

The U.S. Rewards Offer for Three Top Leaders of the PKK: A Well-Thought-Out Plan?

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- What are the backstage strategic calculations of the U.S. rewards offer?
- What are the expected initial reactions of the relevant actors?
- What are the pragmatic implications of the rewards offer in terms of the interests of the relevant actors?

THE STATEMENT

On November 6, 2018, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer announced that the U.S. Department of State's Rewards for Justice Program has pledged to put bounties for information leading to the identification or location of the three senior leaders of the PKK: Murat Karayılan, namely the military commander of the terrorist group (up to USD \$5 million; the PKK's co-founder Cemil Bayik (up to USD \$4 million); and Duran Kalkan, a prominent member of the executive council of the umbrella organization Koma Civaken Kurdistan (KCK) (up to USD \$3 million).¹ Regarding the timing of the statement, it can be said that the United States intended to kill two birds with one stone. First, the U.S. tried to appease Turkey which feels emboldened and ready

for conducting comprehensive and effective operations at the east side of the Euphrates River. Secondly, the U.S. tried to instrumentalize the YPG against the Iranian-backed militias in Syria with an attempt to reformulate and dissociate the YPG from the PKK; an attempt that ultimately aimed to legitimize the YPG as a local actor.

THE TIMING OF THE STATEMENT

The announcement came after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement which highlighted Turkey's intention to conduct comprehensive and effective operations on the east side of the Euphrates River. On October 30, 2018, President Erdoğan stated, "We will destroy the terrorist organization in the east of the Euphrates, as well. To conduct a comprehensive and effective operation, we have completed our preparations, plans, and programs."² Before the statement,

1. "Statement on U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer's Visit to Ankara, Turkey", *U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Turkey*, November 6, 2018, from <https://tr.usembassy.gov/statement-on-u-s-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-state-matthew-palmers-visit-to-ankara-turkey/>; "US Offers up to \$12 Mmillion Rreward for 3 Ssenior PKK Tterrorists", *Daily Sabah*, November 6, 2018, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/11/06/us-offers-up-to-12-million-reward-for-3-senior-pkk-terrorists>

2. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Terör yapısını çökerteceğiz, hazırlıklarımızı tamamladık", *TRT Haber*, October 30, 2018, from <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-teror-yapisini-cokertecegiz-hazirliklarimizi-tamamladik-391647.html>

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on October 28, the Turkish Armed Forces, had been shelling the PKK/YPG positions in the west of Ayn al Arab and in the town of Tal Abyad, on October 30. In return, on October 30, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared that it temporarily suspended its offensive in the remaining pockets held by DAESH in the city of Hajin after a setback it faced days before due to a DAESH counter-offensive.³

The U.S. State Department Deputy Spokesman Robert Palladino expressed the United States' concerns over Turkey's shelling in northern Syria by stating, "Unilateral military strikes into northwest Syria by any party, particularly as American personnel may be present or in the vicinity, are of great concern to us."⁴ Following this statement, the U.S. military conducted a series of "assurance patrols" with the SDF in northern Syria to reassure its local allies. Pentagon spokesman Colonel Rob Manning announced the start of the "assurance patrols" with SDF forces, on November 2, by stating, "While there is no set timetable for these specific patrols or regularity, these patrols will allow us, Turkey, and our SDF partners to maintain the safety and security of the region."⁵

In the diplomatic arena, Ankara feels emboldened due to attempts to restore trust in ties with America after releasing Pastor Andrew Brunson and gaining diplomatic leverage over bilateral relations as a result of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. For Turkey, a military operation in the northeastern areas of Syria is a matter of time. With shelling the positions of the PKK/YPG at the east of the Euphrates River, Turkey is testing whether the political and military conditions

for a comprehensive military operation in the region are ripe. In this way, Ankara will be able to check the U.S. administration's reactions, which has scrambled to contain the tensions.⁶

The Initial Reactions against the Statement

One of the first reactions to the statement came from the KCK, the PKK's umbrella organization. In a public statement, given the timing of the statement, the PKK identified the announcement as a "conspiracy attempt" against the "movement" and emphasized the role of the PKK in the political developments in the Middle East. The PKK's core cadre perceived this announcement as an attempt to eliminate its leadership.⁷

