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Ethnic or political cleansing? Identity, cultural heritage and demographic engineering in the Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria*

Davide Grasso

1. Introduction

Since 2016, the Republic of Turkey has conducted a series of air and ground military operations in the northern territories of the Syrian Arab Republic. The abducted motivation of these operations was the need to clear those areas of political organisations that threaten Turkish domestic security. The main target has been the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), that are classified as terrorist organisations under Turkish law. The YPG and YPJ were founded in 2012 as the armed branches of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Turkey considers the PYD as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been fighting a guerrilla war against the Turkish state since 1984. Another belligerent targeted by Turkish operations between 2015 and 2017 was the Islamic State (IS), a Salafist movement that controlled swaths of Syrian territory between 2014 and 2019. This study focuses solely on the Turkish operations targeting the SDF and the subsequent demographic engineering in the occupied areas. We will attempt to answer the following question: Which identification process is more relevant to understanding Turkish operations and the related demographic engineering policy?

The operations against the SDF in 2018 and 2019 resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Many of the displaced moved to Syrian regions without Turkish troops, while others left the country. These events were followed by attempts by the occupying authorities to settle individuals from other regions of Syria or Turkey in the newly occupied lands. These phenomena can be grouped under the definition of "demographic engineering policies" (Weiner et al. 2001).

The affected areas have experienced limited state sovereignty since 2012 due to the outbreak of conflict among various insurrectional groups. These groups developed relationships with foreign states interested in directly or indirectly intervening in Syria. Therefore, the area in question is marked by cross-border institutional affiliations and political identifications within a conflict framework that has gained a significant transnational character. These affiliations relate to transnational paths of identification capable of impacting state foreign policies and international relations (Di Peri and Maritato 2024).

Davide Grasso, IMéRA - Institute for Advanced Study, Aix-Marseille University, davide.grasso@unito.it
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The research is based on an understanding of identity compatible with a methodological approach known as processual-relational thinking (p-rt). P-rt's basic assumption is that processes and relations are crucial in defining social and institutional reality, including social identification processes in contentious political contexts and international relations (Jackson et al. 1999; Campbell 1998; Epstein 2013). Social constructions, including identity-related phenomena, are not delimited by stable and precise boundaries. A critical ontological perspective reveals the "constitutive interdependence" of ever-changing social (i.e. temporal) entities as "artefacts of socio-political processes" (Bucher et al. 2018: 399). This does not mean that historically produced entities lack their own reality; their "thingness", however, is contingent and unstable, resulting in "temporal achievements" (ibid.).

Identities should be conceived as processes rather than things, linked to situated temporal events, spatial horizons, immediate perceptions of danger and different social roles at play (Campbell 1998; McCourt 2012). They result from intentional or unintended acts located in space and time, i.e. in a political context. These acts produce self-perceptions and perceptions of others, subject to rearrangement, reinvention, political manipulation or contestation. The relationship between identity and organisational dynamics will consistently be conceived in relational terms (Jackson et al. 1999). Identity will not be considered an individual inner state, unrelated to social interactions; on the contrary, linguistic, customary, religious and political identification bundles will be analysed in relation to the case study as the result of encounters between individuals (Hagström 2014: 137-138).

From a methodological point of view, the author accessed two of the now-occupied Syrian cities shortly before the Turkish invasions. In 2016, we conducted interviews in Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kanî in Kurmancî Kurdish) and spent four days in Tell Abyad (Girê Spî in Kurdish), interacting with locals and SDF fighters. At the time, Tell Abyad was under sparse military attack by the Turkish forces. Both cities would be occupied by Turkey in late 2019. Together with Afrin, occupied in 2018, they have been the main focus of subsequent desk research. The author's stay in the autonomous regions (ARs) controlled by the SDF (governorates of Al-Hasakah, Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo) lasted a total of 9 months between 2016 and 2017. There, we conducted 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews relevant to this study with 19 individuals aged between 18 and 56, 5 of whom were female and 14 male. 4 further interviews were conducted online between 2020 and 2021 with members of SDF-related organisations: 3 female and 1 male, ranging between 26 and 48, as well as 4 non-Syrian volunteers who participated in the SDF resistance against the Afrin invasion in 2018. Data relating to the identity of the interviewees has been anonymised to varying degrees per their requests.

The article is structured as follows. First, it provides a methodological framework for data interpretation. Second, it discusses the relevant scientific literature, assesses critically the categories at stake and shapes its original terminology. Third, it reconstructs the political-historical context of the military invasions since 2016 and the air operations still ongoing as of May 2024. An in-depth analysis of the ensuing process

of forced demographic change follows. The empirical analysis of identification bundles related to the SNA and the SDF, as well as the ongoing demographic change, is then deduced from the documentary and ethnographic material. An orderly assessment relevance of different identification layers concludes the article.

2. Methodological framework

The data presented in this research was extracted from documentary and ethnographic sources, including interviews with individuals residing or operating in the affected areas before the occupation or during the invasions; participant observation carried out among SDF ranks and aligned civilian institutions in 2016 and 2017; United Nations reports and sheets; NGO reports; official statements by the Turkish government; think-tank reports and analysis materials; humanitarian and civil rights organisation reports; sheets and web pages compiled by political organisations acting in the field; journalistic reports produced by professionals on-site.

