

## **REPORT TITLE**

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(U//FOUO) The Syrian Conflict and its Nexus to U.S.-based Antifascist Movements

## **DATE OF INFORMATION**

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06/24/2020

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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(U//LES) In June 2020, U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) National Targeting Center (NTC) Counter Network Division (CND) compiled CBP encounter data on individuals who returned from Syria and fought with the YEKÎNEYÊN PARASTINA GEL (YPG, translation: *PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS*), and had some with reported ties to a U.S.-based ANTIFA (Anti-fascist) movement. CBP concerns about and interest in these individuals stem from the types of skills and motivations that may have developed during their time overseas engaged in foreign conflicts.

## **SCOPE NOTE**

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(U//LES) This information bulletin is intended to inform frontline personnel of emerging threats to personnel, facilities, and operations. ANTIFA is being analyzed under the 2019 DHS Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism (CT) and Targeted Violence. The information contained within this bulletin is derived from research in CBP holdings, open sources, state authorities, and other federal law enforcement agencies. Research conducted includes background of the threat network, current trends and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), and criminal history of associated members. This bulletin evaluates reporting spanning from 2014 through June 2020. Single source reporting cannot be verified; however, separate source reporting, external to CBP, has corroborated much of the information.

## **BACKGROUND**

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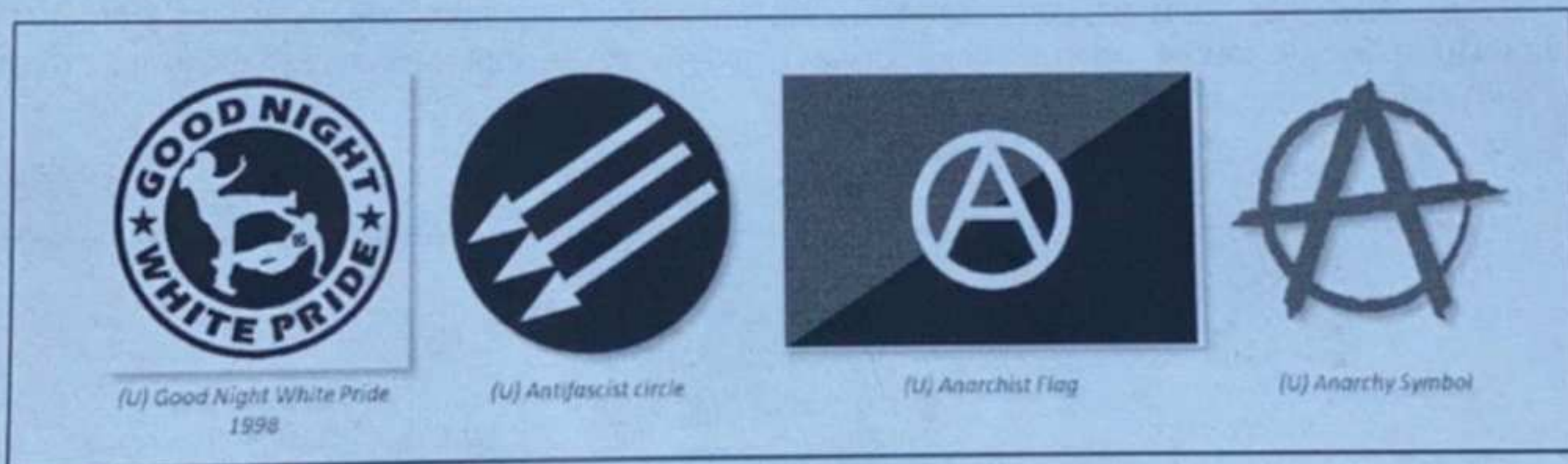
(U//FOUO) The Anti-fascist (ANTIFA) movement or Anti-fascist Action, is a conglomerate of extreme left-wing autonomous, militant anti-fascist groups in the United States and abroad.<sup>1</sup> The movement is known for using physical violence as their means of "direct action," with conflicts occurring both online and in person.

(U//LES) ANTIFA claims no official leadership, a decentralized network of autonomous local groups using social media and internet forums to communicate.<sup>2,3</sup> ANTIFA is driven by a mixed range of far-left political ideologies, including anti-capitalism, communism, socialism, and anarchism, with a unifying goal to fight against fascism through protests and direct confrontations; confrontations that have turned violent in several instances.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

(U//FOUO) The origins of ANTIFA can be traced back to anti-fascist movements in Italy and Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Current anti-fascists movements have taken on the name "Antifaschistische Aktion" and image of the post-World War II European ANTIFA. In the United States, ANTIFA gained new prominence after the white supremacist-affiliated "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA, in August 2017.<sup>8</sup> In Charlottesville and at subsequent events held by white supremacist extremists or merely right-wing protestors, encounters between ANTIFA and white supremacists have turned violent.

