

To be for fighting & To fight for being (How identity and the sense of belonging can influence the performance of the Syrian Kurds' military groups)

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^a Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel;
Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5019-8014; lucrezia.savasta89@gmail.com

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to examine how the concept of identity and the sense of belonging can shape the performance and increase the capacity of a military group. At first the text outlines the theoretical framework of what is the sense of belonging and how this is strictly connected with the notion of identity by looking at previous literature. Afterward the paper defines how these factors can cause and bring to a different military capacity, when it is formed by representatives of a single ethnic group.

The relevance of this work is the possibility of having a clearer understanding of military efficiency by combining theories of two sciences: political science and anthropology. Previous works didn't give a complete vision and understanding of it because they were not combining the theories of these two disciplines, leaving a not clear result in their research. Furthermore, for proving the theoretical framework developed in the text, a case study is chosen: the Syrian Kurds, specifically two groups, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (YPD) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Using a qualitative research method, the groups are exposed, and it is outlined how the theoretical idea of the paper functions when looking at physical examples. The combination of primary sources and interviews with UN staff operating in Syria during 2012-2016, allowed a more complete and objective vision of the groups' capacity and the reality that the Syrian Kurds were living. The choice fell on these exponents because they manifest each of the theoretical points touched in the research (culture, sense of belonging and identity).

Keywords: Syria, Kurds, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Syrian Democratic Forces, sense of belonging, military performance

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INTRODUCTION

Political scientists and policymakers for many years have been interested in understanding whether soldiers from different cultures fight in the same way, or if the armies from different societies are just as good as one another when given the same material resources [15]. Several have focused just on the concept of common culture, which is correct, but it is incomplete. Others have devoted their studies analyzing how diverse strata of society can influence the efficiency of the military group, a relevant point but doesn't play a big role.

The key question that can allow us to understand in front of which army we are is "how do you identify yourself"? This simple query might help to comprehend more than what is written in warfare and combat unit literature. In this article I outline how the sense of belonging and identity of each individual part of a military group, can influence his/her performance in battle/war.

To understand whether this factor can be a booster for the result, we can't just take into consideration the literature of political science, we have also to take into account and combine what anthropology expresses in regard to the topic of identity and sense of belonging. The peculiarity of the work is exactly the combination of the two sciences, this gives a clearer and new understanding of military efficiency. Furthermore, in this article, it is explained how under the concept of identity are included also the sense of belonging and the idea of culture, clarifying how they can't be separated from each other and how they can bias the capacity of a military group.

The method used for proving the theoretical idea of the combination of the two sciences is qualitative (using in-depth interviews combined with literature review). A demonstration of this theory is given analyzing the Syrian Kurdish military forces (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - YPG, Syrian Democratic Forces - SDF between 2012 and 2019/2020) as case study. The choice fell on this group because it allows us to obtain a clearer vision of how a military group based on a common identity, even when it is not technologically advanced and when it is not backed by international bodies, can still perform at a very high level.

WHAT IS THE SENSE OF BELONGING?

The concept of belonging has been used to explore and make sense of a wide range of phenomena that scholars have found difficult to address using the concept of identity as an ongoing process rather than identity as a stable

result of finite processes [13]. Marco Antonsich, a specialist on territory and identity, sees the discussions on belonging as structured around two dimensions: belonging as a personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and belonging as a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging) [1]. Other scholars have distinguished between micro and macro structures of belonging and theorized how the idea of belonging varies in different contexts (membership in a community, citizenship, etc) [13].

Others, as Hakan Sicakkan [16], an expert in comparative politics, emphasized the 'modes of belonging' when discussing the broad variety of attachments to places, groups, and cultures [13]; while to the sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis [21], the politics of belonging relates to national belonging and the participatory politics of citizenship. She also encourages to analyze belonging on the level of ethical and political values, social locations, and identifications and emotional attachments, mostly because it seems impossible to separate emotional attachments, psychological belonging, and politics of belonging [13].

As a concept, it is closely linked to the concept of identity. The post structural and critical theories have broadened the discussion on identities by highlighting identification as an ongoing process rather than a stable result of finite processes [12]. Identity is a key term in anthropology, reason why we should turn to that science to learn its meaning. It relates, on the one hand, to categories of the individual or sameness with oneself and, on the other, to collective distinctions of otherness. It is fluid and transcends boundaries but, to a certain degree, has to be stable in order for others to identify one as theirs.