The research has three main limitations. The first lies in the lack of reliable statistical data about the number or composition of the SNA and the SDF. For the time being, a quantitative analysis of these groups is impossible, and the research must rely on inferences derived from direct observations and external documentary sources. Second, the author could not access the occupied territories after the invasions. This limitation has been mitigated through the analysis of documents compiled by the UN and international human rights organisations and extensive press review.

The third limitation lies in the sample of interviewees, that is linked solely to the SDF or allied institutions. However, since this study concerns the phenomena of war and military occupation, demographic engineering and settler colonialism targeting political, linguistic, religious and gender minorities, critical voices from movements opposing such policies, however partisan, are, in the author's view, repositories of high heuristic value. This did not prevent the researcher from critically analysing the collected interviews and comparing them with opposing and independent views. The data gathered through participant observation and qualitative field research has been counterbalanced by a wide use of documentary sources that do not emanate from the SDF but rather from sources opposed to them (e.g. Turkish government agencies and aligned newspapers and think tanks) or international organisations.

3. Conceptual framework

This article aims to go beyond the state of the art and enrich the literature on the relationship between ethnicity and conflict in two ways: (1) by redefining the categories related to 'ethnic' or 'non-ethnic' factors in contentious processes and civil wars and (2) by presenting empirical data from a case study that demonstrates how and why this redefinition is necessary.

Morland (2016) proposes his "hard demography" approach to the study of demographic engineering, identifying causal variables with identification processes of the

"self" and the "other", mostly reliable on ethnic divides. Other authors have insisted on a strong correlation between ethnic diversity (or polarisation) and civil conflict (see Sambanis 2001; Montalvo et al. 2005). A correlation between civil war onsets and ethnic diversity is singled out by Fenton (2010) and Abosedra et al. (2021), who deem it, however, weaker or even secondary. This perspective is tempered by research proposing additional variables, such as the presence of organised groups actively investing in ethnic diversity to promote conflict (Fearon et al. 2007; Fearon 2011) or a correlation between conflict and ethnic injustice (e.g. the imbalance in the political representation, or inclusion, of different ethnicities in national institutions: Wimmer et al. 2009; Bodea et al. 2017; Esteban et al. 2012).

The present research intends to question the usefulness of the very category of "ethnicity", insisting on the "ethnic" transversality of the significant identification processes that seem most relevant to understanding the addressed case study. Studies on demographic engineering in Syria form an extensive literature. They concern the historical development of the phenomenon in both the Ottoman and the post-Ottoman era (Zürcher 2009; Tejel 2016), as well as during the ongoing civil war (Sokolowski et al. 2014). They focus on Syrian government policies (Jongerden 2021; Bdiwi 2022; Blanga 2022) or policies implemented by the Turkish government (Adar 2020; Osztovics 2020). The literature shows a recourse, on the part of the Syrian and the Turkish governments, to forms of administrative management of population movements and residency policies dictated by identity, compatible with recent research on ad-hocratic governance and measures related to migration and displacement (Natter 2023).

Regarding the relevance of categories related to ethnicity, Ismail (2011) emphasises numerous attempts, at the beginning of the Syrian uprising, to design a national perspective inclusive of religious and linguistic minorities. In Syrian war studies, the focus on "ethnic" factors emerged soon after, when armed groups primarily referring to islamist political horizons became hegemonic. Zelin et al. (2014) analysed the vocabulary of Syrian sectarianism, while Phillips (2015) and Alvarez-Ossorio (2019) devoted their analyses to the relationship between ethnic and sectarian identity and contemporary Syrian dynamics.

Concerning the specific focus on northern Syria, we believe that these studies partially dismissed the character and relevance of the divides at the centre of the present research. Zelin and Smyth identify the PYD as the most "nationalistic" among Kurdish forces, while Alvarez-Ossorio seems to undermine the key role of PYD's political gains in triggering the direct Turkish interventions in Syria. However, the PYD's programmes oppose Kurdish state-nationalism and traditional national forces (see *infra*, section 7, "Hermeneutic identifications bundles"). Since 2015, its achievements, although not oriented by separatist goals, have combined with domestic conflicts in Turkey to produce growing anxiety, in the Turkish apparatus, sparking the military invasion process (O' Connor et al. 2018; Cemgil 2021).

Recent literature has generally found a static conception of identification processes problematic, including perspectives that inadvertently foster somewhat reductionist approaches, overly emphasising the "ethnic" character of conflicting iden-

tification bundles. Desmet et al. (2017) have shown that the overlap between the 'ethnic' dimension (linked to a perceived common descent, induced from commonalities in language, faith or custom) and what they call a 'cultural' dimension (identification with sets of values) is far from complete. By contrast, each "ethnic" community is internally torn and divided by different and conflicting value-related political orientations. These differing interpretations of the sense of belonging are associated with common cultural heritage or, in other cases, with critical rejections of selected identification bundles that others deem essential for self-recognition. Individuals cannot choose their inherited customary, religious and language framework, but they do construct their own values and political identity. This is why values and political choices so radically differ between members of the same "ethnic" community.

