can only be understood by the inclusion of groups not necessarily linked to a nation. In this sense, alliances touted in macro, international logic do not necessarily materialize on a daily basis in Syria.

For this, the article is divided into three moments. The first will establish a genealogy of the concept of Proxy War, reinforcing its proximity to the Cold War period, bipolar logic and highlighting its explanatory limitations. After that, the Civil War in Syria will be analyzed, pointing out its ambiguities and the fluid character of the alliances, as well as stressing that the constitution of religious binarisms of clashes between Sunism and Shiism, consolidated by the PW narratives, are not effectively valid. Finally, we mapped the actions of Kurdish groups in the confrontation, as well as their deployment to Iraq. Using the conflicts in Mount Sinjar and the city of Kobane as an example, it is reinforced that such a non-state group materializes the fluidity and non-binaryism of the conflict in question and that the constitution of fixed sides does not aid sophisticated understanding of the clash.

FOR A GENEALOGY OF PROXY WARS

The era defined by historian Edward Luttwak (1995) as “postheroic” would have its most sophisticated materialization in the contemporary Middle East. Unlike previous confrontations involving disputes with national soldiers, interests in the region would be mainly guaranteed by state funding to local actors. In what was once called by US President Dwight Eisenhower as “the cheapest insurance in the world,” Proxy Wars would be the strategy par excellence at a time when the deployment of regular troops is becoming increasingly intricate and politically difficult.

Finding a unique definition for PWs is quite complex. The first attempt made by Deutsch (1964:15) classifies it as a

“Confrontation of two foreign powers, facing each other in a third country, disguised as an internal conflict [of that third country] and employing its personnel, resources and territories to achieve external strategies and objectives.”

Loveman (2002: 4), in turn, points to PWs as the “participation, usually of Great Powers, indirectly in a third-party conflict, with the aim of influencing its strategic outcome”. Such warfare would thus involve a ‘sponsoring State’ that utilitarianly employs a non-State actor or a smaller state to fight on its behalf. The basic premise is that their strategy would converge absolutely, thus, acting together would be inevitable.

Such definitions share two overlapping logics. The first is that alliances are rational, unchanging, and led and reflected by a State power. The second concerns the utilitarian logic of non-State actors, viewed as mere tools of nations and without agency capacity. Munford (2013:1) points out that such definitions would ignore regional negotiations, for example, excluding essential actors from the analysis. The definitions of Proxy War, thus, would be permeated by the historical moment in which they were most used: the Cold War. The reinforcement of bipolar character thus tends to ignore the possibility of non-State actors not operating as instruments of the powers, which would act in a “great global chess”.

Although we can identify this conflicting process at various times in human history, the use of proxy warfare was particularly prevalent after the end of World War II. This would be because the nuclear threat would have made direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union unlikely. It is during this period that classic examples, later taken up as similar to the Syrian case, occurred: Washington’s response to the 1979 Soviet invasion by arming Afghan militias, or Moscow’s training of northern Vietnamese during the Vietnam War of 1955.

The narrative inaugurated at this time and present in contemporary times is that since direct conflicts between the powers would not be possible — either politically or by material threats — outsourcing of conflicts would be inevitable. The nuclear weapons freeze would thus make such a strategy the best way to establish that the interests of the powers would still be guaranteed.

In this sense, despite the discourses about PWs being associated with the Cold War, it is also worth pointing out that this strategy continued

after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, mainly as an element in non-traditional violent demonstrations. In this sense, definitions such as “New Wars” (Kaldor, 2005; Reyna, 2009), Brand New Wars (Moura, 2005), 4th Generation Wars (Simons, 2010; Lind and Thiele, 2015) and Hybrid Wars (Schmidt, 2014) would point out that financing a third actor to achieve political ends would be a necessary practice in a scenario of diffuse threats and with less domestic support for military action.

In this post-Cold War context, US entry into international armed interventions could have increased, for example with the end of the automatic veto at the United Nations Security Council with the end of the Soviet Union, as shown by Russian support for the US Gulf War. However, as pointed out by Bobbitt (2003), the post-Cold War freeze on traditional war desires would be less for fear of triggering a nuclear process — but mainly for constraints such as economic crises and domestic pressure to send large number of troops internationally.

Munford (2013: 4) also points out that the emergence of the so-called Global War on Terror, inaugurated in 2001 by President George W. Bush, would also have contributed to the continuation of typical PW strategies. Since these are irregular and dispersed conflicts, the only way out would be to employ local actors — assisted by US training — to better address such threats. In addition, the internal impacts of increased troop and personnel mobilization would be avoided, especially following the failures of the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is emphasized that certain discursive advantages are not ignored when, in some moments, the dimension of “proxy” is framed to reinforce the international ties of conflicts that, at first glance, could be interpreted as essentially intrastate dynamics. However, the reflection on the genealogy of the term and its referential dispositions, essentially the binary context of the dispute, typical of the Cold War period, ends up promoting analyses that compartmentalize the conflicts in this way. Inevitable comparisons, such as *The Guardian's*, that “Syria would be Russia’s Vietnam” support such points (Goepner and Thrall, 2017).

