

Off-Topic Article

The Impact of Western European Countries' Ambivalent Attitudes on PKK / YPG Recruitment and Positioning: A Policy Analysis of France, Germany, and Belgium

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Abstract

This study examines how the ambivalent counterterrorism policies of Western European countries toward the PKK/YPG terrorist organization are reflected in the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their positions within the organization. Although the PKK is officially designated as a terrorist organization by many Western European states, the cooperation between its Syrian affiliate, the PYD/YPG, and the U.S.-led coalition has contributed to the expansion of the organization's perceived international legitimacy. This situation has facilitated the recruitment of numerous foreign terrorist fighters from Europe.

The study adopts a qualitative research design. The data set consists of official government documents, national counterterrorism strategies, parliamentary reports, judicial decisions, and relevant academic sources related to France, Germany, and Belgium. These materials are analyzed through discourse and textual analysis in order to examine participation motivations, organizational roles, and the security risks posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters. By linking foreign terrorist fighter participation to inconsistencies in Western European counterterrorism policies, the study offers an original contribution to the literature on terrorism and security studies.

Keywords: PKK, Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Counterterrorism Policies, Western Europe

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of "foreign terrorist fighters" (FTFs) has become widely used, particularly to describe individuals who travel to conflict zones in the Middle East following the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not historically new. Throughout history, individuals have participated in armed conflicts outside their home countries for religious, ideological, political, or personal reasons. For instance, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a substantial number of foreign fighters joined the Afghan resistance, while the Russia-Chechnya conflicts also saw international fighter mobilization. However, the civil wars that emerged in Syria and Iraq after 2011 represent an unprecedented scale of foreign fighter involvement.

Although the term FTF is commonly used in the literature, no universally accepted definition exists at the international level. According to Malet (2013), foreign terrorist fighters can be defined as individuals who participate in armed insurgencies outside their country of citizenship without expecting material gain (p. 6). Hegghammer (2011) provides a narrower definition, emphasizing that such individuals must have no citizenship or familial ties to the conflict zone, not belong to a formal army, and participate in the insurgency without receiving a salary (pp. 57–58). United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) defines foreign terrorist fighters as persons who travel outside their country of residence or citizenship to commit, plan, prepare, participate in, or receive training for terrorist acts (p. 2).

In recent years, the threat posed by FTFs has been highlighted by ISIS's attacks on Western countries and its open calls for recruits. Consequently, numerous studies have analyzed Western foreign fighters joining ISIS. In contrast, foreign fighter involvement in groups other than ISIS—particularly those operating in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq—has received relatively limited scholarly and public attention. Among these,

foreign fighters joining the YPG, operating in Syria on behalf of the PKK, constitute one of the least examined cases.

Since 2014, the PKK/YPG terrorist organization has recruited numerous foreign fighters from Europe and other regions. Yet this phenomenon has been minimally debated in European public discourse and political decision-making. The *de facto* recognition of the YPG by Western countries as a partner in the fight against ISIS has sparked serious legal, moral, and political debates. Furthermore, returning foreign fighters from conflict zones represent a significant security threat due to their potential involvement in violent acts and propaganda activities.

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case-study design to critically examine European state policies toward the PKK/YPG within the broader context of the foreign fighter phenomenon. France, Germany, and Belgium were selected as case studies due to their significant exposure to foreign fighter mobilization, distinct legal frameworks, and differing policy approaches toward Kurdish armed groups operating in Syria.

The research relies primarily on discourse and text analysis to explore how state actors conceptualize, justify, and implement policies related to the PKK/YPG. Data sources include official government documents, parliamentary debates, legal texts, policy reports, and statements issued by relevant ministries and security institutions, as well as reports from European Union bodies. In addition, selected media coverage and secondary academic literature were used to contextualize state discourse and policy decisions.

The analysis follows a comparative logic, highlighting both convergences and divergences in national approaches. By systematically comparing legal categorizations, enforcement practices, and official narratives, the study identifies patterns of inconsistency and ambiguity in European policy responses.