The term 'ethnic' retains a vague semantic aura and often proves unsuitable for consistent classification (see Green 2006). Chapman et al. (2016) explicitly refrain from providing an operational definition, claiming that previous attempts have failed to unify the scientific lexicon. They draw attention to the fact that diversified uses and understandings of the term "ethnos" date back as far as ancient Greek literature. This does not make it promising to sharpen the definition based on etymology. The emergence of this word's scientific use in the atmosphere following World War II (Baumann 2004) may explain why the scientific community has since been confronted with a linguistic object whose contours are vague and ambiguous, and that it must always struggle to define.

The term 'culture', by contrast, does not seem appropriate to solely cover the spheres of values pinpointed by the individual during their adult life. Co-constructed and reinvented individual values do contribute to qualifying culture, but inherited legacies are cultural products as well. Culture does not appear to properly contrast with "ethnicity" but rather to comprehend it. It encompasses, and does not exclude, all features that existing definitions attribute to the latter (Hutchinson et al. 1996; Chapman et al 2016; Smith et al. 2007; Grasso 2019; 2023).

We propose, therefore, to overcome the terminological designation in terms of 'ethnicity' and 'culture' assumed by Fanton (2010) and refined by Desmen et al. (2017). We aim to better convey this dual identification process while emphasising, consistent with p-rt methodology, the unstable and contingent character of all identity bundles. Instead of ethnicity and culture, we will refer to (1) ancestral and (2) hermeneutic bundles of identification. Ancestral identity is built on cultural items the individual inherits from their family and ancestors and consists of norms related to language, customs and religious denominations. Hermeneutic identity, instead, defines the critical and living interpretation of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of an individual or group. The SNA and the SDF provide opposing hermeneutics concerning what social functions (if any) the different ancestral legacies must play in the world or country they fight for. This is why individuals who identify as Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen or Muslims adhere to one group or the other. What draws the epistemic margin between ancestral and hermeneutic bundles is the tension resulting from the dynamic trajectory of inherited legacies toward original, co-constructed and always unstable interpretations of a sense of belonging.

4. Historical context

Turkish political intervention in Syria predates the direct military activity that started in 2016. During the Cold War, Turkey was a NATO member, whereas Syria enjoyed good relations with the Warsaw Pact countries. Since 1979, Syria provided various forms of support to the PKK, which could use logistical bases in the north of the country bordering Turkey – an area considerably inhabited by Kurds and, therefore, named Başûrê Biçûk (the "little south" of Kurdistan) and later Rojava (the "west" of Kurdistan) in Kurmancî. Thanks to its good relations with the Syrian government and the Palestine Liberation Organization, the PKK also had access to training bases in the Bekaa Valley (Lebanon), where the Syrian army was present at the time.

During the Turkey–PKK war, the Turkish state used demographic engineering policies to counter popular support for the PKK. The PKK reacted fiercely, contesting the state's territorial control in the southeast, also with practices that the leader of the movement, Abdullah Öcalan (2013), later deemed human rights violations. The Turkish counter-insurgency policies included erasing references to Anatolia's varied cultural heritage: Kurdish toponyms were subjected to extensive obliteration (Öktem 2008), and thousands of Kurdish families were forcefully displaced through the destruction of their villages. As a consequence, Kurdish migration increased dramatically toward western Turkey and Iraq (Günay 2017).

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 led Ankara to increase its pressure on Damascus. This included the political use of water resources and, in the late 1990s, the deployment of troops along the border. To overcome this crisis, the Syrian state expelled PKK militants and Abdullah Öcalan from its territory. Öcalan was subsequently arrested by Turkish operatives in Kenya in 1999 and is still detained in Turkey.

In 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, won the elections in Turkey and has maintained the relative majority in parliament and the government leadership ever since. In 2011, an uprising took place in Syria following a wave of mass mobilisations in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and other Arab and Muslim-majority countries. The AKP-led Turkish government, like many other domestic and international actors, saw an opportunity to gain influence in the region. With the support of the US and other countries (Ozkizilcik 2019), it trained and equipped Islamist factions, fuelling an armed insurgency against the Syrian ruling elite. These factions were instrumental in forming the Syrian National Coalition in Istanbul in 2012, supported by Turkey, Qatar and most Arab League and NATO countries (Álvarez-Ossorio 2012a; 2012b). This coalition forged ties with several militias active in Syria and regrouped around the denomination "Free Syrian Army" (FSA).

In 2013 the Syrian National Coalition declared a Syrian Interim Government (SIG) based in Turkey, to replace the government in Damascus (Hilal et al. 2017; Loufti 2017; Munif 2017). While this perspective never materialised, armed factions in northern Syria marginalised the FSA groups. Salafist organisations such as Jabhat al-Nusra (the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda) and its offshoot claiming to be the Islamic State (IS), took over swaths of the northern and eastern regions in 2013 and 2014. Their expansion was curbed along part of the Syrian-Turkish border by the YPG and

the YPJ, which formed the SDF in 2015 with some defecting FSA groups (Schmidinger 2017). This process was guided by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), founded in 2003, four years after the arrest of Öcalan, by his Syrian supporters.