After the Department of State's rewards offer, the U.S. Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey clarified the U.S. intention by stating that the United States doesn't recognize the People's Protection Units (YPG), the PKK's Syrian affiliate, as a terrorist organization. Jeffrey declared, "Our position on the PKK is clear, but we do not classify the YPG as a terrorist organization. We never did... We understand Turkey's security concerns. We understand the concern over ties between the PKK and the YPG. That's why we are acting very, very carefully. We inform Turkey about what we do and why we do it."⁸ Despite Jeffrey's claims, the CIA listed the PYD/YPG in its report as a terrorist organization, but later removed it.⁹

3. "Kurdish SDF Caught between Turkish, US Aims in Syria", *The Arab Weekly*, November 4, 2018, from <https://the arabweekly.com/kurdish-sdf-caught-between-turkish-us-aims-syria>

4. "US Concerned over Turkish Shelling of PKK/YPG Positions", *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 1, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-concerned-over-turkish-shelling-of-pkk-ypg-positions-138466>

5. "US Begins Patrols with SDF in Northeast Syria: Official", *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 6, 2018, from <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-begins-patrols-with-sdf-in-northeast-syria-official-138599>

6. "Turkey Threatens Syria's Kurds: A Headache for the US?", *AFP*, November 7, 2018, from <https://www.afp.com/en/news/15/turkey-threatens-syrias-kurds-headache-us-doc-1am8fa1>

7. "KCK: ABD'nin kararı uluslararası komplonun parçasıdır", *Hawar News*, November 7, 2018, from <http://hawarnews.com/tr/haber/kck-abdnin-karari-uluslararasi-komplonun-parcasidir-h7912.html>

8. "Jeffrey: 'YPG'yi PKK Gibi Terör Örgütü Olarak Değerlendirmiyoruz", *VOA*, November 7, 2018, from https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/jeffrey-ypgyi-pkk-gibi-bir-teror-orgutu-olarak-degerlendirmiyoruz/4648216.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

9. Charles Lister, "I'm late to this, but it's an intriguing [new] CIA addition/ amendment: - #Syria's #PYD & 'Rojava' territory now classified as terrorist; alongside likes of #ISIS, al-Nusra, #Hezbollah etc.", *Twitter*, January 28, 2018, from https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/957762408302415872

On the other hand, in Turkey, the rewards offer by the U.S. is regarded as a sign of America's intention to legitimize the acts of the YPG and to turn it into a legal, local representative of the Syrian Kurds. Expecting the same attitude towards the YPG, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar told reporters that "I would like to underline that this decision and step of the U.S., of our American friends and our allies, was a positive but belated one."¹⁰ The Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, by emphasizing the U.S. attempt to differentiate the YPG from the PKK, stated, "They [the Americans] say they are making a distinction between the PKK, and the People's Protection Units (YPG), and Democratic Union Party (PYD). But they cannot fool us. We have told them many times that the organic link between them [the PKK and the YPG/PYD] is not [purely] instrumental. We will take this cautiously. It is a late decision."¹¹

Moreover, President Erdogan, signaling further military operations in Iraq and drawing attention to Turkey's desire to implement a Manbij roadmap-style agreement in the remaining parts of eastern Syria, stated, "It is not only Qandil - there is also the issue of Mahmur Camp, which is defined as the PKK's incubation hub. We will be in frequent communication with the central authority in Iraq. By including the Regional Government in Northern Iraq, we should cooperate on the PKK presence in Iraq. If we carry out this cooperation, we may see results from the U.S. announcement on the ground in a difference area, and specifically in Qandil."¹² In the next term, it is obvious that Turkey will try to convince the U.S.

to implement Manbij-like models in the east of the Euphrates River or pressure the U.S. to move to the next phase of the roadmap.

