

## **TURKEY'S MILITARY VICTORY OVER THE PKK AND ITS FAILURE TO END THE PKK INSURGENCY**

*This paper explores the major reasons why Turkey could not end the PKK insurgency despite its military defeat in the late 1990s. It argues that the Turkish governments failed to sufficiently address two key aspects of their low intensity conflict with the PKK, namely the fact that the PKK is not only a group of armed militants, but rather a complex insurgent organisation and that it appeals to a large number of Kurds. Turkey's inability to quell definitively the PKK insurgency raises significant questions regarding the justification and effectiveness of the use of military force in dealing with insurgencies.*

Turkey has been struggling with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*-PKK) insurgency since the 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, Turkish security forces conducted a determined counterinsurgency campaign against the PKK, as a result of which its leader Abdullah Öcalan acknowledged military defeat.<sup>1</sup> Öcalan was captured and arrested in 1999, and the PKK subsequently declared a unilateral ceasefire. By the early 2000s, the PKK was militarily weak, and the majority of its members were outside of Turkey's borders. However, after a few years of calm, on 1 June 2004, the PKK put an end to its unilateral ceasefire and once again, began to attack civilian and military targets in Turkey. How was the PKK able to survive and rebuild itself in such a short period of time? In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Turkey's fight against the PKK was identified as a success story in counterinsurgency.<sup>2</sup> However, it soon became evident that Turkey's military defeat of the PKK could not bring an end to the insurgency. The PKK recovered quickly and renewed its commitment to violence in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Turkey's inability to quell definitively the PKK insurgency raises significant questions regarding the justification and effectiveness of the use of military force in dealing with insurgencies.

The use of military force and its consequences in counterinsurgency has long been a subject of debate. From Britain's struggle with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to Sri Lanka's counterinsurgency campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), academic studies and real world experiences present a mixed record of success for the usefulness of military force in struggling with insurgencies. While some scholars and policy makers argue that the application of military force has a key place in counterinsurgency, others believe that counterinsurgency is mainly a political endeavour and military methods alone can never bring a complete end to an insurgency.

This paper asks the question of why Turkey could not end the PKK insurgency despite its military defeat in the late 1990s. It argues that the political dimension of the PKK insurgency played a determinative role in the perpetuation of its existence. More specifically, the paper demonstrates that the Turkish governments failed to sufficiently address two key aspects of their low intensity conflict with the PKK, namely the fact that the PKK is not only a group of armed militants, but rather a complex insurgent organisation and that it appeals to a large number of Kurds. By the late 1990s, although Turkey's counterinsurgency campaign weakened the PKK militarily, it left the organisation intact to a great extent with a complex institutional structure both in Turkey and abroad. Furthermore, throughout the counterinsurgency campaign, the Turkish governments failed to make a sufficient effort to win the hearts and minds of the Kurdish people. As a result, despite its military defeat, the PKK continued to sustain a significant support base, especially in southeastern Turkey.

The rest of the paper discusses how Turkey's shortcomings in its counterinsurgency policy prevented the complete end of the PKK violence and contributed to its revival from 2004 onwards. The first section presents an historical overview of Turkey's struggle with the PKK between 1984 and 1999. The following section starts with a discussion of the literature on counterinsurgency. Then it examines two major problems of Turkey's counterinsurgency

policy in the 1980s and 1990s, namely the state authorities' treatment of the PKK merely as a group of armed militants and their failure to win the hearts and minds of Turkey's Kurdish citizens. The last section presents a summary and implications of the main arguments.

The PKK was founded in 1978 as a Marxist/Leninist organisation. It initiated its armed struggle against Turkey in the early 1980s with the goal of creating an independent Kurdish state in predominantly Kurdish populated areas of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. The PKK's first major attacks were on military targets in southeastern Turkey in 1984. At first, the Turkish political authorities did not take the PKK threat seriously and identified the group as a 'bunch of bandits'. Thus, the initial response to the PKK came mainly from the military. This corresponded to a period of martial law in the region, which was imposed due to the increasing violence in the run up to the 1980 coup. By taking advantage of the martial law conditions, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) conducted several operations against the PKK both in the Southeast and across the Iraqi border in 1984 and 1985. The government also put into effect the village guard system in 1985 in an effort to receive the villagers' assistance in the fight against the PKK.<sup>4</sup>