It is in this context that the Civil War in Syria is framed after its start in 2011. As noted, there would initially be little willingness from Washington to engage in a new conflict in the Middle East — then President Barack Obama had been elected with the promise of withdrawing troops from the region. As deaths and violence escalate, a new issue has emerged: Russia, regaining its old desires to be recognized

as a key player in the region, has again blocked international action. Along with it, the narratives of conflict proxy.

CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA, MULTIPLICITY OF ACTORS AND CONFLICT MYTHS

The first analyses of the confrontation in Syria (Al Jazeera, 2011), which began in 2011, show that developments in the country were another chapter of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. This set of popular protests, which began in 2010 in Tunisia, quickly spread across the region, toppling regimes and reinforcing an often exaggerated narrative that the entire region would undergo leadership changes in a short time (Brancoli, 2015; Lynch, 2017).

Despite local differences, protests in Syria began relatively similarly with other countries: some children were arrested by security forces south of the capital Damascus after being caught writing on walls asking for the fall of the regime. Local demonstrations for the arrest quickly turned into broader claims, such as improved public services and greater government openness. The fact that police forces treated Protestants from the outset with extreme violence galvanized the protests further. The background to the grievances was well known: greater political freedom beyond systematic complaints by the country's poor public services, and widespread perception of leadership corruption (Erlich and Chomsky, 2014:56). A severe drought has also plagued the country since 2008, leading to a strong rural exodus and an increasing urban population, many without access to basic issues such as sanitation and housing.

The move from a nonviolent protest movement, which lasted about eight months, to a national civil war has multiple reasons. On the one hand, the protest movement was traditionally divided, mainly by the absence of illegal, formal opposition parties and organizations during the Assad regime. Government violence, moreover, drove violent strategies to the center of the discussions, starting a cycle that withdrew even more political capital from unarmed groups. Finally, the continuous flow of armaments and money from outside actors ultimately benefited those who decided on such a strategy.

Already at that time, the number of armed actors facing the regime became quite scattered. According to Oxford University's Center for Middle East Research, in the first two years of the conflict alone there were more than 20 distinct groups, including their political objectives. For

example, while the so-called “Syrian Free Army,” an umbrella of various groups, argued that the solution to the crisis was secularisation and the immediate adoption of democratic elements, the “Soldiers of the Levant” pointed out that only the constitution of a theocratic regime could pacify the area. Interestingly, despite opposing objectives, such elements were often framed in the ethereal ‘Sunni rebel’ compartment.

HISTORICAL SETTINGS AND ALLIANCES

An analysis of Syria’s recent history helps to understand why initially peaceful movements were responded to with violence — in addition to accelerated expansion throughout the country. Heir to post-World War I colonial division processes, materialized by the Sykes-Picot Accords⁴, modern Syria became independent in 1946, undergoing a series of coups until the military seizure of power by Hafez Al-Assad in 1970, linked to the Baath party.

From that moment on, Syria adopted a policy of proximity to the Soviet Union. Damascus arms purchase agreements, for example, were initiated in the immediate post-independence period after French troops left the area. Between the 1970s and 1980s, Syria purchased more than \$ 400 million in Russian weapons, becoming one of the major military partners in the region (KERR; LARKIN, 2015). This period marks the assignment to Moscow of the naval base of the city of Tartus, the important hot water base for the country.

Interestingly, after the two failed attempts at war against Israel (1967 and 1973), the Assad Senior regime also began to establish relations with the United States and the West at large. The end of bipolar logic has increased structural pressures for change within the country. Although Bashar largely retained his father’s old policies, such as his image worship campaigns, with posters spread across the country, he also tried to establish new practices. For example, new programs of political freedom and the press were introduced, at a time which, curiously, was known as the Damascus Spring (NOUEIHED; WARREN, 2013). Former dissidents were pardoned, with still shy voices beginning to cite changes in the

⁴ The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 was a secret negotiation between the governments of the United Kingdom and France, which defined their respective spheres of influence in the Middle East, considering the hypothesis of defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The agreement has set boundaries that still remain on most of the common border between Syria and Iraq.

regime, such as the end of the State of Emergency, implemented in 1963 and suspending various civil rights. Despite these concessions, it was common to see violent clashes between governmental and opposition forces, which signaled the limits of reform.