The Strategic Implications beyond the Statement

One of the implications of the statement may be the U.S. attempt to instrumentalize the YPG in confronting Iran. Curbing the Iranian political and military influence in the Syrian territory may be one of the ancillary profits of the fight against DAESH. According to the U.S. Department of Defense's Lead Inspector General report on Operation Inherent Resolve, the presence of Iranian-backed forces in Syria and Iraq may present a threat to the United States. Therefore, it is assumed that the U.S. is trying to gain leverage on Iran in Syria and Iraq.¹³ In February, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis mentioned the U.S. plan to differentiate the YPG from the PKK by underlining that the "United States could separate the People's Protection Units (YPG) from the PKK and even try to make them fight against the PKK."¹⁴ However, to materialize this plan, the U.S. needed to eliminate senior Iranian-backed cadres of the PKK. The names, who were put bounties on, are known as the leaders who have pragmatic relations with Iran. By eliminating them or decreasing their influence in the hierarchy of the organization, the YPG may be able to have the military flexibility to conduct operations against Iranian militias. However, it remains to be answered how the U.S. plans to motivate the YPG to act against the militias with which it cooperated inside Syria. Also it is questionable how the anti-DAESH alliance of the SDF can evolve into an anti-Iranian force. Another advantage and output

10. "US Putting Bounties on PKK Positive, Belated Step", *Anadolu Agency*, November 7, 2018, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-putting-bounties-on-pkk-positive-belated-step/1305070>

11. "Turkey Will Take US Bounty on Senior PKK Leaders Cautiously: Presidential Spox", *Press TV*, November 7, 2018, from <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/11/07/579305/Turkey-will-take-US-bounty-on-senior-PKK-leaders-cautiously-Presidential-spox->

12. Erdal Şafak, "İnfaz Emrini Veren Peşindeyiz", *Sabah*, November 13, 2018, from <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/safak/2018/11/13/infaz-emrini-verenin-pesindeyiz>

13. Seth J. Frantzman, "Jerusalem Post Middle East US REPORT: IRAN PROVOKING AND THREATENING THE US IN SYRIA AND IRAQ", *The Jerusalem Post*, November 7, 2018, from <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/US-report-Iran-provoking-and-threatening-the-US-in-Syria-and-Iraq-571278>

14. Mehmet Solmaz, "Absurd US Attempt to Ease Turkish Concerns: YPG Could Fight PKK", *Daily Sabah*, February 15, 2018, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/02/15/absurd-us-attempt-to-ease-turkish-concerns-ypg-could-fight-pkk>

of the differentiation may be the pressure on Qandil to mobilize the elements within Iran, although this is quite unlikely. Distracting the focus of the PKK cadres from Syria, the U.S. may recalibrate and utilize the organization actively in possible operations within Iran.

Furthermore, making this statement in the aftermath of the normalization of Turkish-American relations may bring about different expectations from the Turkish side. After the Turkish court released the U.S. evangelical pastor in October, both countries have mutually lifted sanctions against top officials. Recently, the Washington administration announced that Turkey would receive a temporary relief from oil sanctions re-imposed on Iran. President Erdogan announced that talks are underway regarding the allegations about Turkish state-owned Halkbank, indicating that Washington and Ankara are trying to mend relations. American and Turkish troops have begun joint patrols in northern Syria's Manbij area after weeks of delay.¹⁵

At such a time, the rewards offer can be perceived as a diplomatic maneuver by the U.S. State Department; by giving an image of supporting Turkey's fight against terrorism, the announcement is guided by the inner motivation to soothe public opinion in Turkey. If Turkey compromises on its determined stance against the YPG presence in the east of the Euphrates River, it is likely that the United States will dissociate the YPG from the PKK, reformulate the terrorist organization based on the criteria that Turkey has laid down as a condition, and legitimize the YPG as a local actor by eliminating the radical PKK elements within its structure. Thus, the YPG will cease to be a threat to Turkey's southern border and the PKK's assault capability and mobilization power in southeastern Turkey will be reduced significantly. The legitimization of the YPG as a local ally will prepare the ground for the fu-

ture negotiations of these elements with Turkey during the settlement of the conflict in Syria. However, considering the anti-YPG protests of the Arab tribes in Raqqa, transforming the YPG into a legitimate actor is a long-term project. The dissociation of the YPG from the PKK is a catalyst for accelerating the efforts to legitimize the YPG. Despite the American aim to separate the YPG from the PKK, the probability of success remains very low as the YPG cadres are filled with PKK veterans. Also in terms of organizational structure, ideology, logistics, and membership pool, the YPG and the PKK are the same organization with two different names and not two autonomous groups.