In the early stages of the conflict, the TAF's operations against the PKK were quite effective. The PKK was weak in the mid-1980s with around 200-300 armed militants. Furthermore, the PKK did not have much public support at the time. As a result, the organization incurred significant losses in its early confrontation with the Turkish security forces. In fact, after these initial clashes, the PKK convened its third Congress in 1986 in order to identify the causes of its failures and draw lessons from its mistakes.<sup>5</sup>

The year 1987 marked a turning point in Turkey's struggle with the PKK. In 1987, the Turgut Özal government replaced the martial law regime in the Southeast with a state of

emergency, comprising ten provinces in eastern and southeastern Turkey. The government also created the post of an emergency rule governor who would be responsible for assuring coordination among the governors of these provinces, as well as with their civilian and military officials. The removal of the martial law regime created a lot of opposition among the military officers because of the uncertain chain of command in the state of emergency. In this new system, the fight against the PKK was conducted mainly under the command of the police and gendarmerie forces. Thus, the TAF was not in direct control of the counterinsurgency campaign. This uncertainty created serious obstacles in Turkey's struggle with the PKK and decreased its effectiveness. This transition also coincided with the PKK's emergence as a more professional insurgent organisation from 1987 onwards. During this period, the PKK increased its recruitment activities among the Kurds and intensified its violent acts. As a result, sometimes out of fear and sometimes out of genuine support, the PKK increased its prominence among the local population and began to act more freely in the region.

During the early 1990s, both military officers and civilian policy makers were seriously concerned about the PKK's challenge to the Turkish state. Especially after the 1991 Gulf War, the power vacuum in northern Iraq provided a comfortable living space for the PKK members, where they could carry out their armed and political activities.<sup>6</sup> During this period, the number of fatalities caused by the PKK increased tremendously. While the PKK caused 1619 deaths between 1984 and 1990, this number rose to 4132 between 1991 and 1993.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, the PKK was collecting taxes from the local population and providing them with an alternative law enforcement mechanism. There was almost a dual authority in some provinces of the Southeast.

However, from 1993 onwards, Turkey carried out a determined counterinsurgency campaign against the PKK under the TAF's full command, which led to a decrease in the

PKK violence from the mid-1990s onwards. According to the National Security Council of Turkey, by 1997 the PKK's terrorist acts were reduced to a controllable degree.<sup>8</sup> During this period, internal PKK correspondence also included comments about the beginning of a process of decline in the PKK.<sup>9</sup>

In 1998, Turkey decided to take a final step to end the violent acts of an already weakened PKK. Öcalan had been living in Damascus since the 1980s, and Turkish civilian and military leaders thought that his expulsion from Syria would put the PKK in a vulnerable position. Thus, in October 1998 Turkey threatened the Syrian regime with military action if it did not expel Öcalan out of Damascus. In response, Syria deported Öcalan, a move that initiated the latter's efforts to search for a new refuge and eventually gave way to his capture in Kenya in February 1999. After his capture, Öcalan was tried by the State Security Court in Turkey and sentenced to the death penalty. This sentence was commuted to life imprisonment after the removal of the death penalty from the Turkish Criminal Code in 2002. After Öcalan's arrest in September 1999, at his request, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew the majority of its armed militants outside of Turkey's borders. Throughout his defence, Öcalan did not talk about an independent Kurdish state. Instead, he developed a discourse that emphasized his hope of Kurds and Turks living in a democratic Turkey.

These developments seemed to mark the beginning of a process in which the PKK renounced violence. In the early 2000s, discussions mainly revolved around the implications of Turkey's victory over the PKK and the PKK's efforts to politicize the organisation. However, after his arrest, Öcalan never asked the PKK to disarm, and the PKK members continued their armed and political activities in northern Iraq. The subsequent developments demonstrated that it was too early to talk about a defeat on the PKK front. The peace turned out to be short-lived. On 1 June 2004, the PKK resumed its armed struggle against Turkey.

This situation showed that Turkey's seemingly successful counterinsurgency policy had a number of serious limitations.

Counterinsurgency is a multidimensional effort, which requires state action in a number of different domains. As Gordon McCormick aptly describes in his Diamond Model, attacking the insurgent infrastructure could be only one aspect of a state's counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>10</sup> Counterinsurgency is first and foremost a political endeavour.

However, it is true that the state may need to fight the insurgents with the goal of containing their growth and their ability to continue. Actual fighting is, in fact, an indispensable element of counterinsurgency because when the state faces a violent group that targets its authority through terrorism and irregular warfare, it feels the need to counteract this challenge in order to restore control over its territory.

