Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces
February 27, 2017

Figure 1 - KÖG fighters in Rojava (via Twitter).

In 2014, an ISIS-embattled YPG (People's Protection Units) called for foreign volunteers to join in their fight against black-flagged fighters from Syria and beyond. The initial volunteers for the Kurdish struggle included foreign fighters sympathetic to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), trained militia from Matthew VanDyke's Sons of Liberty International (a not-for-profit business that trains Christian militias in northern Iraq), and a slew of other Western veterans. A large portion of the initial Western veterans appeared to harbor religious (Christian) motivations. After it became clear, however, that the YPG was dominated by cadres of Marxists, Marxists-Leninists, and Maoists, this flow of western veterans has stemmed, and was replaced by a new wave of foreign volunteers who wished to join the cause.

Through a website set up by the YPG, English-speaking foreign fighters were able to contact the Kurdish group, begin learning the local Kurdish dialect, Kurmanji, and book travel to YPG territory. The route to Rojava ran through Suleimaniya, Iraq for years until the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq took action to stem the flow of fighters. The YPG recruitment site is now just a landing page explaining that the route is blocked, but the remainder of the old site is still accessible through unlinked pages.
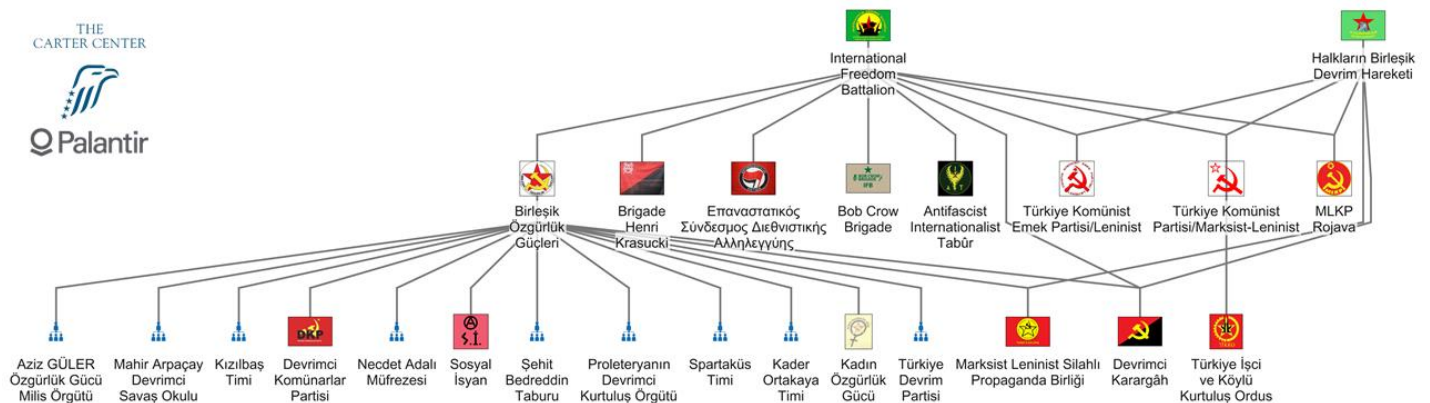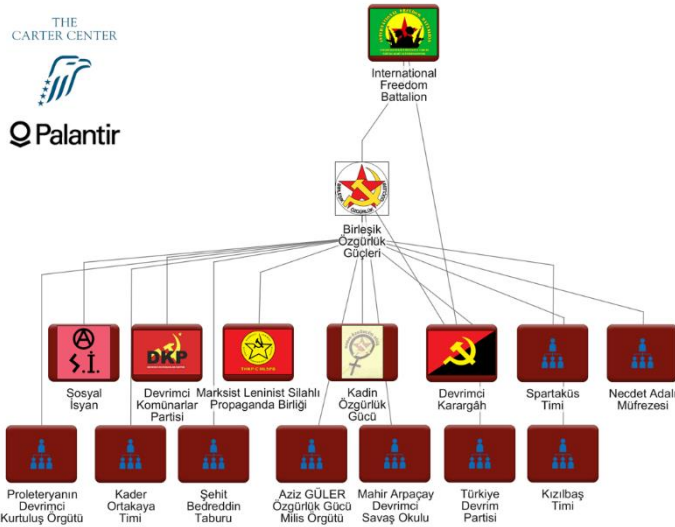

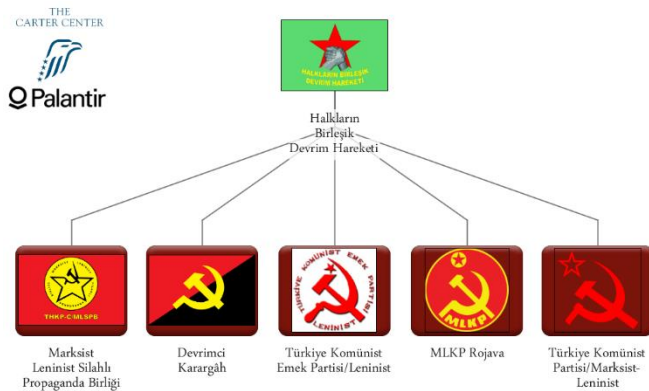Figure 2 - Chart of foreign units in Rojava

Figure 3 - Chart of IFB subunits in Rojava

The International Freedom Battalion (IFB) is a foreign militia harkening back to the internationalist brigades in the Spanish Civil War. Members of the IFB come from many nations, including the UK, the US, Germany, Greece, and France. Subunits include communist, anti-fascist, and anarchist Western elements as well as Turkish communist parties of varying ideologies.