(U//LES) In more recent events individuals affiliated with ANTIFA have been identified traveling to Syria to fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) aligning themselves with the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), translation People's Protection Units.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, in late-May 2020 ANTIFA participated in widespread domestic unrest in the United States, provoking riots, looting, arson, and violent attacks against law enforcement and right wing protesters.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

(U) Additional iconography associated with ANTIFA groups:



(U) ANTIFA United States



(U) ANTIFA Europe

## NARRATIVE



(U) CBP Events Involving Individuals with Suspected or Confirmed ANTIFA Links and the Syrian Conflict

(U//LES) U.S. citizen (USC) Brace BELDEN was encountered on 08 April 2017, arriving in San Francisco, California from Frankfurt, Germany. BELDEN was returning from a six month tour of volunteering to fight with the YPG under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighting ISIS in Syria as part of the ongoing Raqqa offensive starting in November 2016 to retake Raqqa from ISIS. BELDEN stated he recently learned that an open source article had been written about him and his "Anarchist" fighters;<sup>13</sup> that the story rights had been sold to a movie company and are planning to produce a movie about them.<sup>14</sup> According to the open source article, BELDEN was a minor criminal and drug addict who started reading Marx and Lenin in drug rehabilitation treatment and became involved in a number of political causes before deciding to fight alongside the YPG.<sup>15</sup>

(U//LES) Christopher Joseph HELALI (USC) is a Kurdish activist who has worked for the past few years with the Kurdish liberation movement. HELALI spent 2016 in Greece, working with Kurdish refugees from Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran in anarchist venues as well as in the historic Lavrio camp outside of Athens. In January of 2017, HELALI traveled to Southern Kurdistan (KRG) in Northern Iraq where he spent time with the guerrillas of the PKK in the mountains and then crossed over into Rojava (Western Kurdistan), now known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.<sup>16</sup> HELALI was a member of the YPG for 9 months and returned from the region in September of 2017 confirmed through CBP holdings.<sup>17</sup> Through a separate CBP encounter along the Derby Line, Vermont on 07 June 2019, HELALI had numerous pictures of and physical items related to ANTIFA, anarchist materials, and communist propaganda. Upon reviewing HELALI's media, multiple conversations were found where he admitted to being an anarchist, anti-imperialist, and socialist and was attempting to meet with fellow socialists and anarchists in multiple countries, including Cuba and Venezuela.<sup>18</sup>

(U//LES) Marcus Andrew HARNICHAR (USC) aka Cesur Herekol (Kurdish name) was encountered on 05 November 2017 arriving in New York from Doha, Qatar. HARNICHAR stated he was returning from the Syrian conflict zone fighting alongside the YPG against ISIL. HARNICHAR was motivated to fight against ISIL due to the "genocide" of Yazidis by ISIL in Iraq and Syria. After further research he contacted someone through an unidentified website which he would not elaborate on which gave him further instructions on how to join the YPG. Once HARNICHAR arrived in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq and crossed into Syria, he was taken to a training camp in Derik, Syria by an unidentified "overseer," the camp was used by the YPG to train "western fighters" in various tactics, such as group movement and room clearing. HARNICHAR admitted joining a group while in al-Shaddadi, Syria called the "International Tabur" aka Antifascist International Tabur aka Antifaschistische (Antifa) Aktion but claimed no affiliation to Antifa in the United States.<sup>19</sup> Open source reporting indicates HARNICHAR was spotted wearing ANTIFA patches during his time in Syria which was confirmed during a secondary exam of his media.<sup>20,21</sup>



(U//LES) Photograph of HARNICHAR seen wearing an Anarchist Flag patch on his right shoulder.

(U//LES) Aman Singh BIRK (USC) was encountered on 09 January 2018 flying from New York to Baghdad, Iraq via Cairo, Egypt. BIRK initially claimed he was teaching English in Iraq but later admitted that he joined the YPG's International Freedom Battalion to fight ISIS.<sup>22</sup> Many members of the International Freedom Battalion are foreign fighters with connections to Marxism, socialism, communism, or anti-fascist movements.<sup>23</sup> BIRK was



attracted to the Democratic Union Party, the political party associated with YPG, because of their feminist and socialist platform.

(U//LES) Grayson Tate SCOTT (USC) was encountered on 14 January 2018 arriving in New York from Cairo, Egypt. SCOTT attended a YPG training camp for westerners and was then sent to fight in Raqqa, Syria. SCOTT admitted he "does a lot of protesting" and considers himself a communist. Although SCOTT claimed he was not involved with ANTIFA, he had a picture of his unit holding an ANTIFA flag and additional photos displaying some allegiance towards ANTIFA.<sup>24</sup>



(U) First row, Caleb STEVENS (second from left), Grayson SCOTT (third from the left), and Marcus HARNICHAR (sixth from the left, Mohawk hairstyle) in Raqqa, Syria.