All classical and modern thinkers on counterinsurgency, so far, have provided lengthy accounts on how the military aspect of counterinsurgency should be carried out. Among the existing studies, some scholars attribute a more central role to the use of coercion.<sup>11</sup> These experts discuss different ways in which coercion works in counterinsurgency. Trinquier talks about how it is essential to make use of the police forces, and if necessary the army, in order to eliminate the enemy organisation among the population.<sup>12</sup> He goes so far as to defend the use of torture during the interrogation of the prisoners.<sup>13</sup> Galula promotes the idea that political and socio-economic measures are essential in counterinsurgency in order to win the support of the population. However, he also adds that in order for these measures to work, successful military and police operations must precede them to make sure the insurgents are no longer in control of the population.<sup>14</sup> Among the more recent studies on counterinsurgency, Merom's *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (2003) and Luttwak's

*Counterinsurgency Warfare as Malpractice* (2007) follow a similar approach. While Merom argues that states that are willing to use brutal methods can be successful in eliminating insurgencies, Luttwak asserts that in order to defeat an insurgency, the simple starting point is to realize that 'insurgents are not the only ones who can intimidate or terrorize civilians'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, he recommends that states follow a similar strategy.

In contrast to these works, many other scholars strongly emphasize the political nature of the insurgencies and argue that it is not possible to eliminate them mainly through the use of military force.<sup>16</sup> These studies share the common view that in order to end the insurgent violence in a country, it is necessary to formulate an effective response to the political subversion as well as achieve military success against the insurgent forces. They all argue that the state must have a clear political goal from the very beginning of the counterinsurgency and that in addition to the coercive measures, it must adopt political, economic, and social programs in order to end the violence. As Arreguin-Toft states, pure barbarism may be effective only in the short term and only as a military strategy. 'If the desired objective is long-term political control, barbarism invariably backfires.'<sup>17</sup>

According to these scholars, there is an interplay of political and military dimensions in counterinsurgency. The political dimension especially involves the state's efforts to win the support of the population in its struggle with the insurgents.<sup>18</sup> This is the only way to establish the legitimacy of the state among the population and deplete the support the insurgents enjoy. Since the 1960s, scholars and practitioners of counterinsurgency have highlighted this goal of winning the loyalty and support of the population as the central pillar of a successful counterinsurgency campaign. As Mao Tse-tung stated, in *On Guerrilla Warfare*, the relationship between the population and the insurgents is similar to that of water and the fish that inhabit it. '[G]uerilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies

and cooperation'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in a low intensity conflict, the state must strive for the support of the population and it must try to alienate the people from the insurgent organisation as much as possible.

Throughout the low intensity conflict with the PKK between 1984 and 1999, most Turkish governments failed to see this political dimension of the PKK insurgency. They treated the PKK mainly as a group of armed militants and believed that an effective fight against these armed units would be enough to end the insurgency.

Indeed, Turkey's counterinsurgency campaign against the PKK was generally successful in targeting the PKK militarily. Especially from the mid-1990s onwards, Turkey's strong military response to the PKK both in the Southeast and across the Iraqi border caused the insurgent organisation to incur serious losses. The cross-border operations significantly damaged the PKK's infrastructure in northern Iraq, including its supply and ammunition warehouses and food stocks.<sup>20</sup> This situation, when coupled with the imprisonment of the PKK leader Öcalan in 1999, crippled the insurgent organisation.

However, this did not lead to the total disintegration of the PKK or a complete end to the insurgency. The PKK managed to survive and rebuild itself in a short period of time. After Öcalan was put into prison and the PKK withdrew its armed units outside of Turkey's borders, major political and military actors in Turkey thought that the struggle with the PKK was over. However, although the PKK was militarily weak and unable to continue its armed struggle against the Turkish state in the late 1990s, it was intact as a political organisation promoting itself as a defender of Kurdish cultural and political rights. Throughout its counterinsurgency campaign, Turkey perceived the PKK mainly from a security perspective and it focused on fighting the PKK militants. However, in the late 1990s, despite its defeat in the face of the Turkish security forces, the PKK was still a strong organisation with an established system of networks and institutions.