To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, the study employs source triangulation by cross-referencing official documents with independent reports and existing scholarly analyses. Nevertheless, the research faces certain limitations, including restricted access to classified security materials and potential discrepancies between official discourse and policy implementation.

1 - Motivations for Foreign Fighters Joining the PKK/YPG

The PKK has historically maintained a sympathetic support base within Western Europe's mainstream left and radical left circles. This ideological and political environment has facilitated the recruitment of European foreign fighters. For instance, Eva Juhnke, a German national captured in Hakkâri in 1997, and Andrea Wolf, a former member of the Soviet-backed Red Army Faction, participated in armed activities for the PKK. Wolf, who died in combat for the PKK in Turkey in 1998, remains symbolically commemorated by the organization, illustrating the continuity of ideological influence.

1.1. Ethnic-Based Motivations

The PKK utilizes ethnic identity as a central tool in its European recruitment strategy. Recruited individuals generally fall into two categories. The first group comprises individuals of Kurdish descent born and raised in Europe, who radicalize through PKK-affiliated associations and later either operate domestically on behalf of the organization or travel to conflict zones. The second group consists of individuals born in Turkey who migrated to Europe; these individuals exhibit relatively higher participation rates. Identity and integration challenges encountered during migration, com-

bined with the PKK's ideological propaganda, increase the likelihood of their joining the PKK/YPG (Yalçın et al., 2019, p. 28).

1.2. Motivation to Combat ISIS

Another significant segment of foreign fighters comprises Western individuals without ethnic ties to the Kurdish cause. Many come from far-left political backgrounds, and their recruitment increased markedly after 2014 as the PKK/YPG emerged as a prominent actor in the fight against ISIS. ISIS's attacks in Sinjar and Kobani elicited strong public reactions in Western countries, motivating many foreign fighters to join the YPG, perceiving it as an effective actor opposing ISIS's atrocities. Among former soldiers with prior combat experience in Iraq or Afghanistan, the sense of "unfinished responsibility" was particularly influential. Digital platforms such as Jordan Matson's "Rojava Lions" social media network became critical mobilization channels (Orton, 2017; Martin, 2019). Similarly, U.S. Army veteran Jeremy Woodard framed his YPG involvement as a moral obligation to fight ISIS, demonstrating the internalization of this motivation at the individual level (Muir, 2014, p. 79).

1.3. Role of Social Media

The PKK has developed a longstanding, institutionalized propaganda network across Europe. It disseminates messages through outlets such as Yeni Özgür Politika newspaper, STERK TV, and Rohani magazine in Germany; ROJ TV in Denmark; and Fırat News Agency in the Netherlands (Onay, 2017). These outlets frame the PKK as a legitimate actor engaged in a "freedom struggle" rather than a terrorist organization. German-based ARTE programs further illustrate media's role in shaping public perception (ARTE TV, 2017).

The YPG effectively uses social media for foreign fighter recruitment. Platforms like the "Rojava Lions" Facebook page serve as the first point of contact for interested Western individuals. Prospective recruits submit intention statements and participate in online surveys assessing ideological, political, and reli-

gious alignment, as well as familiarity with the conflict and the organization's framework (Didziulis, 2016, p. 7). Those who pass the screening are directed to encrypted messaging channels, accelerating the recruitment process. For some recruits, the process is remarkably brief. Canadian Firas Vancouver reported that it took less than a month from initial contact to deployment, while British former soldier Kostandinos Scurfield—known as "Kosta" in the PKK/YPG—joined camps in Northern Iraq within weeks (AFP, 2015; MailOnline, 2017, p. 18).