The most prominent among the many identity aspects we employ is probably the ethnic one, which hinges on a bundle of markers used to distinguish each other in presumed cultural terms [8]. The anthropologist Fredrik Barth in his "Ethnic Groups and Social Boundaries" [3] discussed this topic, focusing on ethnic identity. He argues the production of ethnic boundaries is what we should focus on, because it is from a few differential elements that an identity separation is obtained. In Barth's study a group that interacts with others must develop self-definition criteria that allow its members to interact with members of other groups who define themselves differently, in a way that favors the interchange, but without erasing their identity.

Barth proved in his studies how the "boundaries" between groups were regularly crossed, and how they also persisted despite a flow of personnel across them. His concept of boundaries is resumed and outlined also by another anthropologist, Ugo Fabietti [7], saying that the existence of ethnic groups and their persistence over time is an effect of the presence of borders, regardless of the changes that may affect the diacritical "indicators" on which they are based [7]. A reduction of cultural differences between ethnic groups does not correlate with a reduction in the organizational relevance of ethnic identities, or a breakdown in boundary-maintaining processes. Belonging is not simply closely linked to the concept of identity, but that the two go hand in hand, when one is present the other is also present.

HOW CAN THE SENSE OF BELONGING INFLUENCE THE PERFORMANCE OF A MILITARY GROUP?

Political scientists and policymakers have been interested in understanding whether soldiers fight the same way in time of war. By focusing on the way in which social structures affect military power it can help to explain why countries from different cultures have different or similar capabilities [10]. The issue of cultural differences, in the context of military groups, and its comparative analysis was particularly difficult to untangle, mostly because the scholars that were dealing with it tended to be anthropologists. They were not specialists of western military history or political views linked with conflict and warfare and this limited their ability to make comparative military evaluations [10].

Those first efforts to understand the impact of culture on strategic behavior were imperfect. The concept of strategic culture has been advanced to explain possible differences in military behavior, but it was never adapted to the point of understanding why they acted in a determinate way [10]. The political scientist Steven David noted that armed groups when entering in action owe allegiance to and act for interests other than the national interest, he pointed out that individuals identify with ethnic, religious, or regional groupings [6]. He pointed out that the matter of culture affects the desire to move in a military group. The specialist in social structures on military organizations Stephen Rosen also agreed with it, saying that the identity and sense of belonging that each individual, which is part of the military group, shares might also influence his/her attitude towards specific actions [15]. Idea supported at the same time by Brooks Risa, expert in strategy, defense, and security, attesting how culture represents a first category of potential causes of military effectiveness [4].

In all those cases, what the political scientists refer to as culture is in fact the sense of belonging which is the concept of identity defined in anthropology. Kristen Harkness, a scholar expert in conflict studies, was right when saying that previous comparative analyses done by anthropologists weren't complete, but it is also right that the research conducted by political scientists are unclear and present several gaps. This is because for having a final vision of who and how military groups can be more effective the two sciences have to be

combined. The 3 factors, culture, sense of belonging and identity, are strictly connected and when one is present the others can't be missing.

Combining the two sciences the result is that identity plays an important role in an army and it is a strong characteristic. Ethnic identity, especially, forms strong boundaries inside each individual and the ethnic composition of a military group can pattern the perspective of possible results. This is given by the fact that shared ethnicity offers an enduring and strong basis for military loyalty. The ethnic army's fate makes them particularly predisposed to act in a unified manner, moving inside them the feeling of defending 'their people' and their family as a duty. This drives them till the point to be up to giving their lives for granting a future for their nation [10].

CASE STUDY: THE SYRIAN KURDS' MILITARY FORCES

The Kurds of Syria were not well known in Western countries until the explosion of the civil war in 2012 [12]. As analyzed and described by the Russian Professor Alexei Vasiliev, prominent Arabist and specialist in the region and on the topic, there are more than 2 million Kurds in Syria (approximately 10-12% of the population), making them the largest non-Arab minority in the country [19]. Syrian Kurds have historically encountered human rights abuses in Syria. To most of them Syrian documents were refused, they were classified as foreigners and they carried red identity cards that permitted them to be recorded as 'aliens' in official records [20], or a yellow definition certificate (residence bond) issued by a local *mukhtar* (chieftain) and used to identify the holders whenever authorities found it necessary [14].

A) After the explosion of the civil war, Syrian Kurds have been able to organize themselves into a semi-autonomous region, called Rojava, ruled and defended by the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or PYD). The PYD is a branch of the anti-Turkish Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK), based in Syria and declared as a terrorist group by the Turkish government.