The PKK was formulated as a political party in 1978 with a political, social, and military apparatus. However, as the insurgency strengthened and professionalized in the early 1990s, the PKK attempted to create a parallel administrative structure in the southeastern part of Turkey through activities such as collecting taxes from the local population and providing alternative judicial services.<sup>21</sup> During this period, both Turkish civilian and military actors were acknowledging that there was almost a dual authority in the Southeast. Especially at night, the PKK was in control of a number of small towns and villages.<sup>22</sup>

By the early 2000s, the PKK turned into an even more complex organisation composed of several entities. These entities included armed units, sister parties in Syria<sup>23</sup> and Iran,<sup>24</sup> a 'Kurdish Parliament in Exile' in order to carry out the PKK's diplomatic activities in Europe, special branches that organize women, and the popular front Kurdistan People's Congress (*Kongreya Gelê Kurdistanê-KONGRA-GEL*).<sup>25</sup> All of these elements were later brought together under the name of the Kurdistan Communities Union (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan-KCK*).<sup>26</sup> The PKK developed an advanced organisational structure, which included both military units and those elements responsible for recruitment activities, ideological training, propaganda efforts in order to increase awareness about the Kurdish question, and fundraising.<sup>27</sup> The organisation even developed its own news sources, publications and television stations.

The PKK also built an advanced international network over the years. Throughout the low intensity conflict between 1984 and 1999, the PKK received tremendous support from a number of foreign countries as well as from Kurds living in different parts of the world, particularly in Europe. First of all, both Syria and northern Iraq served as a sanctuary for the PKK for a long time. Öcalan lived in Syria until he was expelled from Damascus in 1998, and the Syrian regime provided the PKK with weapons and training. Many Syrian Kurds also joined the PKK and fought against Turkey. Moreover, especially after the 1991 Gulf War,

northern Iraq turned into a major living space and military base for the PKK. In the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK received various forms of support from many other countries, including the Soviet Union, Iran, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Armenia, Libya, and Cuba.<sup>28</sup>

Europe also has served as a major logistical and financial support base for the PKK. In the 1980s and 1990s, several European countries felt sympathetic to the PKK cause and they preferred not to confront the PKK activities within their borders. In fact, the EU did not label the PKK as a terrorist organisation until 2002.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the PKK managed to act freely in many European countries. PKK members got mobilized in various Kurdish cultural associations and other non-governmental organisations in Europe.<sup>30</sup> These organizations played a major role in Kurdish identity formation and mobilisation through activities such as celebrating Kurdish national holidays, teaching the Kurdish language and organising cultural gatherings.<sup>31</sup> Funds provided by the Kurdish diaspora in Europe became a significant source of income for the PKK.<sup>32</sup> The PKK raised funds in Europe through donations, subscriptions, support campaigns, publications and other legitimate business activities.<sup>33</sup> The PKK also engaged in criminal activities to raise money, including drug trafficking, arms and human smuggling, robbery, extortion, and money laundering.<sup>34</sup>

Considering the fact that the PKK has developed such a complex system of networks and institutions, as well as various sources of funding both at the domestic and international levels, it was no surprise that Turkey's ability in weakening the PKK militarily in the late 1990s did not bring an end to the PKK insurgency. The PKK came out of its fight against the Turkish security forces militarily weak, but far from destroyed. The PKK's decision to withdraw the majority of its armed militants from Turkey turned out to be an opportunity for the organisation to regroup, consolidate, and restructure itself, rather than the starting point of a process of disarmament. After Öcalan's imprisonment, the PKK maintained a low-key presence in northern Iraq, avoided violence, and mainly focused on rebuilding and

strengthening its organisational structure. It mainly carried out activities that would contribute to spreading awareness about the Kurdish question such as civil campaigns for the right of education in the mother tongue and for the recognition of Öcalan as the representative of the Kurds.<sup>35</sup> During this period, Öcalan continued to lead the PKK from prison. Öcalan's regular meetings with his lawyers and family members provided him with the opportunity to maintain his control over the PKK. Through these meetings, Öcalan conveyed his ideas and messages to the PKK's presidential council, which was in charge of the organisation in Öcalan's absence.<sup>36</sup>

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey also helped keep the PKK as a relevant organisation in Kurdish politics.<sup>37</sup> Through its elected representatives both in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi-TBMM*) and at the municipal level, first the Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi-DEHAP*) and then the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi-DTP*) after the former's closure by the Constitutional Court, pursued a determined political struggle for the Kurdish political and cultural rights in the country.