1.4. Ideological and Normative Appeals

YPG/PKK aims to convey to Russia and Europe that it is a useful and legitimate actor by disseminating messages on social media that emphasize not only its opposition to ISIS and political Islam, but also its alleged commitment to women's rights, democracy, pluralism, diversity, economic justice, and even environmental sustainability. While the organization engages in trade in Rojava through narratives rooted in Kurdish nationalism, it simultaneously seeks to recruit fighters by circulating these strategically constructed and internally inconsistent messages (Öz, 2022, p. 7). In this context, certain individuals influenced by such propaganda choose to join the organization in order to transform their ideological beliefs into action, particularly because they perceive the PKK as an organized and powerful structure capable of operationalizing these ideals (Tınas & Demirden, 2021, p. 80).

Before being deployed to designated conflict zones, recruits are initially transferred to northern Iraq to undergo training, after which they are sent to assigned areas of combat. Consequently, despite being internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, the PKK/YPG has strengthened its operational capacity by incorporating a significant number of European foreign terrorist fighters. This has been facilitated both by European states' reluctance to confront the organization directly and by the favorable coverage it has received in international media. In other words, while combating ISIS—another designated terrorist

organization—European states have opted to cooperate with the PKK/YPG. By disregarding the fact that the PYD/YPG constitutes the Syrian branch of the PKK, European countries have prioritized the fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda within their counterterrorism strategies. As a result, despite its explicit organizational links to the PKK, the YPG has received substantial support from the U.S.-led international coalition. Under the pretext of combating ISIS and benefiting from a comparatively tolerant international media environment, the YPG/PKK has succeeded in attracting numerous foreign terrorist fighters into its ranks.

Several far-right extremist groups also operate within the PKK/YPG ecosystem. In particular, ISIS's persecution of Christian minorities in Syria and Iraq provided the YPG/PKK with an opportunity to cooperate with armed far-right groups. While some of these groups operate independently, others function under the protection of the Assad regime. Despite ideological and organizational differences among far-right extremist groups, religious identity appears to play a decisive role in motivating their mobilization to Syria. Among these groups, Dwekh Nawsha ("The Sacrificers") stands out as one of the most prominent. Founded in 2014 in response to ISIS atrocities against Christians and other minorities in Iraq, the group's primary objective is to defend Christian communities and fight ISIS (Lucente, 2015).

Members of this group—many of whom describe themselves as Crusaders—believe that their religious identity faces an existential threat. Volunteers from the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Australia have joined Dwekh Nawsha. For example, U.S. Army veteran Brett Felton, who traveled to Iraq in 2014 to join the group, stated: "These are some of the towns in Nineveh where church bells used to ring. In almost all other towns, the bells have been silenced, and that is unacceptable" (Coles, 2015, p. 9). Although Dwekh Nawsha does not formally operate under the YPG, it is permitted to function within YPG-controlled territories. Through this arrangement, the YPG seeks

to draw such extremist groups into its sphere of influence and allows them to establish armed units aligned with its broader objectives. The primary motivation behind these partnerships is to alter the balance of power on the battlefield and to meet operational needs (Tinas & Demirkhan, 2021, p. 11).

An analysis of the motivations driving Western foreign terrorist fighters to join the PKK/YPG indicates that many of these individuals are predominantly apolitical military veterans. Since 2014, the influx of Western former soldiers into YPG ranks has become a notable trend. Approximately 40% of YPG-affiliated foreign fighters have prior military experience. In 2014, veterans constituted 64% of foreign fighters joining the YPG; this figure declined to 36% in 2015 and to just 1% in 2016. These individuals often struggle to reintegrate into civilian life and experience a sense of loss stemming from the absence of camaraderie and brotherhood characteristic of military service (Orton, 2017, p. 20).

In this regard, the statements of former U.S. soldier Jeremy Woodard are particularly illustrative. Explaining his decision to join the YPG, Woodard remarked that finding employment was difficult and that civilians often perceived him as a potential threat. For him, joining the YPG represented an escape and a sense of belonging reminiscent of military life (PBS NewsHour, 2015). By emphasizing its anti-ISIS mission, the YPG presents itself as an organization that gives meaning to the sacrifices made by soldiers and their comrades in post-9/11 conflicts, particularly in Iraq, thereby serving as a powerful pull factor (Tuck et al., 2016). This sentiment also resonates with individuals who left the military shortly before the September 11 attacks and consequently feel guilt for missing deployments to Afghanistan or Iraq. Many Western foreign fighters share the belief that there is still more that can be done and that insufficient action has been taken (Gallagher, 2015).