Figure 4 - Chart of BÖG and HBDH subunits in Rojava

The largest group within the IFB is the Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri (United Freedom Forces, BÖG). BÖG, like IFB, contains a mix of foreign brigades that espouse leftist political ideologies. BÖG also has a women's unit, the Kadin Özgürlük Gücü (Women's Freedom Forces, KÖG) and a number of Turkey-based Kurdish Communist groups.

The BÖG was founded at the end of 2014 during the battle for Kobanî. The IFB was founded in the middle of 2015 by partisans of the BÖG in coalition with several other leftist pro- Kurdish groups that had previously not joined BÖG. BÖG keeps ties with the PKK in Turkey.

Another coalition of pro-Kurdish groups, the Halkların Birleşik Devrim Hareketi (Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement, HBDH) contains exclusively Turkish communist groups. HBDH battalions include Stalinist, anarchist, Marxist-Leninists, and Leninist organizations. The Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist (Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist, TKP/ML) is a political party that operates within Rojava and has created an armed wing called the Türkiye İşci ve Köylü Kurtuluş Ordus (Liberation

Figure 5 - Pro-Kurdish fighters with a Devrimci Karargâh flag (via Twitter)

Figure 6 – Western brigades of IFB

Army of the Workers and Peasants of Turkey, TIKKO).

Among the IFB are units that are explicitly comprised of volunteers from Western countries. These include Επαναστατικός Σύνδεσμος Διεθνιστικής Αλληλεγγύης (Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity, ΕΣΔΑ). Εσδα is a Greek Anarcho-Communist group in Rojava. The Antifascist Internationalist Tabûr (International Antifascist Battalion, AIT) is made up of Western members from a multitude of countries, led by an Italian. Brigade Henri Krasucki (Henri Krasucki Brigade, BHK) is a French volunteer force named after a French labor rights activist. BHK is modeled after the Bob Crow Brigade, a British volunteer force also named after a labor rights activist. All four of these brigades have pledged allegiance to IFB and coordinate directly with the YPG in Rojava. The remainder of the foreign volunteer forces are from Turkey.

Conclusion

Compared to the YPG, foreign volunteers fighting on behalf of the YPG (especially Western volunteers) remain few in number. For now, foreign volunteers represent a set of poorly-trained but ideologically-willing fighters and a significant international media boon for the Syrian Kurdish political cause.

Appendix of Foreign Volunteer Group Structure
(nested group indicates subunit relationship)

1) International Freedom Battalion (IFB)
    a) Antifascist Internationalist Tabûr (AIT)
    b) Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri (BÖG)
        i) Aziz GÜLER Özgürlük Gücü Milis Örgütü
        ii) Devrimci Karargâh (DK)
        iii) Devrimci Komünarlar Partisi (DKP)*+
        iv) Kader Ortakaya Timi
        v) Kadin Özgürlük Gücü (KÖG)
        vi) Kızılbaş Timi
        vii) Mahir Arpaçay Devrimci Savaş Okulu
        viii) Marksist Leninist Silahlı Propaganda Birliği (MLSPB)*+
        ix) Necdet Adalı Müfrezesi
        x) Proleteryanın Devrimci Kurtuluş Örgütü (PDKÖ)
        xi) Şehit Bedreddin Taburu
        xii) Sosyal İsyan
        xiii) Spartaküs Timi
        xiv) Türkiye Devrim Partisi (TDP)
    c) Bob Crow Brigade (BCB)
    d) Brigade Henri Krasucki
    e) Devrimci Karargâh (DKP)*+
    f) MLKP Rojava*
    g) Türkiye Komünist Emek Partisi/Leninist (TKEP/L)*
    h) Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist (TKP/ML)*
        i) Türkiye İşci ve Köylü Kurtuluş Ordus (TIKKO)
    i) Επαναστατικός Σύνδεσμος Διεθνιστικής Αλληλεγγύης (ΕΣΔΑ)
2) Halkların Birleşik Devrim Hareketi (HGDH)
    a) Devrimci Karargâh (DK)*+
    b) Marksist Leninist Silahlı Propaganda Birliği (MLSPB)*+
    c) MLKP Rojava*
    d) Türkiye Komünist Emek Partisi/Leninist (TKEP/L)*
    e) Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist (TKP/ML)*
        i) Türkiye İşci ve Köylü Kurtuluş Ordus (TIKKO)

Some battalions have multiple affiliations, so for those groups appearing more than once:
   * indicates membership in HGDH as well as where appears in structure
   + indicates membership in BÖG as well as where appears in structure