In sum, from the very beginning, the PKK was designed as more than a group of armed people and it evolved into a complex organisation over the years. This process accelerated even more after Öcalan's arrest in 1999. As a result, Turkey's achievement in weakening the PKK militarily in the late 1990s did not mean much in the presence of an insurgent organisation with an advanced system of networks and institutions both in Turkey and abroad. Even after its military defeat, the PKK continued its propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising activities. It continued to play a significant role in Kurdish identity formation and mobilisation, and when it felt that the time was ripe, the PKK once again began to attack civilian and military targets in Turkey.

In the late 1990s, another major reason behind Turkey's failure to end the PKK insurgency despite its military victory over the organisation was the continuing public support for the PKK among the Kurds. Winning the loyalty and support of the people is a key element of low intensity conflicts. However, Turkey failed to win over the support of many of its Kurdish citizens in the struggle with the PKK. Turkey's counterinsurgency campaign was marked mainly by coercive means, and the consistent use of this approach ended up alienating the local Kurdish population. As a result, although the Turkish security forces defeated the PKK militarily in the late 1990s, the organisation's support base remained intact. Recruitments as well as logistical and financial support for the PKK continued even in the aftermath of Öcalan's arrest. This enabled the PKK to rebuild its strength in a short period of time and restore its attacks against the Turkish state from the mid-2000s onwards.

Throughout the low intensity conflict between 1984 and 1999, many Kurds in the Southeast lost their loved ones, were forced to leave their villages, and experienced human rights violations. A new generation of Kurds grew up in the state of emergency conditions and became highly politicized and even radicalized.<sup>38</sup> In the early 1990s, there were reports coming from the Southeast about people who disappeared under detention and never came back. Moreover, there were several news about increasing torture and ill-treatment towards the local people and burning down of forcibly evacuated villages.<sup>39</sup> These kinds of experiences and especially the security forces' involvement in human rights violations contributed to an increase in popular support for the PKK.<sup>40</sup> Öcalan even stated in the early 1990s that 'if Jezireh [Cizre] is ours today, it is half thanks to our efforts. But the other half, Turkey presented to us on a silver platter'.<sup>41</sup> A Parliamentary Commission, formed to investigate the unsolved murders of the early 1990s, explicitly reported that the security forces' operations in the Southeast, which sometimes involved extrajudicial activities, increased public distrust towards state authorities and contributed to the growth of the PKK.<sup>42</sup>

Despite being aware of the worsening image of the state in the Southeast, the Turkish governments and the security forces failed to win the loyalty and support of the local Kurdish population. As a matter of fact, the state actors did develop a number of policies to gain the trust of the Kurdish citizens in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the Turkish governments made a significant level of investment in the Southeast, mainly through the Southeast Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi-GAP*), which included plans for a number of hydroelectric plants and irrigation systems on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The policy makers expected that as the state provided the essential services and increased the living standards in the southeast region, the Kurdish people's incentives to join the PKK would decrease. However, relentless discussions about the actual connection between prosperity and terrorism prevented these kinds of socio-economic policies from becoming a major component of Turkey's counterinsurgency strategy. During these years, in addition to those who supported the pursuit of socio-economic policies in dealing with the PKK, there were also several political actors in Turkey who argued that economic prosperity would lead to the accumulation of more money in the hands of the PKK.<sup>43</sup>

Turkey also attempted to address the political dimension of the PKK insurgency under the leadership of Turgut Özal (Prime Minister, 1983-1989, and President, 1989-1993, of Turkey). During his tenure, Özal took a number of important steps such as removing the ban on the public use of the Kurdish language, improving relations with the Iraqi Kurdish leaders and initiating secret indirect talks with the PKK leader Öcalan. However, these initiatives stopped all of a sudden when Özal died of a heart attack in 1993. In 1996, although Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan tried to follow a similar path by establishing indirect contacts with Öcalan in order to reach a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question, he could not gather enough support from the other major political actors in the country.

In the later years of the counterinsurgency campaign, the Turkish security forces embarked on a public relations campaign in the Southeast where they became more careful about avoiding harm to the civilians, played an important role in establishing schools and medical facilities, and tried to solve the local problems in cooperation with the civilian authorities.<sup>44</sup> However, winning the loyalty and support of the Kurds never became the primary concern of the Turkish civilian and military authorities throughout the counterinsurgency campaign. Nor were these policies developed as part of an overall political objective regarding the resolution of the Kurdish question. Instead, Turkey mainly developed a security perspective towards the PKK and tried to end the insurgency by fighting the PKK militants both in Turkey and across the Iraqi border.