The conflicts between Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian army, the FSA, IS and the SDF fragmented the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah and Deir el-Zor. In 2014, a number of people's communes and councils were created under the auspices of the PYD and declared as the Autonomous Regions (ARs) in Rojava (Grasso 2022a). The ARs were soon attacked by IS. Between 2015 and 2019, the SDF managed to destroy IS's de facto government, benefitting from aerial support by an international coalition led by the US. The SDF thus expanded the ARs, initially located in Rojava, to much of northern and eastern Syria. The newly liberated regions were mostly inhabited by communities who identified not as Kurds but rather as Arabs, Turkmen and Assyrians (RIC 2021). In the wake of the SDF's successes, Turkey reorganised several FSA and Salafist groups in 2017 to form the Syrian Liberation Front and the Syrian National Army (SNA). The Syrian liberation front later merged into the SNA, which since 2018 has waged war against the SDF with Turkish aerial and ground support, invading areas previously controlled by the ARs.

This process entailed a transnational dimension. Both Russian and US troops, which had military relations with the SDF, withdrew from the occupied areas to facilitate Turkish anti-SDF manoeuvres in 2018 and 2019. The first Turkish attacks came in the wake of the failure of an AKP–PKK peace process initiated in Turkey in 2013 (Cemgil 2021). In 2015, the strong election results achieved in Turkey by the People's Democratic Party (HDP), inspired by the Syrian PYD and Abdullah Öcalan's theories, were followed by raids, massacres and bombings against HDP offices and demonstrations (O'Connor et al. 2018). The HDP reacted by supporting a declaration of self-rule by Kurdish militants in Istanbul and southeastern towns. Government forces responded by razing entire neighbourhoods of various towns and cities in the southeast. While carrying out this repression, the government also foiled an attempted coup in 2016 and declared a state of emergency. A few weeks later, Turkish troops entered Syria for the first time, sparking the process that would eventually lead to the formation of the SNA.

5. Demographic engineering

Between 2016 and 2017, Turkish forces attacked both IS and the SDF (Operation Euphrates Shield) in areas located between the Syrian cities of Jarablus, Al-Rai, Azaz, Manbij and Al-Bab (Razzak 2016; Chulov 2016). Turkey attacked the ARs, in support of the newly created SNA, in 2018 and 2019 (Yüksel 2019; Cevik 2022). In 2018, it occupied the Afrin region (Operation Olive Branch), and in 2019, the areas of Tell-Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (Operation Peace Spring). SIG offices were installed in all the areas occupied during these three operations. Military and policing functions were entrusted to the SNA. Turkish air operations against the SDF and the civilian personnel of the ARs have continued ever since.

The 2018 and 2019 invasions produced a wave of around 380,000 refugees. In 2018, an estimated 151,000 people abandoned their homes in the Afrin region, heading to other areas of Syria or Iraq (UNHCR 2018; Landis 2018; Chulov-Shaheen 2018). The same phenomenon affected approximately 180,000 people in 2019, during the invasion of Tell Abyad, Ras al-Ayn and the surrounding villages (OCHA 2019; Christou 2019; Hevdestî 2022). Arbitrary detentions, killings, disappearances, rape and torture have been reported from all the occupied territories (OHCHR 2018; 2020). Economic and security problems, exacerbated by the conflict, have resulted in a further flow of refugees to Iraq in recent years (IOM 2019; 2023).

The decline in economic welfare in the occupied territories is linked to vast campaigns of property expropriation conducted against locals by the SNA-related SIG. On 16 September 2018, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights published excerpts of a communiqué issued by the SIG-linked Syrian Islamic Council, stating that public and private property traceable to the "separatist militias" (the PYD) would be requisitioned by its authorities (SOHR 2018). Thus, supposed support for the PYD was used as a justification for the large-scale appropriation of property and wealth (Bodette et al. 2023). The volume of the olive oil trade run by new SIG-related owners has since transformed the ownership structures of the region, causing endemic armed conflict among different SNA groups (Baker 2021).

In the same year, the Turkish government announced its intention to repopulate the emptied occupied territories (RIC 2019) by relocating there Syrian refugees in Turkey, even if they mostly originate from other areas of Syria. Some people have since been transported by bus from Turkey to the occupied territories and installed in homes abandoned by the displaced communities or in settlements constructed by the Turkish authorities (MacKernan 2019a; 2019b). In October 2019, Erdoğan declared that he would enable "up to 2 million refugees" to enter the northern territories of Syria (Ritter et al. 2019). However, this plan never fully materialised due to the reluctance of Syrians in Turkey to comply (HRW 2024). The partial repopulation of the occupied territory was carried out mainly through militiamen loyal to the SNA and their families (Sydow 2019).

In April 2018, the independent website Syrian Civil War Map published an aerial photograph of a settlement built by the occupying authorities in the area, commenting: "Forced demographic change by Turkey in Afrin. Arab civilians from East Qalamoun are being settled in Afrin. First, they are brought to camps and later settled in the villages. Kurds, Yazidis and Christians are being displaced" (SCWM 2018). East Qalamoun is a mountainous Syrian area north of Damascus, where militias supported by Turkey had been defeated by the government weeks earlier. In the same period, 700 families arrived in Afrin from Eastern Ghūṭa and Southern Damascus. These areas had previously been controlled by the Turkey-supported Failaq Ar-Rahman and Aknaf Bait al-Maqdis, a group affiliated with the Palestinian Hamas (Al-Haj 2018). They were overpowered by the Syrian government earlier that year.