With deeper political changes out of the question, Assad turned to the economy, where he adopted a kind of hybrid model. While allowing some financial liberalization, it maintained the state control framework, allowing the State to remain able to control economic dynamics. In less than five years, at the end of 2004, the government authorized foreign banks to enter the country, which soon spread throughout the territory (Lesch, 2012: 12). Import tariffs have also been reduced, attracting European industries such as automotive. The government has also launched a significant tourism program, encouraging the arrival of Americans and Europeans. On the streets of Damascus, for example, tourist buses announcing the city's sights were common, with local guides versed in English and French. The main beneficiaries of economic thawing, however, were the government-related sectors. Alawite families, close to the inner circle of power, and Sunnis, located in large urban centers with good government connections, were able to make fortunes in a few months.

Such alliances were mobilized and resigified according to the institutional crisis that came to be understood as a civil war. To this extent, resources were mobilized by the government and pre-existing alliances. The international role of the conflict in Syria has been dubious since the protests began, especially after the protests started in 2011 became more violent, mainly after the defection of members of the national army. As it became clear that the protests were turning into an armed conflict, even in 2011, the United States refrained from further involvement, despite constant demand from regional allies, especially from Saudi Arabia. In April 2011, the Obama administration initiated some sanctions against the Assad regime and, two months later, together with leaders from France and Germany, to bring the leader out of power. During this period, the United States also established a program for training and aid of rebel groups, which as early as 2012 began actions to seize cities, as the prime example of Aleppo, the country's economic capital. Western warmongering speech increased, reaching in November a Security Council resolution attempt that could authorize its members to take "all necessary measures" to ensure the protection of civilians in the country (LYNCH, 2017, p. 89). The action proved fruitless by the

Moscow veto, which would be repeated in all subsequent attempts. In this case, France was prominent in demanding stronger action. Paris was the first member of the Security Council to expel Syrian diplomats linked to the regime, and pointed out that attacks on Assad were needed. The regime of socialist François Hollande, mainly due to the increase of terrorist attacks in the national territory, pointed out that the instability in the region brought insecurity to Europe as a whole.

Despite the impossibility of direct intervention, the United States and European allies, especially France, concentrated support efforts on the deployment of weapons and training of local troops, especially those under the umbrella of the so-called “Syrian Free Army”, as well as Kurdish groups, as will be shown later. In 2015 alone, the Obama administration would have sent over 900 tons of war material to such actors (YASSIN-KASSAB, 2016, p. 67). The choice of which group to support led to complications, particularly as regards finding “moderate” elements. Chaos in this regard can be materialized with the revelations that groups financed separately by the Pentagon and the CIA were fighting each other (LA Times, 2016). With the increasing fragmentation of armed gangs, Washington has turned to a larger alliance with the Kurds in the country, a consortium that will be better addressed in the next topic.

Russia’s entry into Assad’s government, in addition to the lack of political motivation for Washington to send more troops to the field, are the main explanatory factors for why more powerful interventions by the West and its regional allies were not possible, which eventually led to the option of forming alliances with local actors. The central argument was that support for the Assad government was mainly to prevent the expansion of terrorist groups. Russia, in addition to the strategic interests discussed above, would also fear a possible spillover of Islamic armed groups to Chechnya, for example. In this sense, the government of Vladimir Putin has supported the Syrian regime since the beginning of the protests, initially with logistical and political support and, from 2015, with ground troops and air support. The Russian military presence was vital to the survival of the regime, which took over cities after Putin’s support, as well as maintained the aforementioned blockade in the Security Council.

Russia has also acted as mediator for the Assad government at various times. In 2013, with threats from the Obama administration to unilaterally attack Syria on charges of chemical weapons, Moscow struck a deal with the US to prevent further war escalations. In 2017, with

accusations by now President Donald Trump that Assad had used chemical weapons against the civilian population, Russia again proved instrumental to the Assad regime, maintaining the political blockade at the UN Security Council and increasing the military presence in the region.

REGIONAL DISPUTES AND MYTHS OF CONFLICTING SECTARIANISM

The freezing of possible interventions between Russia and the United States also had consequences with regional leaders. Prevented, at first, from sending troops directly, the involvement of neighboring countries was through the financing and deployment, in the case of Iran, of special forces.

On the one hand, Saudi Arabia, with which the Syrian Baathist regime has had political disputes for decades, has supported armed groups among the rebels since the protests began. With an emphasis on Sunni organizations⁵, Riyadh has been accused of supporting indiscriminately, including sending weapons to fundamentalist groups with the self-proclaimed Islamic State⁶ (LYNCH, 2016, p. 49). Statements by the country to justify the action were mainly regarding protecting Syrian members of the Sunni branch of Islam, who were being persecuted by Damascus and could be the victims of “genocide” (SCHMITT, 2017).