In fact, after Öcalan's arrest in 1999, Turkey acquired a tremendous opportunity to put an end to the PKK insurgency by looking at the conflict from a non-military perspective and developing the necessary policies that would help win the trust of the Kurdish population. During this period, the PKK had been militarily defeated and at Öcalan's request, it had declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrawn most of its armed units outside of Turkey's borders. Now that the PKK was far from posing a military threat to Turkey, the time was ripe for the Turkish policy makers to address the political, social, and economic dimensions of the PKK insurgency and to take the essential steps for the resolution of the Kurdish question. However, the coalition government in office between 1999 and 2002, which was composed of the center left Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti-DSP*), ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-MHP*), and the center right Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi-ANAP*), once again failed to focus on formulating policies that would win the support of the Kurdish people. The coalition partners all thought that the PKK was 'defeated and dissolving',<sup>45</sup> and thus what to do with the PKK in the post-terror phase was not their main policy concern. In fact, even if the members of this coalition

government had wanted to take the necessary steps to deal with the Kurdish question after the PKK's military defeat, they probably would not have achieved much because these political parties had very different ideological and programmatic approaches to the Kurdish question.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it was very difficult for them to unite behind policies to deal with such a politically sensitive issue. Moreover, these political parties had to deal with two major earthquakes in 1999 and a serious financial crisis in 2001. Therefore, the government's focus shifted towards these urgent matters and away from the PKK terrorism, which was in a state of relative calm after 1999.

As a result, from the late 1980s onwards, it was possible to see the growing public support for the PKK in a variety of different occasions in the region. These included local demonstrations where the security forces ended up directly clashing with the people and Nevruz celebrations, which turned into violent mass protests of the PKK sympathisers where tens of people were killed and many more were arrested.<sup>47</sup> In various occasions, thousands of people gathered in the Southeast waving PKK flags, holding the portraits of Öcalan and shouting 'Long live our leader Apo'.<sup>48</sup> In 1989, although the PKK formulated a 'Compulsory Military Service Law' in order to pressure the Kurds to join the insurgency, from 1991 onwards, it had to stop the recruitment of new members temporarily because of the organisation's inability to provide proper training for the large numbers of incoming militants.<sup>49</sup>

The growing appeal of the pro-Kurdish political parties in the region was another indicator of increasing popular support for the PKK. While the first pro-Kurdish political party, People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*-HEP) received 4.1 per cent of the votes in the 1991 national elections, its successor People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*-HADEP) received 4.2 per cent in the 1995 elections and then 4.8 per cent of the votes in the 1999 elections. In the 2002 national elections, DEHAP received 6.2 per cent of the

votes.<sup>50</sup> Although these numbers seem quite low for a nationwide election, the pro-Kurdish political parties actually won the majority of the votes in several southeastern provinces. The municipal elections brought similar results. HEP boycotted the 1994 municipal elections with the argument that the state's policies made it very difficult for this political party to carry out a free campaign.<sup>51</sup> However, in 1999, HADEP won 37 municipalities in the local elections. Among these 37 provinces, in three of them located at the most southeastern end of Turkey, namely Diyarbakır, Batman and Hakkari, HADEP received 62.5 per cent, 57.2 per cent, and 56.1 per cent of the votes, respectively.<sup>52</sup>

This outlook did not change much in the aftermath of Öcalan's arrest. During this period, recruitments to the PKK continued unabated. In fact, according to an analysis based on the PKK's recruitment cohorts killed between 2003 and 2008, a great majority of the militants joined the organisation between 1999 and 2003.<sup>53</sup> When Öcalan was arrested on 15 February 1999, the PKK sympathisers organized protests in a number of European countries. Some of the radical PKK supporters even occupied Greek diplomatic missions because Öcalan was captured when he was leaving the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya on that day.<sup>54</sup> This support and active recruitment of new members helped the PKK remain as a major actor of the Kurdish movement and maintain its capacity to fight after 1999.