In 2020, the flow of members of Turkey-backed militias and their families increased, reaching 13,000 in December 2020 alone (Bodette et al. 2023). In 2021, the

Syrian Observatory of Human Rights reported that the number of people transferred to Afrin from Rīf Dimashq, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and western Aleppo even reached a total of 270,000 (SOHR 2021a). Some of them settled near Afrin, in Muhammadiyah, Jindires, Afraz, Rajo and Bulbul. In March 2022, the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice recorded the arrival in Afrin, in the Jabal al-Ahlam area, of some 600 SNA militiamen with their families, who belonged to the SNA groups Al-Hamza Division and Al-Jabhat as-Shamiya (STJ 2022). Citizens of countries other than Syria were also settled in the occupied territories. The presence of new residents with Iraqi citizenship emerged in Ras al-Ayn in December 2020. They belonged to armed Turkmen groups supporting Turkish policies in Iraq and later in Syria (Baker 2022).

This settlement process is mostly managed by Turkish and international NGOs (GAD 2022) from Pakistan, the Gulf countries and even Palestine (Spyer 2022). One of the Turkish NGOs is Basma, which is building a settler compound in the village of Shadir, around Sherawa in Afrin. Media close to the SDF denounced the construction of 12 residential units with 144 flats, earmarked to accommodate Turkmen families linked to the SNA (ANF 2018a). Following reports by the North Press Agency and Global Issue, assistance to the settlement policies has also been made by a Palestinian NGO, Living with Dignity. The organisation is run by Palestinians and based in Israel. It began working with the Turkish government in late 2019 to build 112 flats and 10 mosques in Afrin. Reportedly, fifty SNA-related families have been settled in a new village called Palestine Ajnadine, near Jindires (Zurutuza et al. 2023; Hamo 2023).

The number of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey who became settlers in the Syrian-occupied territories appears to be smaller. The Turkish authorities maintain that the settlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey takes place voluntarily, in accordance with international law. However, an investigation by Amnesty International (2019) documented cases of forced repatriation. The humanitarian organisation implied the possibility of a full-scale strategy (Natter 2023). In 2023, an independent study reported that the Turkish government was "unable to solve the problems that make voluntary repatriation unrealistic for refugees"; for this reason, the reports concluded, it resorted to "coercion, both directly and indirectly, to get Syrians out of the country" (Hickson et al. 2023). A report compiled by Human Rights Watch states that since 2017, "Turkish forces have arrested, detained, and summarily deported thousands of Syrian refugees, often coercing them into signing 'voluntary' return forms and forcing them to cross into northern Syria through various border crossings" (HRW 2024). According to the same report, "in July 2023 alone, Türkiye sent back over 1.700 Syrians into the Tel Abyad area".

In April 2022, national elections in Turkey were approaching amidst a climate of social hostility towards refugees, heightened by the effects of the February 6th earthquake. According to statistics released by the Turkish government in that context, the number of Syrian refugees who had "voluntarily" returned to Syria was around half a million, including 348,000 in the occupied territories (Kızılkoyun 2022). As a result, the population of those areas was said to have increased from 1.3 million to 2 million. Re-

portedly, 51,860 homes were built, with plans for 63,167 new housing units. According to the same statistics, 275 settlements and 243 mosques had been built in the occupied areas. In the same period, Minister for Internal Affairs Suleyman Soylu unveiled a project to build 13 settlements, including 250 residential units, in Ras al-Ayn, Tel Abyad and Jarablus. In February 2024, media close to the PYD reported that the NGO Türkiye Diyanet Foundation had completed the construction of the latest settlement in the village of Kafr Rom near Afrin (Al-Haj 2024).

6. Ancestral identification bundles

Having defined the empirical contours of the conflict and the demographic engineering process, we will now analyse data assessing the identity composition of the conflicting actors. We will first consider what we call ancestral identification bundles. Ancestral identification bundles are defined by the affiliations the individual inherits from their family and previous generations, designing a linguistic, customary or religious community of reference.

6.1 The SNA

The number of SNA members is estimated to range between 70,000 and 90,000 by Ozkizilcik (2019) and 100,000 by Testekin (2019). The SNA's national composition includes Syrian, Turkish and Iraqi militiamen. Alongside the flag of Syrian independence, the SNA displays Turkish flags. The Special Forces linked to the organisation and the Free Police controlling the territory also display Turkish-language designations (RIC 2022). The linguistic composition of its constituent groups includes a majority of Arabic speakers and speakers of the Turkic-Azeri, Kilis, Urfa and Antep Turkish dialects, predominant among Turkmen in the northeast of the Aleppo governorate. Several hundred Kurds joined the organisation as well. While other groups active in Syria welcomed thousands of individuals from all over the world, the SNA's recruitment of foreign fighters seems more limited. There is no evidence of militiamen from religions other than Islam or from schismatic Islamic denominations within the SNA (Ozkizilcik 2019).