Especially in the first decade of the 21st century, the Saudi regime has employed religious discursive elements as justifications for military actions in its surroundings. Leadership of the notoriously more conservative Wahabita strand of the Sunni Islam, Riyadh has established military action in Yemen and Bahrain, for example, using such prerogatives. In the specific case in Syria, the religious argument has gained automatic connotations to indicate the side on which the country would enter the conflict. Constructing a binary scenario in which all Sunnis would be facing an oppressive Shiite Alawi regime, the constitution of the clashing space is thus simplified.

⁵ Sunism is the major branch of modern Islam, with about 85% of all practitioners. Next comes Shiism and its branches, with 10%, and the rest with minority interpretations, such as Sufism. The distinction is symbolically made of questions as to who would be the heir to the prophet Muhammad. See PINTO, P. G. Hilu da Rocha, *Islã: Religião e Civilização – uma abordagem antropológica*, Aparecida, São Paulo, Editora Santuário, 2010.

⁶ Depending on the moment of self-identification, the group is also called the Islamic State of the Levant, or Daesh, in the Arabic acronym.

From a regional point of view, another important actor would be Iran. With long objectives in the region since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which had a strong expansive character, the country saw such objectives partially frozen in the first decade of the 21st century. This was mainly due to the nation's inclusion within the "Axis of Evil" context of the Global War on Terror (CRONBERG, 2017, p. 120). Despite this political configuration, the country played an important role in military movements in Iraq following the US-led invasion in 2003 and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein. Following the departure of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the gradual thawing with the West, materialized by the nuclear agreement sewn in 2016, Iranian regional ambitions became more explicit. In addition to sending weapons to rebels in Yemen, the country's main focus was on Syria.

The regime of the Ayatollahs and Damascus has had close ties since the 1980s with the Iran-Iraq war. At that time, Hafez al-Assad sought a counterweight against Baghdad, with whom he disputed prestige mainly within the settings of the Baathist regimes. In the same period, Syria and Iran both acted together in the Lebanon Civil War, financing several militias, with emphasis on the armed group Hezbollah. The proximity also materialized in cultural and religious elements, such as the facilitation of Shiite Syrian pilgrims to centers in Iran, as well as increased trade flows.

These channels were again triggered by the Syrian crisis and increased armed pressure to oust the Bashar Al Assad regime in 2011. Since the uprising began, Iran has not only supported the Syrian government with financial aid, it has mobilized armed militias, notably the aforementioned Hezbollah, and has sent special forces from the Iranian Republican Guard. The calculation, at this point, was that Bashar Al-Assad best served Iranian interests in the region — which could be overlooked in the event of a Saudi regime change.

A cursory analysis of regional dynamics would reinforce the analytical elements that represent the Syrian conflict within a binary logic of proxy war. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia, a Sunni representative, would fund similar groups in Syria as they are not part of the government and want to replace it. On the other hand, the Shiite representative, Iran, would support the ruling Alawi minority, thus ensuring that their interests are safeguarded. The Religious Cold War between Riyadh and Tehran would thus be binary. The narrative shown, in this way, is that there would be an

ontology of hatred and inability to live together between the two fronts, making the confrontation inevitable.

The materialization of these interests within this discourse would be the result of the very configuration of Syrian society. The population of the country is mostly Sunni Islamic (KERR; LARKIN, 2015, p. 33), with a Shia and Christian minority, as well as Druze and Kurds. However, anthropological analyses conducted decades ago in the country show that religion and ethnic identification, although having an important role in social relations, was never a specific factor for government belonging (PIERRET, 2013, p. 67).

A deeper appreciation of the very formation of society already demonstrates a plurality beyond the direct confrontational binarism in branches of Islam. For example, Sunnis are strongly represented at all levels of leadership in the Assad government (CAMBANIS, 2015). The territory controlled by the regime, moreover, is effectively Sunni majority — which would be impossible to maintain if the constitution of animosities were automatic in that sense. The Assad government, although belonging to the Alawite branch, contains Christians and Sunnis in important posts, such as Army Command (ALAM, 2016). In addition, the country's economic elite, which has historically supported the regime, is also Sunni. Later, religious visibility will be resignified to justify clashes — but this narrative is post-conflict.

This does not mean that religious identity elements are completely ignored by the Syrian population. Pinto and Baeza (2016, p. 3) demonstrate that Syrians in the diaspora re-signify national belonging by employing such elements. Often, through this bias, employing this identity element as one of the fronts to articulate the “other” compatriot in foreign territory. However, this does not mean that such elements are the only ones to be mobilized, as most of the above analysts point out.

