

Alternate Names: People's Protection Units, People's Defense Units
Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG

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The People's Protection Units (YPG) is a Kurdish military force in Syria that serves as the armed branch of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the defensive force for Kurdish regions of northern Syria. Over the past four years, the YPG has led Syria's Kurds to a position of prominence through their capture and control of key territory and by serving as a vanguard against ISIS.

The YPG originally formed in 2004 after riots in [Qamishli](#) were violently put down by the [Syrian regime](#). It did not officially [declare its existence](#) until it first began combat operations in the Syrian conflict in 2012. The YPG is led by commander Sipan Hemo and [estimates](#) of its [force size](#) range from 30,000-50,000. The Women's Protection Units (YPJ) is an all-female subsidiary unit that fights alongside the YPG.

The YPG's relationships with other armed actors in Syria are complex, as it tends to make pragmatic rather than ideological alliances. The YPG has maintained a sort of détente with Assad's forces since 2012 when the Syrian military [withdrew](#) from most Kurdish areas in Syria's northeast. To this day, the YPG [shares control](#) of the provincial capital Qamishli with Syrian military and [NDF forces](#), although tensions at times have boiled over into violence. The YPG's relations with moderate armed opposition groups are even more mixed, and it continues to cooperate and clash with various [armed opposition groups](#). The YPG's only consistent enemies have been jihadist forces, including the formerly al Qaeda-affiliated [Jabhat al-Nusra](#) and the [Islamic State \(ISIS\)](#).

In late 2014, ISIS captured hundreds of Kurdish villages surrounding the town of Kobane on the [Turkish](#) border, spurring the Kurds into one of their most significant battles of the war. Backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, the YPG, Syrian opposition groups, and Peshmerga forces, spent months fighting ISIS forces before successfully breaking the [siege of Kobane](#) in January 2015. Following this battle, the US began to shift its strategy in Syria towards supporting the Kurds as its preferred anti-ISIS fighting force.

In October 2015, Kurdish YPG fighters became the cornerstone and [dominant component](#) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a newly minted coalition [designated by the US](#) to receive the bulk of its military support which includes weapons and training from embedded [US Special Operations Forces](#). US support for the YPG as it captures territory across northern Syria is a significant concern for Turkey due to the Syrian Kurds' [ties to the PKK](#), which is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US, and the EU. When the PYD [was excluded](#) from the UN-sponsored Intra-Syrian Geneva negotiations in the spring of 2016, the Kurds responded by moving forward with plans to create an autonomous federal region, now known as "[Rojava](#)," in large parts of northern Syria. Despite Turkish trepidations that the YPG is building a de facto contiguous [Kurdish state](#) along the length of its southern border, it appears clear that the [US will continue](#) to ramp up military support for the YPG-dominated SDF as long as it continues to drive ISIS out of strategic towns such as [Manbij](#).

The YPG's success has propelled Syria's Kurdish minority into a unique position of power over the last several years, but their future in Syria will still be shaped by several geopolitical developments:

- The [long-term fallout](#) of the July 2016 Turkish coup attempt and how it will impact Erdoğan's approach to the YPG/PYD remains unclear. Erdoğan is consolidating power in Turkey, which may suggest a more direct and forceful pursuit of existing state policies. In the case of Syria's Kurds, these policies have meant [increasing aggression in the past](#) year. On the other hand, the PKK has not been implicated in the coup attempt, so Erdoğan's focus on [purging other](#) political enemies may place his war on the Kurds on the back burner, or even bring them back to the [negotiating table](#).
- [Current efforts](#) by Russia and the US to restore a nationwide cessation of hostilities could force a realignment of armed opposition factions, and it remains unclear where the YPG would land in this web of shifting allegiances.
- If an additional round of UN-sponsored Intra-Syrian negotiations is actually convened in Geneva in [late August](#), it appears that the Kurds will not be invited despite becoming the favored partner of the US in the fight against ISIS. Syria's territorial integrity will certainly be on the agenda at Geneva, and both the Syrian government and opposition reject the sort of de facto territorial partition of Syria that the Kurds are currently pursuing in the north.