As the fight against ISIS prolonged, however, the composition of Western foreign fighters increasingly shifted toward individuals motivated by anarchist, Marxist-Leninist, and other far-left ideologies. While early recruits tended to be apolitical veterans, later waves were more ideologically driven. One foreign fighter affiliated with the YPG described this ideological convergence by stating that ideological differences often dissolve within revolutionary contexts and that inspiration drawn from the Rojava revolution led many to embrace armed struggle (Dearden, 2016, p. 21).

Some Western foreign fighters opposing ISIS were already embedded within ideological movements prior to traveling to Syria and Iraq. Upon arrival, ideological indoctrination continued in training camps and operational units. Western recruits attending YPG training camps reportedly read PKK texts alongside works on guerrilla warfare by figures such as Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, and Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap (Bauer, 2019, p. 19). Western left-wing radicals often frame the Syrian conflict as the equivalent of the Spanish Civil War for their generation (Harp, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, the concept of a “Rojava revolution” serves as a powerful attraction. The YPG/PKK provides Western foreign fighters with the necessary conditions to participate in what they perceive as a revolutionary struggle while simultaneously enhancing their militant skills. Members of the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF) articulated this motivation by emphasizing their desire to defend the ongoing social revolution and to learn from diverse militant traditions, including Apoist, communist, and anarchist movements (Rojava Solidarity NYC, 2017).

2 - The Role of Foreign Terrorist Fighters within the Organization

The military significance of Western foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) within terrorist organizations has often been a subject of debate. Observations indicate that the PKK/PYD generally attempts to keep these individuals away from front-line combat and assigns them limited operational roles. Instead, the organization predominantly utilizes foreign fighters for propaganda purposes, targeting Western audiences to shape public perception and enhance the acceptance of the organization’s message abroad. In line with this strategy, YPG/PYD initially provides opportunities for FTFs to engage in activities aligned with their motivations for traveling to Rojava (Orton, 2017, p. 163).

Within this framework, Western FTFs with limited military experience are typically assigned secondary roles rather than combat positions. In contrast, individuals with prior military expertise or technical skills may receive brief training before being deployed directly to conflict zones. These experienced fighters contribute not only to combat operations but also provide tactical, logistical, and medical support to local militias, as well as training in guerrilla warfare techniques.

Accounts from Western volunteers highlight the harsh realities of frontline conditions. U.S. YPG member MacTaggart described the terrain as “barren, rocky, and extremely deprived—virtually hellish” (McNulty, 2015, p. 61). Similarly, Dean Parker, another Western fighter, characterized life on the front lines as cold, unsanitary, and lacking basic human necessities, emphasizing food shortages and the prevalence of disease (Parhlo, 2015, p. 8).

Following the successful defense of Kobani against ISIS, the continued cooperation between the YPG and the U.S.-led coalition strengthened the organization's position in northern and eastern Syria. During 2014, when the YPG faced an existential threat, foreign fighters from Western countries were considered a strategic asset to garner support. However, as the ISIS threat diminished and the organization stabilized its administrative capacities, the YPG adopted a more selective approach toward foreign volunteers.

Some foreign fighters, particularly Christian volunteers, chose to leave upon learning about the YPG's ideological orientation. For instance, an American volunteer known as "Scott" reported leaving the YPG after discovering its radical leftist ideology. Likewise, British volunteer Alan Duncan indicated that the organization's leftist political framework prompted his departure, and he noted that many others had similar intentions. Some of these volunteers subsequently joined the Christian militia group Dwekh Nawsha operating in Northern Iraq (Agence France-Presse, 2017).

The establishment of the International Freedom Battalions (IFB) in June 2015 marked a significant institutional development in the YPG's recruitment and vetting process for foreign fighters. The IFB incorporated radical leftist elements from various international groups, including the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP), TKP-ML/TIKKO, and the United Freedom Forces (BÖG) (Demokrat Haber, 2015).