As an example, Iran acts in the southern part of the country, on the border with Lebanon, mainly by sending revolutionary guard troops, as already stated, and coordinating with Hezbollah — always in support of the Syrian army. However, as Zambelis (2015) argues, the main members of the Armed Forces of this region are Sunnis, acting without major issues with the Iranian Shiite forces.

Finally, it is interesting to point out a third relevant regional actor to understand the civil war in Syria: Turkey. With increasingly expansive pretensions in the region, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has changed

its stance towards the Bashar Al Assad regime. Initially, the countries had good relations, especially after the Hafez government expelled terrorist militants from Ankara who were to be housed in Syrian territory.

The rising violence in Syria, however, has changed this relationship, permeated by two major arguments. First, Ankara argues that the neighbor has become a place for free action by terrorist groups, especially the so-called Islamic State. Formed in mid-2014 by the combination of Syrian Sunni fundamentalists and former members of the Iraqi Armed Forces, expelled from their posts by the US from 2003, the group became famous for the sophistication of messages sent via social media, displaying prisoner executions and after occupying important cities in both Syria and Iraq. ISIS allegedly committed attacks in Turkey and compromised the security of the region. The at least discursive threat from the Islamic State has reached such an extent that Russia, the US and Turkey would have taken joint action to bombard the organization's administrative centers.

More important, however, is Turkey's relationship with Kurdish groups. With more than 14 million representatives of this ethnic group inhabiting Turkey, its most significant party is considered a terrorist group by separatist actions and have been framed since 2010 as "one of the main threats to the Turkish state" (ÜNVER, 2015, p. 122). Reflections on the Kurdish impulse to obtain an independent space in Syria and the possible reflexes for Ankara explain the complexity of actions in the Syrian civil confrontation, which will be addressed in the next topic.

NON-TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS AND THE MULTIPLICITY OF ALLIES IN SYRIAN WAR: THE KURDISH CASE

The Kurds are touted as the largest stateless ethnic group on the globe, with about 30 million individuals, divided mainly through Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran (MCDOWALL, 1997, p. 2014). With the vast majority of its Sunni Muslim population, as well as representatives of Yazidi and Alevi minorities, as well as Christians. It is interesting to note, however, that 'Kurdish' identification, especially in the analysis of the Syrian confrontation, ends up overlapping religious elements. In this sense, when allocated within the alliance trays, the Kurdish forces are hardly referred to as 'Sunnis', which already indicates a certain attempt to homogenize the elements. Thus, the analysis of these

groups is essential: the search for a national state makes the strategies of such elements normally to pulverize alliances and agreements, which eventually deconstructs binary narratives.

Thus, the Civil War in Syria, for the Kurds, shows itself as one of several struggles for autonomy. In interviews in Northern Iraq in 2017, all parliamentarians heard pointed out that these 21st century conflicts were the outcome of clashes that had as their initial landmark 1916, a turning point for Kurdish history.

The area, which until then was occupied by the defeated Ottoman Empire, was divided by fields of interest from Paris and London, relegating the Kurdish population to different states. The subsequent history, despite local elements, is of a population that suffers repression from several fronts in its search for autonomy. Accusations of terrorist practices, in this sense, are always present, in addition to criminalizing attempts at greater independence. The specific analysis of the Turkish and Syrian case in relation to the Kurdistan Constitution helps in the deconstruction process that the dynamics in the region would be binary and driven exclusively by religious issues.

In the specific Turkish case, the Kurds have demanded, at least since the 1920s, some degree of autonomy. Comprising about 20% of the country's population, the demands began in return for nationalist and attempted assimilation practices by Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Turkish Republic, and subsequent governments (GUNTER, 2011). The materialization of these disputes led to the establishment in the late 1970s of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, in the Kurdish initials). The group has been considered terrorist by Ankara, causing an armed conflict since 1984 and which, since then, has caused more than 100,000 deaths. The conflict has potentially increased at two times in the last two decades. The first time was in 1999, when party intellectual leader Abdullah Öcalan was arrested in Kenya and has since been held in isolation in Turkey. The gesture was seen as a move by Ankara to ban the rise of formal Kurdish participation mechanisms, which eventually led to increased violent practices. This movement became even more complex when, in 2015, Kurdish-backed parties increased the number of representatives in the Turkish Congress. The Erdogan government's response was to criminalize and de-legitimize the cause by pointing to relatively fragile ties to violent groups and such political coalitions (ÜNVER, 2015, p. 22).

It is within this narrative that a process of homogenization of Kurdish groups can be observed, similar to the explanations of Proxy Wars. Although complex and with distinct political objectives, groups of such ethnicity are eventually homogenized and shown as a unified element. The overflowing of this strategy, which comes mainly from Ankara, clouds the complexity of relations between the different groups and ultimately strengthens the discourse in which such entities have a common agenda and confluent objectives.