6.2 The SDF

The size of SDF fighters is estimated at 50,000 by Van Wildenburg et al. (2021) and ranges between 80,000 and 100,000 according to Gunes et al. (2020). The flag of the SDF displays at its centre an image of Syria crossed by the Euphrates. The yellow colour of the background symbolically represents the stateless Kurdish nation. No state symbols are deployed by the SDF, although it is predominantly made up of fighters of Syrian nationality. The leading forces of the YPG and YPJ, however, comprise conspicuous groups from Turkey and Iran, as well as around 2,000 volunteers (Corradi 2023) from EU member states, Canada, the US, Australia, Russia, the UK and other countries. Arabic and Kurdish are the predominant languages in the SDF. Since 2017, Arab fighters have outnumbered Kurds in the SDF (Mahmud 2023), which also in-

cludes the Syriac Military Council, composed of Assyrian fighters speaking Neo-Aramaic; an all-Armenian unit; and units of Turkmen-speaking fighters, such as the Seljuk Brigade (from Al-Rai) and the Turkmen Brigade (from Manbij).

The author was able to interview the commander of Sotoro, the police force attached to the Syriac Military Council, in Al-Hasakah, and one of the founders of the Seljuk Brigade, Talal Silo[1]. Silo later defected to Turkey, but the Seljiuk Brigade did not disband. There are, moreover, several Turkish political groups engaged in the Syrian war alongside the SDF. They are Marxist-Leninist organisations such as the Communist Party of Turkey – Marxist-Leninist (Tikko), the United Freedom Forces (Bög) and the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP).

Most of the fighters of the SDF are Sunni Muslims. The Assyrian and Armenian units profess various confessions of Christianity. There has been no emergence of Shia Muslim fighters, while the Şingal Resistance Units (YBŞ), who adhere to Yazidism, have taken part in several operations. In addition, many YPG-YPJ fighters and PYD militants declare themselves to be atheists, pantheists or adherents of creative forms of religiosity reminiscent of early Zoroastrianism or Yazidism. Between July and August 2016, the author had personal conversations with a YPG unit commander (a Turkish national) in Manbij, and a YPJ fighter (a Syrian national) in Kobane. Both declared adherence to a pantheistic vision of the universe, which they deemed to be at the core of the original Mesopotamian culture. Nevertheless, both vindicated the right to define themselves as Muslims. Ideological adherence to new syncretic beliefs is often accompanied among PYD members by commendatory remarks about Sufism and Alevism (the latter being a non-Sunni understanding of Islam quite widespread among Kurdish, Turkmen and Turkish believers in Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia).

7. Hermeneutic identifications bundles

Having analysed the ancestral identification bundles relevant to the composition of the conflicting forces, we will now turn to hermeneutic bundles. Hermeneutic identification bundles are defined by the various interpretations that individual or collective actors (including political movements) offer of cultural heritage and ancestral legacies. Building on tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including language and legal and religious traditions, they co-construct or adhere to novel ideologies and dynamic political narratives based on varying understandings of a sense of belonging.

7.1 The SNA

The common political hermeneutic of SNA groups is determined by the perceived necessity of a political revival of the relationship between Sunni Islam and law. The reference law of a legitimate institution ought to be based, entirely or predomin-

[1] Author's interview in Al-Hasakah with Adnan Habce, Sotoro Commander, April 2016; author's interview in Al-Hasakah with Talal Silo, SDF spokesperson, April 2016.

antly, on principles derived from, or compatible with, Sunni interpretations of the Quran and ahadith (Tzurkov 2019). Therefore, secular tendencies within Islamic civilisations are rejected. Individuals active in the Syrian opposition denounced how factions that would later converge into the SNA, such as Jaysh al-Islam, contributed to marginalising or repressing secular activists (Al-Shami et al. 2016). Groups such as Ahrar As-Sham and Ahrar as-Sharqiya, part of the SNA, share a Salafist perspective and promote a return to a supposed Islamic legal spirit of the origins (7th century AD). Other groups, like Failaq as-Sham, Failaq ar-Rahman and Jabhat as-Shamiya, reject Salafism and turn their interpretation of 'true Islam' to the Ottoman era (RIC 2022). Their orientation is thus inclined towards a restoration of elements of the Ottoman tradition or the Islamist shaping of a future Syrian constitution (Pierret 2017).

Ideologies of movements such as the AKP or the Muslim Brotherhood inspire several SNA groups (Pierret et al. 2021). The AKP supports ideological references to Turkish nationhood, conceived as transcending Anatolia and including major regions of contemporary Central Asia, Western China, the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. Unlike previous Kemalist understandings of Turkish identity, these references are inserted by the AKP into a broader horizon, i.e. the Islamic *ummah* (Başkan et al. 2021). Some Turkish or Turkmen SNA militiamen have displayed symbols or performed salutes reminiscent of a Turkish fascist organisation, the Grey Wolves (RIC 2022). Others temper Pan-Turkism with Pan-Islamic references.

In terms of legal solutions, the SIG adopts a reformed version of the Syrian legal system in the occupied territories (Hilal et al. 2017; Sottimano 2022). The latter predominantly adopts Hanafi solutions, in line with the prevailing orientation in Syria since the Ottoman era. A clue to understanding which hermeneutics of these tenets are prevalent among SNA and SIG members is the all-male composition of their militias and cabinets. In Syria, Hanafi legal solutions may co-exist with Shafi ones (especially widespread in rural areas and among some Kurdish communities) while among the Salafist components of the SNA, Hanbali solutions might be preferred. Future research will clarify whether this has had any impact on the actual implementation of sharia in the occupied territories.