Through the IFB, the YPG conducted retrospective purges while aiming for future foreign recruits to possess stronger ideological alignment with PKK principles. Consequently, the number of Western volunteers joining the YPG decreased after 2015. Nevertheless, some foreign fighters who remained committed to PKK ideology or extreme leftist beliefs, such as anarchism or communism, continued their involvement in the organization (Orton, 2017, pp. 47–49).

3 - Threat Potential of Returning Foreign Fighters

Foreign fighters returning from the YPG pose a significant domestic security threat, regardless of their individual motivations for return. Whether aligned with PKK ideology or other radical leftist networks, returnees often maintain connections with PKK's European networks. This continued association increases the likelihood of their involvement in PKK-related criminal or terrorist activities in Europe. Moreover, they may contribute to financing terrorism under the guise of humanitarian assistance (Orton, 2017).

There have been reports of returning foreign fighters engaging in street-level violence in European countries. For example, Greece, Italy, and Spain have observed increased activity among anarchist and radical leftist groups. The expansion of PKK's transnational networks in Europe indicates that such threats are not confined to Southern Europe and may pose broader regional security challenges.

4 - Procedures for States Regarding Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters

When individuals join terrorist organizations abroad, it is crucial for law enforcement agencies to begin working on related investigations before the return of these individuals. This approach has three primary justifications (RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017, p. 6):

- i. Risk to Family and Peers: Foreign recruitment often entails risks to siblings and peers. Police and security agencies should prioritize preventing the chain of events associated with terrorist recruitment.
- ii. Facilitating Reintegration: Returning foreign fighters require specialized counseling and support to establish trust with their families and close contacts. This support is essential for successful resocialization and reintegration.
- iii. Gathering Contextual Information: Contact with family members provides valuable insights into family dynamics and surrounding conditions. This also allows authorities to collect information about the environment of returning fighters, which is essential for managing reintegration processes. Most returnees re-enter familiar social contexts, making these observations particularly valuable for assessing risks and monitoring radicalization (RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017, p. 6).

Between 2011 and 2016, over 42,000 foreign fighters from more than 120 countries joined terrorist organizations, of whom approximately 5,000 were from Europe. Since 2016, the number of foreign fighters has decreased. Although foreign fighters vary in nationality, ethnicity, age, and gender, all share certain levels of trauma and psychological challenges (RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017, p. 6).

The primary factor to consider is the reason for their return. Individuals may return due to disillusionment, remorse, continued adherence to organizational ideology, pursuit of better living conditions, or compulsion by authorities. The second consideration is the individual's role within the organization. Men, women, and children occupy different positions within terrorist groups. Men are generally considered more dangerous upon return due to accumulated combat experience and exposure to violence. While the literature often suggests that female fighters adopt nurturing roles for future combatants, this is not applicable

to the PKK/YPG, as female fighters actively participate in operations—for instance, within the YPJ (RAN YF&C, 2017, p. 30).

Few studies exist on individuals returning from the YPG in Europe within the context of fighting ISIS, creating significant informational gaps. This lack of data obscures the number of returnees, their combat experience, and any crimes committed, leaving them largely unmonitored and potentially posing serious security risks upon return (Koch, 2019, p. 3).

Procedures for Reintegration

Several procedures are recommended to facilitate the reintegration of returning foreign fighters (RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017, p. 8):

1. Psychological Support: Providing mental health support is essential. Research shows that assessing the trauma levels of returnees is challenging, as many are reluctant to share their experiences even after imprisonment. Forcing individuals to recount traumatic events may have adverse effects.
2. Family and Community Support: Reintegration relies heavily on family and community engagement. However, officials must consider various family dynamics, such as distressed relatives, families that glorify the returnee, or families who traveled with them. If family influence is deemed counterproductive (e.g., reinforcing extremist beliefs), authorities should introduce external actors, such as religious leaders or NGO professionals, into the social network.
3. Ideological Support: Ideological guidance is necessary to counteract negative influences acquired during detention. Conditions in prisons—such as overcrowding, solitary confinement, and interaction with like-minded inmates—can exacerbate

extremist beliefs. Rehabilitation programs may be mandatory or voluntary, depending on legal and organizational frameworks.