The beginning of the war in Syria demonstrates these elements. With the Turkish government initially only acting to authorize the circulation of guns and personnel to confront the al-Assad regime, the Kurdish population on the border eventually became caught between Erdogan's interests and the multitude of actors involved in the Syrian context. With the number of political entities increasing, including Kurds, a more systematic analysis of such clusters demonstrates how confrontation in the region should be understood beyond dichotomous procedures. An interesting way to grasp such reflections is to focus on a specific group: in the subsequent case, it will reflect precisely on the Kurdish case.

KURDS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

With the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq following the US and Allied invasion in 2003, the Iraqi Kurds emerged as one of the groups that most garnered political benefit. With about 6 million representatives, 10% of the country's population, the group was persecuted by the Hussein regime during the 1990s, with the most serious cases represented by the so-called "Kurdish genocide", with the murder of thousands of people with chemical weapons. With the new Constitution of 2005, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was given the status of "semi-autonomous", although in practice it has almost complete autonomy (NATALI, 2007, p. 101). The KRG is currently under the leadership of the Barzani family: President Masoud; his nephew, Prime Minister Nurchivan; and his son Masrour, head of intelligence and security affairs. Under family rule, the KRG has turned into a relatively prosperous and peaceful region compared to Iraq in general.

Although the main leaders of the group are relatives, contemporary reflections show that the KRG is extremely fragmented. This is demonstrated by disputes between the main parties representing

Iraqi Kurds, the Barzanis-led Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), and the Kurdistan Patriotic Union (KPU). The KDP, based in the city of Erbil, is seen as a traditional representative of tribal Sunism, with conservative dynamics centered on maintaining Baghdad's heritage and independence. The KPU, led by Jalal Talabani, in turn, has its base of operations in the city of Sulaymaniyah, with its base of support in more progressive and secular elements. As Thronton (2015, p. 8) points out, the differences between these two parties actually led to a civil war in the 1990s. A legacy of this war is still evident today, with the GRC being split between the Barzani-controlled "formal army" and the UPC "peshmerga" militia forces. The peshmerga are mostly a group with little formal training and formed by citizens. The tension between the two groups, however, is quite present.

In terms of economy, the KRG is entitled to part of the dividends from oil exploration in its territory – which has led to a significant growth in industrial activities in the region. This materialized with a rapprochement with Turkey, which began, since the new constituent, to invest in the exploitation of this commodity. In 2013, a project between Ankara and Erbil began construction of a pipeline that would connect the KRG to the port of Ceyhan, Turkey. Relations between KDP and Ankara are more complex than just business relations. For the past few decades, Barzani has disputed with Ocalan and the PKK the leadership of what can be seen as an attempt by an international Kurdish Movement. The rapprochement with Turkey, within this logic, would be an attempt to normalize relations with Erdogan, while keeping the rival perspective isolated.

The Kurdish issue gains new levels of complexity as we include the population of this ethnic group in Syrian territory and their participation in the armed conflict. Before the civil war began, about 2.2 million Kurds lived in the north of the country. Thornson (2015, p. 8) indicates that "if the Kurds of the globe are divided, in Syria they are even more so," with about two dozen political parties representing the different factions. Significantly, there is also a geographical division: most of the population is to the north, in cities such as Kobane and Qamishlia.

With the beginning of the conflagrations in 2011, Yidliz (2014, p. 1) points out that the Kurds decided, at first, to stay away from the disputes, as they interpreted as an issue "among Arabs". In 2012, an informal agreement was reached with the Assad regime: government troops withdrew from the three non-contiguous Kurdish areas, traditionally known as Rojava (West Kurdistan), while the presidency conferred certain

federalist powers, such as authorization of Kurdish teaching in schools. However, the departure of federal troops almost automatically triggered attacks by Sunni fundamentalist groups, including the Islamic State. Since then, Kurdish irregular forces have faced militants, which will be further explored later.

From representative fragmentation, the most influential Kurdish political party in Rojava is the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat - PYD), created in 2003 as a branch of the PKK. In the 1990s, the PKK had been authorized by Assad to operate on Syrian territory against targets within Turkey. However, with the termination of this agreement in 2003, with a rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara, the PKK was again banned in Syria. The PYD, as a formal party, was formed by a cluster of former dissidents who remained in Syrian territory. In this sense, the connections are still quite strong: "Although PYD is led by Salih Muslim, we all know that Ocalan is still where we look" (SAYIND, 2017).