7.2 The SDF

The SDF is the result of a political process guided by the PYD, whose ideology is mostly based on the prison writings of Abdullah Öcalan. Democratic nationhood, conceived as a space for all languages and customs to flourish in mutual respect, is somehow counterposed to the cultural uniformity pursued by the nation-state (Öcalan 2016). Religion is seen as one of the multiple "regimes of truth" produced by civilisation, whose history needs to be assessed critically and detached from state interests. The PYD defines democratic autonomy as a confederation of local self-governing institutions capable of restoring voice and agency to all religious and linguistic communities, including (but not limited to) the Kurds (Öcalan 2013; 2016; Dirik et al. 2016). A female party militant explained to the author how national, generational and gender identi-

fications should be equally part of a plural, complex identity promoted by the PYD[2]. This is supposed to be attained through the dissemination of a re-elaboration of the Kurdish term *welat*, whose literal meaning ("country") is expanded to cover a semantic halo denoting a "perceived identity" or "sense of belonging" (Grasso 2022a).

At the time of the first Turkish shelling of Tell Abyad (2016), the author interviewed three Arab and five Kurdish SDF fighters in Al-Hasakah and As-Shaddade, respectively[3]. Combining the results of these interviews with those carried out with the Assyrian and Turkmen commanders, it was possible to appraise a difference in the degree of knowledge and adherence to Öcalan's thought, to which only the Kurdish fighters explicitly referred. During the Turkish operation Euphrates Shield (2016), the author had long personal conversations with one Arab fighter of the YPG near the town of Ain Issa, who showed complete adherence to the PYD's ideology. There may be SDF units that know little or are indifferent about it. The Turkish Marxist-Leninist groups aligned with the SDF propose, instead, a transnational militancy, transcending all ancestral dimensions, in the name of working-class unity.

In terms of legal solutions, the reference legal corpus of the ARs is the Syrian legal system, significantly amended by the measures taken by their Legislative Councils from 2014 to the present. The Personal Status Code of the Republic, which regulates inheritance and family law, was repealed in 2014 and 2016 and replaced by provisions aimed at uniformly changing practices relating to marriage, divorce, child guardianship and custody, as well as succession. These provisions formally annulled the prerogatives of Islamic and Christian courts operating based on legal religious pluralism, declaring marriage a unified civil contract (Grasso 2024).

The fundamental law of the ARs (Social Contract, 2023) envisages quotas of representation for the different social components, identified with linguistic communities. In proportion to the demographic composition of each city and village, the institutional representation must include quotas of Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian and Turkmen speakers (Bance 2020). Given the predominance of Sunni Islam among the majority Arab and Kurdish population of the ARs, robust representation is guaranteed to the Christian and Yazidi religious communities. Representation quotas are also guaranteed to what the Social Contract defines as "social segments". These are postulated as social realities cutting across linguistic and religious differences, referred to as generational and gender identification bundles (women and youth). This is why the 2023 contract assigns a minimum of 50% of the seats to women in all existing councils of the ARs.

8. Identification bundles and demographic change

As much as for the members of the conflicting parties, available data in ancestral and hermeneutic identification bundles must be considered for the individuals and

[2] Sozan Sîma, Seminar lesson, Jinwar, October 2017.

[3] Author's interview in Al-Hasakah with fighters of Tabur Shehid Aziz, April 2016; author's interview in As-Shaddade with YPG and YPJ fighters, April 2016.

social groups affected by forced displacement and (possibly forced) repopulation processes. This will enable the cross-reference of these categories and data in the conclusive evaluation of the relevance of both processes of self-identification (adherence to a conflicting party) and identification of the other (pinpointing targets of armed action or demographic engineering).

According to all testimonies and journalistic reports, the majority of the people who have fled the Turkish-occupied regions are Kurdish-speaking, and mostly Sunni Muslims. A large proportion of Neo-Aramaic and Suroyo-speaking Assyrians and Chaldeans, as well as Christian and Yazidi families, have left the occupied territories. Many Syrian Arabs left Afrin during the invasion as well. Arab notables from the ARs spoke out against the invasions (ANF 2018b; 2019). In 2018, buses of mostly Arab civilians travelled from Al-Tabqa and Ar-Raqqa to Afrin to show their support for the SDF against the SNA and the Turkish army[4].

During the Turkish invasions various independent sources reported systematic sexual assaults against Kurdish women by SNA militiamen belonging to the Sultan Murad or the Suleyman Shah militia, groups mostly made up of Turkmen or Turks (Tzurkov 2019; HRW 2024; Wilkofsky et al. 2021). In some cases, SNA groups targeted Afrin Kurdish families who disobeyed the ban on celebrating Newroz, the New Year for many people speaking Indo-Iranian languages (STJ 2023). A systematic renaming of places has been in place, replacing Kurdish toponyms with Turkish ones or others referring to the Ottoman Empire (Baker 2021). This was accompanied by targeted bombing and pillaging of archaeological remains to which Kurdish communities, and especially the PYD kadres, assign exceptional value (Engelhaupt 2018; Mogelson 2020).