Most European approaches follow a similar process, largely mirroring interventions designed for radicalized individuals. This intelligence-driven and investigative framework begins with criminal investigations and risk assessment, followed by case-specific intervention by multi-agency teams. The RAN Police Findings (RAN POL) emphasize adapting and improving existing best practices rather than developing entirely new radicalization programs.

Countries such as Australia, Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom prosecute returnees for criminal acts associated with their involvement in terrorist groups. However, some countries still lack effective mechanisms. The United States, for instance, does not charge U.S. citizens who join the YPG, despite counterterrorism laws allowing prosecution for participation in terrorist organizations (Tinas & Demirkhan, 2017, p. 34).

5 - European States' Policies Regarding the PKK/YPG: Examples from Germany, France, and Belgium

Despite the European Union's official designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization, several European countries have either refrained from recognizing the PKK as a terrorist group or have failed to take meaningful measures against its activities. Even in states that acknowledge the PKK as a terrorist organization,

necessary countermeasures are often not implemented, and the operations of affiliated organizations are sometimes overlooked. This permissive environment has provided the PKK with significant political and operational space within Europe, effectively enabling the group to advance its activities against Turkey both politically and economically. Moreover, some NGOs that openly support the PKK in Europe receive substantial funding from EU programs, further consolidating the organization's influence.

Germany, with its substantial Kurdish population, represents a central hub for the PKK's European network. For decades, Germany treated the PKK primarily as a security concern for Turkey. However, following the end of the Cold War and the increase in PKK-led terrorist incidents within Germany, authorities began recognizing the PKK as a threat to domestic public order. In response to German attacks in 1995, the PKK formally apologized and pledged to refrain from further violence (Deutsche Welle, 2015). Despite occasional punitive actions, German Federal Prosecutor reports indicate that imprisonment of PKK members has had limited deterrent effect, as militants often resumed their activities upon release (Müller, 2005). Germany's fluctuating policies have largely been shaped by its significant Kurdish population, which intelligence reports identify as having a high mobilization potential. Furthermore, Western cooperation with the PYD/PKK in the fight against ISIS has inadvertently strengthened the organization's presence in Germany. Notably, many German courts have demonstrated reluctance in prosecuting PKK affiliates, exemplified by a 2016 case in which a PKK member was acquitted due to his Yezidi heritage and involvement in anti-ISIS operations in Syria (Bloomberg HT, 2016).

Belgium represents another key locus of PKK activity in Europe. Historically, Belgium has harbored individuals on Turkey's wanted lists and maintained a permissive stance toward PKK-affiliated NGOs, media, and cultural institutions. The establishment of KON-KURD in 1993 marked one of the first umbrella structures

of the PKK in Belgium. Belgian authorities have often overlooked the organization's illicit activities, failing to recognize them as terrorist acts, and courts have frequently allowed cases involving PKK members to lapse or conclude in favor of the defendants. The escalation of ISIS activity in Syria further encouraged Belgium to adopt a more lenient approach, allowing the PYD to organize numerous congresses and public demonstrations under formal oversight (Yalçın et al., 2019, pp. 183–200).

France also plays a significant role in the PKK's European network. For decades, France has provided various forms of support to the organization, which has contributed to tensions in Franco-Turkish relations. A 2018 Europol report highlighted the PKK's recruitment of young individuals into indoctrination camps under the "Komalen Ciwan" structure, where they were trained in PKK ideology and combat techniques (Strategic Studies Organization, 2018). French President Jean-Michel Frédéric Macron publicly acknowledged support for the PYD in Syria in 2018. However, recent violent incidents within France, such as the December 23, 2022 attack on a cultural center in Paris that resulted in three deaths, illustrate the tangible security threat posed by the PKK/PYD in Europe. Following this attack, PKK militants and supporters staged demonstrations that escalated into violent clashes with law enforcement, with similar incidents subsequently occurring in other European cities (Yıldız, Arslan, & Çakmak, 2022). These developments underscore the fact that tolerating PKK activities solely due to anti-Turkish sentiment is not a viable security policy, as it compromises European safety and emboldens terrorist operations.