The PYD owes much of its power and influence to being the only Syrian Kurdish party with its own militia, the YPG (Yekineyen Gel Parastina - People's Protection Units). With about 65,000 armed combatants, the YPG was reportedly strengthened in 2013, when hundreds of PKK members refused to abandon their weapons and joined the group under an agreement between Bashar Al-Assad and Recep Erdogan. Articulating with centuries-old Kurdish cultural practices, a militia brigade is made up only of women, the Free Women Unit, which has generated some commotion in the Western press.

Turkey, as expected, does not see the rise of the PYD optimistically. The Kurdish group would not only have a common past with the PKK, being considered by Erdogan as a terrorist group as well as having alliances with the Assad regime. Added to these aspects is the Turkish fear that a space with greater Kurdish autonomy in Syria will eventually overflow into its own territory, even generating requests for separation.

As shown, the combative relations in Syria are more complex than the binarism present in traditional narratives. As a way of further materializing such a dimension, with emphasis on Kurdish groups, we will now focus on the so-called "battle of Kobane" and its developments.

“THE MOTHER OF ALL KURDISH BATTLES”

The already intricate relations between the different Kurdish parties have gained a new tangle with the entry of yet another actor into the local conflict: the aforementioned Islamic State. In June 2014, the group launched the largest offensive in its short history, gaining ground in both Syria and Iraq. In Iraqi space, the group conquered without effort the city of Mosul, the second largest in the country and in Kurdish territory. The rapid victory drew global attention mainly from the military dimension: the larger and supposedly better-trained Iraqi army was defeated in a few days. The issue took on a new dimension as IS forces turned to Erbil and, by all accounts, could conquer the city in a few days. At this point, the relationship between the KDP and Ankara trembled, mainly due to Turkey's lack of aid, while the US responded swiftly, authorizing bombing to contain Daesh forces. In discussion at the regional parliament in January 2016, two years later, Kurdish leaders were still grudging: “Erdogan abandoned us when we needed it most,” said Fuad Hussein, one of Barzani's closest generals. Syndjar, Kurdish parliamentarian, continued in this tone “the USA, Europe and France came, [but] from Turkey, our neighbor, we just had silence” (LYNCH, 2016).

The Turkish argument is that the country was in the middle of the election, with authorizations to use force becoming more difficult. Erdogan, moreover, feared to undermine a fragile coalition set up for the event, as the Kurdish issue was still sensitive across the country.

Interestingly, given our multi-level alliance argument, one country that helped the Kurdish coalition profitably was Iran, the explicit rival, at least discursively, of the United States. Tehran, partly afraid of IS's violent actions against Shiites in the region, sent weapons and military experts to Erbil.

The crisis took on humanitarian contours as the Islamic State, scattered by air strikes and reinforcement of the Kurds, launched a persecution against the region's Yazidi minority, a religious group historically beset by incriminations of heresy. Part of the population was surrounded by the top of Sinjar Mountain, a narrative quickly captured by international media, which stirred discussions so that action could be taken to prevent genocide. The pressure for Barzani to do something increased exponentially, although reaction capacities were minimal, as his military forces were undermined after the first efforts against Daesh.

The way out was to solicit support from the PYD in Syria, which was answered relatively quickly. YPG and PKK-coordinated militias quickly took up positions around the hill, expelling members of the Islamic State and paving the way for the Yazidi to leave. The arrival of US special forces created an interesting situation: Washington was now forced to act in conjunction with the group that one of its largest regional allies, Turkey, clearly regarded as a terrorist.

The scenario, as Thornton (2015, p. 11) points out, has become the worst possible for Erdogan. Not only did the KRD Kurdish groups, with whom Ankara had close relations, reevaluate their old alliance, but they established a new relationship with the PYD/PKK. In addition, Washington approached the latter in Mount Sinjar operations, generating a positive international image from the PKK.

Despite such relatively clear dynamics about divisions among Kurdish groups, Western countries have begun a discursive campaign to “send arms to the Kurds” (LYNCH, 2016, p. 56), seen as homogeneous groups. With Erbil as a point of entry, countries such as France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands began significant shipments of military equipment, with Berlin also sending teams for military training. The understanding at that time, not only of Kurdish homogeneity, was that such groups would be representatives of Western interests in the region. The statement by German Defense Minister Ursula Von Der Leyen reverberates this issue when, visiting Erbil, she points out that “the Peshmerga are not only fighting for their own country, but for all of us” (METZGER, 2016).

Once the situation on Mount Sinjar stabilized, attention turned to the Kobane region. Although the Kurds in Syria have been involved in clashes with IS since 2012, only in 2014 did a sustained attack begin. The relations established by Washington at that time, moreover, proved to be effective, mainly due to the media role of the action. Since the military dispute was being described by the international press as “the biggest battle against the Islamic State” and “the conflict that will change the direction of the region” (BBC, 2015), it made the US State Department continue to send arms, mainly by air.