The Turkish Minister of Foreign Relations declared his efforts so that Turkmen communities benefit from the Turkish intervention in Syria: "Syrian Turkmens have a special position within the context of Turkey's support to the Syrian people" (RT-MFA 2022). Media close to the PYD denounce the ancestral profiling of the large majority of settlers installed by the Turkish government in occupied areas, who belong to Arab or Turkmen-speaking families (ANF 2018a). Speckhard (2019) and Sydow (2019) emphasise the hermeneutic profiling of the benefitted communities. While all settlers adhere to Sunni Islam, they are close to SNA members and comply with the AKP's foreign policy and Islamist ideologies.

While anti-Kurdish racist hostility is palpable among many SNA members, the treatment of Kurdish communities signals an ambivalence. Different policies are meted out to the various Kurdish political factions, which in turn reciprocate with hostility, equidistance or support for the Turkish government and the SNA. Thus, depending on their ideological and political attitudes, the Kurds can sometimes be distinguished as "brothers" or "terrorists". Syrian Kurdish groups opposed the PYD in Rojava united under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council in Syria (ENKS), leaning mainly in favour of the SNA. The ENKS, unlike the PYD, strives in principle for the establishment of a separate Kurdish state and belongs to the Syrian national coali-

[4] Author's interviews, in Italy, with one Italian YPG fighter, April 2020, and one Italian civilian volunteer in the ARs, October 2021.

tion, whose members form the cabinet and run the offices of the SIG in the occupied territories (Schmidinger 2017; 2018; Allsopp et al. 2019).

Some Kurds chose the AKP or the SNA over the PYD during the conflict. The pan-Islamic hermeneutic bundle can work among Muslim Kurds in Turkey and Syria, as well as among believers speaking other languages. Kurdish supporters of the Turkish government sometimes enrol in the so-called "Village Guards" hired by the state to oppose PKK activities. Groups of Kurdish Village Guards from Turkey took part in the Afrin invasion alongside the SNA (Schmidinger 2018: 131). The SNA featured three Kurdish components on the eve of the Afrin invasion: the Mashaal Tammo Brigade, the Azadi Brigade and Ehfed i Salahettin (Al-Khateb 2018). They regrouped Kurds fighting with FSA and Salafist factions. Ehfed i Salahettin split on the eve of the Afrin invasion when half of its members left the battleground, denouncing a climate of anti-Kurdish racism along SNA lines (Hamou et al. 2018). Although neither the Azadi Brigades nor Ehfed i Salahettin were numerically significant, they prove that ancestral identifications can lead, even in the most polarised circumstances, to multiple political choices based on irreconcilable hermeneutic identification bundles.

9. Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the following question: Which identification process is more relevant to understanding the Turkish military operations in Syria and the related demographic engineering process?

Based on processual-relational thinking (p-rt), the research provided a dynamic and relational understanding of identity, singling out two predominant identification bundles: the "ancestral" and the "hermeneutic". Building on the distinction proposed by Desmet et al. (2017) between "ethnic" and "cultural" properties, we critically address the possible shortcomings of this terminology by defining a social group's commonalities related to inherited language, customs and religious denominations as "ancestral". We instead call "hermeneutic" the unique interpretations that each actor, on a collective or individual basis, builds on those ancestral legacies, producing new political narratives and original, temporally situated and always unstable sets of values. Based on the conducted investigation, we conclude that both the ancestral and the hermeneutic bundles are relevant to interpreting the case study at stake. The second, however, plays a preponderant role.

The SNA sees a predominance of Arab fighters besides Turkmen and Turks. Although numerically limited, there are Kurds who have either joined or not opposed the SNA's political agenda. By contrast, although the number of Kurds and their directive role in the SDF must not be disregarded, most SDF fighters are Arabs. Three Turkish parties and two Turkmen units take part in the SDF's operations. Armenians and Assyrians have their own units in the SDF. The insistence of the Turkish AKP and the SNA on Sunni Islam may mislead observers into thinking that the sectarian factor, if not the linguistic one, dictates the prevalence of ancestral identifications in the conflict. However, the large majority of SDF are Sunni Muslims too. It is rather the inter-

pretation of Islam, of its historical significance and meaning (i.e. its hermeneutics) and the variety, lack or presence of different beliefs that produces the counterposition between the SNA and the SDF. While the AKP and the SNA claim to promote, to varying degrees, an idea of a state where the main or sole source of law is divine revelation, the SDF claims to promote a society where a hierarchy between ancestral legacies is ruled out, and the source of shared juristic tenets is mostly secular.

The reality on the ground may differ in both cases from ideological goals and representations, and the degree of adherence to both these opposed hermeneutics may vary among militants and sympathizers. The striking difference between the narratives on identity is, however, quite clear. This does not undermine the relevance of ancestral identifications. The SNA narrative seems to attract significant consensus among (Sunni) Turkmen, whereas the PYD is very popular among Kurds. It is mostly the hermeneutic and political divide, however, that can fully explain the overall contrast. Among Kurds, there is significant opposition to the PYD, and evidence among Syrian Turkmen (through limited participation in the SDF and aligned institutions) of rejection of the SNA's attitudes or ideologies. Arabs are present in large numbers in both the SNA and the SDF and hold prominent positions in both the ARs and the SIG. Sunni Muslims are dominant in both organisations and among settlers installed in the occupied territories, as well as among refugees who fled from them. The findings of this research, therefore, suggest that contentious processes in northern Syria are better understood through political and ideological lenses than through "ethnic" ones.

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