Lastly, in the short term, it is indicated that the rewards offer has had no positive or negative impact on the ground dynamics. Even, The American troops and the Manbij Military Council of the SDF even gave the image of being a joint force by commemorating Veterans Day together.¹⁶ However, the rewards offer may be a strategic move against the core leadership cadre of the PKK. The top leaders of the PKK that are mentioned have been serving the ideological ambitions of the PKK for years, and, yet, for years have not been operationally visible on the ground. In a manner of speaking, they are "old-fashioned" in the eyes of the young cadres of the organization. The United States desires to reformulate and replace this old-fashioned management model in accordance with its strategic and geopolitical calculations. For this reason, instead of targeting the elements of the organization that act in harmony with the CENTCOM elements on the ground, the U.S. has targeted the senior leaders in the Qandil region. In other words, according to U.S. aims, elements that insist on the old management model will be either eliminated by the younger and more dynamic elements within the organization, or they will be pres-

15. Tulay Karadeniz and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "U.S. Must Break from Syrian Kurds after PKK Reward Offer - Turkey", *Reuters*, November 7, 2018, from <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-usa-pkk/u-s-must-break-from-syrian-kurds-after-pkk-reward-offer-turkey-idUKKCN1NC0GE>

16. Shervan Derwish, "Our Celebration of the Veterans' Day in Manbij", *Twitter*, November 11, 2018, from <https://twitter.com/shervanderwish/status/1061683137317617665>

sured to restructure themselves in accordance with the interchanging dynamics on the ground. In this way, the U.S. aims to legitimize the YPG and marginalize the hawk cadres of the PKK. In the long term, the U.S. aims for the terrorist organization's members from

Turkey to lose their ranks in the YPG. If it succeeds, the YPG will legitimize itself on a local scale under the U.S. auspices, thus the U.S. will be able to guarantee the YPG's place at the diplomatic table which will address the resolution of the conflict in Syria.



Duran Kalkan Up to \$3 Million Reward

Duran Kalkan is an Executive Committee Member and senior leader of the PKK. He was responsible for an attack that killed seven Turkish soldiers in December 2009. Kalkan is also designated by the Department of the Treasury.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), also known as Kongra-Gel is a regionally active terrorist organization and a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The PKK has targeted Turkish government officials, police and security forces and indiscriminately injured and killed civilians. PKK uses its network and criminal activities across Europe to obtain weapons and materials. The PKK has used suicide bombers, vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), and other indiscriminate terror tactics. The PKK also recruits and indoctrinates youths, sometimes by abduction, and employs them as militants. In 1993 the PKK kidnapped 19 Western tourists including an American and in 1995 two Americans were injured in a PKK bombing.

In 2015 and 2016, the PKK expanded attacks across Turkey, metropolitan centers, and tourist destinations on Turkey's Aegean and Mediterranean coast. In August 2016, the group claimed a car bomb attack against Sirnak police headquarters, killing 11 and wounding more than 70. In June 2017, the PKK attacked a military convoy in southeastern Turkey, killing over 20 soldiers. Since 2015, the group has been responsible for the deaths of over 1,200 Turkish security officials and civilians.

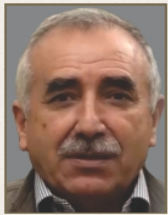


Cemil Bayik Up to \$4 Million Reward

Cemil Bayik is an Executive Committee Member, founding member and senior leader of the PKK. Bayik is also designated by the Department of the Treasury.

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Murat Karayilan Up to \$5 Million Reward

Murat Karayilan, head of the People's Defense Forces (HPG) and a senior leader of the PKK. He is designated by the Department of the Treasury. Karayilan is also indicted by the Government of Turkey for inciting violent attacks.

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- Figure 1 Source: https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/duran_kalkan.html. Accessed November 23, 2018.
- Figure 2 Source: https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/cemil_bayik.html. Accessed November 23, 2018.
- Figure 3 Source: https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/murat_karayilan.html. Accessed November 23, 2018.