For its part, Turkey remained firm in criticizing international aid for Kobane. The central argument was that any aid would be diverted to the PKK and pointed out that the Kurds did not face the main enemy, which was Bashar al-Assad. Turkey, moreover, did not allow Kurds

in Turkey to cross their borders to assist in combat, while accusations that the road would be clear to ISIS military personnel increased (BBC, 2017). Ankara's intransigence has sparked opposing demonstrations internationally and internally as the Turkish population of Kurdish origin started a series of protests. In October 2014, members of such groups were killed by police forces in a series of protests, followed by Turkish air actions against PKK-controlled areas.

As the fronts moved toward IS groups in Kobane, the discursive centrality of pointing out Kurds as a unitary group became evident. More than reflecting on whether such indications were essentially "true", it is important to note that Erdogan, for example, pointed out that "PYD, PKK (...) are all terrorists, these groups are the same" (COLE, 2017). At the same time, the international press was discussing the consequences of the "Kurds" being chosen to face the "proxy war" of the West, and its possible strategic consequences (KHALIL, 2017; BAZZI, 2017).

This kind of argument also ignores that Kobane's siege and retaking may even represent an inaccurate dispute, as Western-sent armaments, in addition to space reconfigurations, have implemented new disputes. For example, while the peshmerga directed from KRG to Syria were composed of a small group, PKK members sent to Mount Sinjar did not return to their point of origin. Local media point out that they were actually laying the groundwork for setting up an autonomous canton in Iraq, in the city of Shingal. Strategic area between Mosul and the Syrian border, the creation of such a warehouse would directly threaten Barzani's interests. The GRC leader materialized such issues in a public statement in January 2017, pointing out that "PKK's attempt to create a canton in Singal is illegal (...). Taking advantage of the battle of Kobane to now impose his political interests will not be acceptable to us. We cannot win [against the Islamic State] only to face another enemy after" (Al Jazeera, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

In May 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visiting the United States, warned that "[the US] to arm the Kurds is to arm a terrorist enemy of Turkey" (The Guardian, 2017). On the same day, the American press reflected on the consequences of President Donald Trump deciding to galvanize the local group as a proxy in the Levant region. We argue that the use of the concept of "Proxy War" in Syria's case simplifies

and conceals certain practical reflections of what effectively assists in the complex chain of violence that occurs in the region. Mainly inherited from the Cold War, such a concept reinforces elements of watertight binary, ignoring the dynamics and wills of local actors, especially non-state actors. The specific case of the Kurds demonstrates the intricate and antagonistic network of relations of such groups with each other and with regional and global powers. Assuming such complexity is the first step to more sophisticated analysis and the way to avoid gross homogeneities and gross simplifications.

The threat materialized in September 2017, when the autonomous government of Iraqi Kurdistan held a referendum unilaterally declaring its independence from Baghdad. If the binary argument reinforced by the concept of “Proxy War” were confirmed, the response of regional and global actors would be predictable. On the one hand, countries would be positioned that would reinforce an anti-Islamic State character and, on the other, those that would have problems with an independent Kurdistan. However, what was seen in the field was a profusion of alliances and multiple connections, with opposing countries in various aspects, such as Iran and the United States, reinforcing that they did not want Erbil’s independence at that time.

The case of the Kurds in Iraq and their consequent (de)mobilization in Syria is a useful example to understand that the confrontation in this country is more complex than merely a binary clash between superpowers. More than a fixed space, the dynamics in this place involve a fluidity that, if ignored, erases various political movements.

This article aims to point out alternative ways to observe the confrontation in Syria, indicating that the materialization of the proxy war discourse represents an oversimplification of what happens in the field. Moreover, far from purely state rational calculations, touted by the PW speech, the Syrian civil war can only be understood by the inclusion of groups not necessarily linked to a nation. In this sense, alliances touted in macro, international logic do not necessarily materialize on a daily basis in Syria. It is believed that the reflections shown here can still adaptably be used in other conflicting movements in the region, favoring further analysis sophistication.

SÍRIA E NARRATIVAS DE GUERRA POR PROCURAÇÃO: O CASO DOS CURDOS COMO ELEMENTO DE COMPLEXIDADE

RESUMO

O presente artigo pretende apontar caminhos alternativos para se observar o confronto civil na Síria (2011-presente), indicando que a materialização do discurso sobre guerras por procuração representa uma simplificação demasiada do que ocorre em campo. Diferente de um confronto de dois lados fixos, liderado por Estados, reforçamos que se trata de um conflito fluido, com alianças e objetivos se modificando ao longo do tempo e do espaço. Para isso, fazemos um estudo de caso dos grupos Curdos e suas múltiplas afiliações no teatro operacional.

Keywords: Síria. Guerra por Procuração. Conflitos armados internos.

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