I have interviewed in the guise of researcher and post graduate student a group of UN diplomats¹ who worked in Syria between 2012-2016 and they have helped me outlining better the steps that Kurds took in the years of war. They explained me that in 2012 the first demonstrations against Assad's government emerged in several areas of Syria (as the suburbs of Damascus). In the Kurdish regions protests were organized too and their political dimension moved gradually from local to a more defined reality and ideological thought and, when things worsened, the idea of building a Kurdish region presented itself immediately.

All UN interviewees confirmed that the Kurdish organization started with a very good system which moved people from any strata of the population, subsequently they began to form councils. The other trend that grew inside the region was the movement led by the political party of the PYD [22]. The PYD is openly a member of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK), the umbrella body for groups supportive of PKK ideology and goals. Together with the PYD also the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) was representing the Kurds [9].

The two groups (PYD and YPG) started a sort of cooperation gaining support from different communities and officially began to recruit people, gathering military forces mainly formed by the YPG fighters, with the goal of defending Kurdish citizens [11]. When their military forces became more defined, hundreds of foreign leftists joined the International Freedom Battalion of the YPG in Rojava [22] and a full female battalion was established, known as the Women's Defense Units [17].

In 2012 fights between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the central government exploded and at the end of the same year there was the first armed clash between PYD and FSA. According to the UN workers' opinion, those clashes helped the PYD to become even more unified and to receive more support from the Kurdish population. In the same year the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS) also grew and in 2013, when its threat increased, the Kurds formulated the canton project of Rojava [12].

In August 2014 ISIS attacked a region bordering with Rojava, that area was inhabited mainly by the minority groups of Yazidis, and it was a devastating genocide. In this case the YPG intervened and freed that population, this was the action that brought the Syrian Kurds to be well known all over the world. From this moment they got an exponential media attention and after the siege of Kobane began the question whether to support the Syrian Kurds.

B) Their military capacity also improved thanks to international cooperation. In addition to the YPG, in 2015 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, the ongoing official forces that is managing and defending the Rojava region, led by the YPG and composed primarily of Kurdish, few Arab, and a small part of Assyrian/Syriac militias armed group - backed at the beginning by the US) was formed. It was basically a subsidiary of the YPG, operating in different geographical areas, more ethnically mixed but always keeping most fighters of Kurdish ethnicity [5].

The establishment of de facto autonomy in Syria's Kurdish majority areas has turned the Kurds into key actors in the conflict [12]. Rojava marked the first attempt at a government based on the political theory of democratic

¹ A total of 5 UN diplomats were interviewed in Geneva (Swiss), Stockholm (Sweden) plus 2 of them via Skype, they asked to keep the anonymity.

confederalism (or democratic autonomy) in Syria for the Kurds, but the project also encountered several difficulties. In the years 2015-2016, the situation for them became more problematic, as described by Prof. A.Vasiliev, a feature of the multilayered situation in Syria was that both external and internal actors pursued their own policies and often waged their own war [19].

One of the clearest examples was Turkey's strategy in connection with military operations in the Kurdish regions of Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield, operation Olive Branch², and 'Operation Peace Spring', in October 2019 [18]. The Turks perceived the Kurds as a threat, not only because of possible connections with the PKK, but also because Ankara thought about the possibility that the YPG would have been able to create a corridor from Iraq till the Mediterranean.

At that point the US was also not ready to militarily prevent the Turkish army from attacking the SDF. Russia and the US were able to quickly reach separate ceasefire deals. This stopped Turkey's original plan to destroy the Kurdish-led autonomous administration by creating a 32-kilometre-deep 'safe zone' stretching along the Turkish-Syrian border.

When I asked one of the UN workers what happened and which was the condition at the end of 2017 - beginning of 2018 N.N. explained that: "The situation reached a deadlock, ISIS basically disappeared, FSA lost a great part of its forces and the Kurds found themselves controlling a wide territory but without support from one of the actors present in Syria. Therefore, they decided to move towards an agreement with Assad's government, which could also help them in having a possible safety from Turkish attacks or repercussions, this is because they found themselves alone".

In 2019 some changes happened, Erdogan and Vladimir Putin signed a 10-points agreement in Sochi on October 22, 2019, ratifying Turkey's presence in northeast Syria and forcing the YPG to withdraw from Turkish-held territory. Since then, Turkey has been accused of driving out the Kurdish population and replacing them with 2 million Sunni Arabs fled from elsewhere in Syria to Turkey [5]. But even though this seemed a clarification, in 2020 and 2021, Turkey continued to bomb Kurdish villages in northern Syria, subjecting the population of that area to daily violence, with the aim of destroying its pluralistic character.