(U//LES) Robert Watson DUNN (USC) was encountered on 23 February 2018 arriving in New York from Sulaymaniyah, Iraq via Cairo, Egypt. Dunn was returning from six months in Syria after joining the YPG to fight ISIS, who he saw as the "most evil group in the world." DUNN received one month of combat and language training and was deployed to Raqqah. DUNN considers himself a socialist and had photos of ANTIFA paraphernalia and a photo of him and other YPG fighters holding an ANTIFA flag. DUNN claimed he does not share all the same views as the ANTIFA movement. DUNN was friends with Italian national, Domenico COMITANGELO, who was an active member of ANTIFA in Italy.<sup>25</sup>

(U//LES) Caleb David STEVENS (USC) was encountered on 03 January 2019 at Champlain-Rouses Point, NY port of entry (POE). STEVENS stated he was in Syria from July 2017 through January 2018, fighting alongside the YPG. During his stint with the YPG, STEVENS was shot in the leg and transferred to a military hospital in Iraq. STEVENS mentioned another prior encounter with CBP but failed to provide details of that interview.<sup>26</sup> The encounter STEVENS is referring to occurred 14 January 2018, when he arrived on crutches and shared a full



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detail of his service with the YPG.<sup>27</sup> STEVENS was also identified in an NPR article where he provides the same image as seen in SCOTT's media holding an ANTIFA flag with his unit in Syria.<sup>28</sup>

(U//LES) Ian Paul BROADHEAD (USC) was encountered on 10 May 2019 flying from New York to Stockholm, Sweden. BROADHEAD stated he was going to Iraq and had applied with the Hikumeti Heremi Kurdistan, translation Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), for a press pass in order to paint a more accurate picture 'than the leftist government is showing.' BROADHEAD admitted he was an anarchist and ran a weekly online anarchist program called "The Final Straw." BROADHEAD was evasive when asked about his contacts in Iraq and stated he was not going to join the YPG.<sup>29</sup> Open source queries showed that BROADHEAD was likely involved with ANTIFA as late as August 2018.<sup>30</sup>

(U//LES) Matthew Martin MARGALA (USC) was encountered on 14 September 2019 arriving in Boston from Doha, Qatar. MARGALA joined the YPG and received approximately two and half months of weapons and language training. MARGALA worked with a Kurdistan intelligence and security agency (Asayish) teaching English to Asayish intelligence officers. YPG recruiters sent MARGALA several short books and literature on Abdullah OCALAN, the jailed PARTIYA KARKERÊN KURDISTANÊ (PKK) leader, PKK being a designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO) by the U.S. Department of State (DoS).<sup>31</sup> MARGALA expected his training to focus on "democratic federalism and Marxism" rather than language and weapons. MARGALA had photos of himself with ANTIFA and PKK flags, although he claimed to not be involved with ANTIFA in the United States.<sup>32</sup> There appears to be a clear connection in the imagery between ANTIFA ideology and Kurdish democratic federalism teachings and ideology.<sup>33</sup>



(U//LES) Matthew MARGALA, posing next to an ANTIFA flag while in Syria, serving with the YPG.

### (U) Antifascist Movements in Syria

(U//FOUO) Within the YPG, a group called International Tabur was in al-Shaddadi, Syria. International Tabur was originally called Antifascist International Tabur but had no affiliation to the ANTIFA movement in the United States. The group changed its name to International Tabur to distance itself from the ANTIFA association.<sup>34</sup> International Tabur is likely The International Freedom Battalion, aka Tabura Azadi Ya Internasyonal, an armed group consisting of leftist foreign fighters fighting for the YPG in the Syrian Civil War.<sup>35</sup>

(U//FOUO) The International Freedom Battalion (IFB) fights for the YPG against ISIS. The IFB is an armed group consisting of leftist foreign fighters fighting for the YPG in the Syrian civil war support of the Rojava Revolution and against ISIS.<sup>36</sup> Open source research shows that many individuals associated with the IFB have connections to Marxist, socialist, communist, and anti-fascist ideology.<sup>37</sup>

- (U//FOUO) Michael John HICKEY (USC) fought with the YPG in 2015 and 2016 but decided to leave the group and join the Peshmerga. HICKEY left the group due to an escalation in the group's "socialist and Marxist behavior" and the influx of "ANTIFA leftists" joining the YPG, according to his CBP encounter.<sup>38</sup>

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(U//FOUO) In October 2017, an unidentified Colorado-based individual who was in Northern Syria fighting with a PKK-aligned organization posted an announcement to a popular anarchist extremist website seeking funds to return to the United States. The individual wanted to return home to continue “organizing with the political tools and lessons” learned during their time spent in Northern Syria. The funds raised would be used for travel and any unused fund would be “funneled” to Kurdish solidarity or ANTIFA efforts.<sup>39</sup>

## OUTLOOK

(U//LES) The nexus between ANTIFA and the YPG appears to be limited to a handful of individuals who became pro-YPG foreign fighters for a variety of individual motivations, such as the desire to contribute to the counter-ISIS fight, leftist ideology, and former military veterans. Individuals with an affinity to the YPG’s far-left, utopian, socialist ideology, which acts as a pull factor, are likely to continue to join the YPG in Syria as persistent conflict remains within the region. Aside from a single instance derived from open source reporting, there does not appear to be evidence of a centralized effort to give marching orders to returning ANTIFA-affiliated USPER foreign fighters once they return to the United States.

## REPORTING NOTICE

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