Given the existing political obstacles to countering the PKK's criminal and terrorist activities in Europe, the legitimization of the YPG in anti-ISIS operations provides no tangible benefit to European states. It is therefore essential that European countries do not allow the PKK to build political infrastructure. A key component of this strategy should involve curbing

the PKK's electoral and societal influence in Western countries. The organization's recruitment and propaganda efforts can be countered directly and indirectly. Direct measures include the closure of PKK-affiliated television channels, newspapers, and social media platforms, such as the Facebook page "Rojava Lions," which romanticizes YPG's military operations and serves as a recruitment tool for European volunteers. Indirectly, the PKK's influence can be mitigated through counter-messaging strategies that disseminate factual information about the organization's history, authoritarian structure, and criminal activities. Providing platforms for Kurdish opponents of the YPG to share their experiences, as well as for former YPG fighters to publicly recount disillusioning experiences, can help disrupt the romanticized narrative that attracts foreign recruits (Orton, 2017, p. 131).

In sum, comprehensive measures targeting both the political and propagandistic dimensions of the PKK/PYD's European network are critical. Failure to address these issues not only allows the PKK to consolidate power within Europe but also exacerbates regional and transnational security risks. European states must adopt coherent, proactive, and legally enforceable policies to restrict PKK influence, prevent recruitment, and ensure the organization cannot exploit political or social permissiveness to advance its objectives.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between Western European countries' ambivalent counterterrorism policies toward the PKK/YPG and the participation of European foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in the organization. Focusing on the cases of France, Germany, and Belgium, the findings demonstrate that inconsistencies between the formal designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization and the de facto political and military engagement with its Syrian affiliate, the PYD/YPG, have created a permissive environment for recruitment and mobilization.

The analysis reveals three interrelated empirical patterns. First, the normalization of the PYD/YPG in political and public discourse has contributed to the perception of legitimacy among potential recruits, reducing the stigma traditionally associated with participation in terrorist organizations. Second, legal and institutional responses toward individuals joining the PKK/YPG have remained fragmented and delayed, particularly when compared to the comprehensive measures adopted against those joining ISIS. Third, the absence of a coherent and unified counterterrorism framework across European states has limited deterrence and enabled the PKK/YPG to expand its operational and propaganda activities within Europe.

These findings suggest that European foreign fighters joining the PKK/YPG represent not only an ideological or political challenge but also a long-term security risk. Through their involvement in violent organizations, these individuals acquire operational skills, transnational networks, and radicalized identities that may pose threats upon return. However, European counterterrorism approaches have largely underestimated this risk due to the political ambiguity surrounding the PYD/YPG.

Based on these empirical insights, the study argues that effective counterterrorism requires policy coherence and institutional consistency. Recognizing the

PYD/YPG as an organizational extension of the PKK constitutes a necessary first step toward addressing existing contradictions. Moreover, measures aimed at preventing recruitment, restricting propaganda activities, and prosecuting foreign terrorist fighters should be applied uniformly, regardless of the specific terrorist organization involved. Without such consistency, existing counterterrorism efforts risk remaining selective and ineffective.

While recent legal initiatives in some European states indicate a growing awareness of the issue, the current political and normative climate continues to constrain comprehensive action. Addressing this challenge will require the coordinated use of intelligence, legal, and political instruments, as well as the legitimization of these measures in the public sphere. Although the implementation of such policies may be gradual, failing to act risks entrenching a security environment that allows terrorist organizations to exploit normative and institutional gaps within European counterterrorism frameworks.

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