C) A proof of how the sense of belonging and identity became their performance booster is given by the fact that, despite the US left them and gave green light to Turkey for initiating the military campaign, Syria's Kurdish officials have been able to not be disheartened. They have been able to push themselves till they struck another deal with Assad for military reinforcements in the border area [2]. This ethnic minority has been able to keep most of the geographical areas gained in 2012-2013. Their willingness to fight and capacities to create loyal armies and coalition went far beyond what many thought [2].

Even nowadays the SDF claims that they have no intentions to revert to the pre-2010 state conditions. Although the Kurds feel bitterness and anger over how the enclave between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn was abandoned to the Turks, they are keeping their population safe as much as possible and are not up to withdraw or to lose the rights and the status gained [5]. The capacity of Syrian Kurds in creating Rojava, merging from a collapsing state, has been impressive. The sense of common identity, of belonging to the same nationhood and peoplehood, gave them the necessary strength for starting this journey and has been their booster in the most extreme and difficult military situations.

CONCLUSION

The article outlines how the combination of anthropology and political science can explain why some military groups have a better performance compared to others. It is outlined how culture and the sense of belonging are part of the broader anthropological concept of identity and how this can be a booster for the military force. When we look at armed groups, the identity and sense of belonging of each individual is able to influence his/her attitude towards specific actions. Usually, this sense of commonality is able to bias the sensation that each person has, bringing inside them greater strength and manages to transform fear into courage and to let the individual think as a unit.

One of the strongest identities, as described in the text, is the ethnic one, which doesn't focus only on cultural material, but on internal borders present in every individual who is part of the ethnic group. A reduction of cultural differences between ethnic groups does not correlate with a reduction in the organizational relevance of ethnic identities, or a breakdown in boundary-maintaining processes. There might be commonalities or intersection of culture, or people inside a common ethnic group might not have the same culture, but the borders that allow them to see clearly who is 'us' and who is 'the others' remain.

² In January 2018, the Turkish military launched a military operation, code-named Operation Olive Branch (Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı) by Turkey, in the SDF-controlled Afrin District and the Tell Rifaat Subdistrict. The offensive was against the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party in Syria (PYD), its armed wing People's Protection Unit (YPG), and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions surrounding the Syrian city of Afrin.

This article gives as an example of how, in the case of the Syrian Kurds, a strong ethnic identity has led to develop an extremely efficient method of defense. This group is very interesting because Kurds in other countries (Iran, Iraq, and Turkey) had the historical possibility of developing their own community and to expose their ideologies and identity in different ways and during different times. While Syrian Kurds were completely oppressed and neglected by the central government and when chaos exploded, their first thought went to safeguard the Kurdish population, organizing a capable military force for defending their people. After that, institutional structures were created till the formation of what is now called the region of Rojava.

The two military groups, the YPG and the SDF gave proof of being fearless warriors on the battlefield. The joint military work of the YPG and the SDF has shown its fighting efficiencies, even when they weren't backed by international forces. These groups are an exemplary pattern of what is discussed in the theoretical paragraphs regarding how the sense of belonging and identity affect the performance of a military group.

Rojava is viewed as a haven of grassroots democracy, based on principles of feminism, ecology, cultural pluralism, participatory politics, and a co-operative sharing economy. Rojava's revolutionary system is holding up remarkably, using its grassroots structures to meet the basic and economic needs of its people [2]. Even when the region and their military forces faced existential threats and they knew that they were militarily weaker, they still went to war, both women and men. The Syrian Kurdish military forces never abandoned the land and the people, they preferred to find a way to communicate with the Syrian government instead of forgetting about what they have been able to create and gain during years.

The sense of belonging, the common identity shared by the fighters and by the civilians, construct a strong bondage between action and love for who they are. As mentioned, the ethnic factor provides a particularly enduring and rigorous basis for military loyalty and influences the attitude towards the participation of Kurdish fighters in the war. A shared common ethnic identity might give a military group the possibility of lasting longer and of achieving positive results.

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ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Саваста Лукреция, исследователь, Университет имени Райхмана, Герцлия, Израиль; аспирантка, Казанский феде- ральный университет, Казань, Россия.	Lucrezia Savasta, Researcher, Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel; Post-graduate student, Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia.
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