All in all, the PKK's ability to create and maintain a significant level of public support among the Kurds and the Turkish governments' inability to win the loyalty and support of its Kurdish citizens throughout the counterinsurgency campaign turned out to be another major factor that gave way to the PKK's quick recovery after the organisation's defeat and Öcalan's arrest in the late 1990s. Despite the PKK's weakened military status during this period, the organisation continued to be perceived as a defender of the Kurdish rights in the region. While Kurds continued to fill up the PKK ranks, many PKK sympathisers showed their support for the organization through their votes for the pro-



Kurdish political parties that they saw as the legal representative of the PKK.<sup>55</sup> The persistence of the PKK's support base significantly contributed to the organisation's ability to keep its relevance and popularity alive in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, the PKK managed to restore its strength and renew its commitment to violence against Turkey from 2004 onwards when it thought that the domestic and regional circumstances were in its favor.

Turkey has been struggling with the PKK insurgency for more than 30 years. Despite Turkey's ability in weakening the PKK militarily in the late 1990s, this did not bring an end to the PKK insurgency. It is possible to point out two major reasons why this was the case. First, although the PKK was never only a group of armed men, but rather a well-developed insurgency movement from the very beginning, the Turkish governments failed to perceive the real nature of the PKK insurgency and thought that the application of military force would be sufficient to incapacitate the movement. This failure may have resulted from a number of different factors, such as the Turkish policy makers' mistake of equating the first PKK acts with the Kurdish rebellions of the early Republican years or the political influence of the Turkish military in the national security policy making process. Regardless of the main cause of this misperception, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the country's counterinsurgency policy mainly revolved around fighting the PKK militants both in Turkey and across the Iraqi border. In the end, Turkey's counterinsurgency campaign was effective in weakening the PKK militarily. However, it left the organisation intact to a great extent.

Second, throughout the struggle with the PKK between 1984 and 1999, Turkey failed to win the loyalty and support of its Kurdish citizens. Although the Turkish governments and security forces developed a number of policies in order to alleviate the grievances of the Kurds, these policies never became a key concern of Turkey's counterinsurgency strategy. As

a result, despite the PKK's military defeat in the late 1990s, the PKK's support base among the Kurds remained almost untouched. This opened way for uninterrupted recruitments for the PKK and increasing votes for the pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey even after the imprisonment of Öcalan.

All in all, Turkey's military defeat of the PKK by the late 1990s did not have a long-lasting impact on the fate of the insurgency because first, the PKK's institutional structure as well as its domestic and international networks remained almost untouched after 1999, and second, the PKK's public support among the Kurds continued. This situation allowed the PKK to recover in a short period of time and begin to attack civilian and military targets in Turkey when it thought that the domestic and regional circumstances were once again right. In this process, especially the regional developments worked to the advantage of the PKK. The United States' war in Iraq brought the Kurds to the forefront of international politics as one of the most important American allies in the war.

Turkey's story appears to be on the side of those studies, which emphasize the key place politics occupies in counterinsurgency. Although a number of works in the literature highlight the role of military force and coercion in dealing with insurgencies, such as David Galula (1964) or more recently Merom (2003) and Luttwak (2007), the majority of the studies reiterate the idea that counterinsurgency has to have a clear political goal and it is mainly a political endeavour. Turkey's experience provides further support for the latter approach.

Today it is still possible to observe the emphasis on the use of military force and coercion in counterinsurgency. Discussions about Sri Lanka's defeat of the Tamil Tigers and the outcomes of Russia's wars against the Chechens constitute important representatives of this understanding. However, the Turkish experience demonstrates that although the use of military force works in counterinsurgency, it may not have a long-lasting impact. As long as

the non-military elements of the insurgency continue their activities and as long as the insurgents have popular backing, it is hard to talk about the ultimate end of an insurgency movement. The insurgency may seem to disappear now, but it may come back in new shapes and forms in the future.

The current state of Turkish politics presents a mixed record about the extent to which Turkey has drawn lessons from its past mistakes. On one hand, there are reasons to be optimistic. In recent years, there is an increasing number of academics, bureaucrats, and policy makers who emphasize the idea that the use of military force alone cannot constitute an effective struggle against the PKK. Even several high-ranking military officers now accept that nonviolent methods should be considered in the struggle with the PKK.<sup>56</sup> In 2005, the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan acknowledged, for the first time, that the state made mistakes in its handling of the Kurdish question. Moreover, in 2009 the AKP government initiated the policy of the Kurdish opening, which aimed at ending the PKK violence and resolving the Kurdish question through peaceful means. Although this process created a nationalist backlash in its early stages, the AKP embarked on a new peace and resolution process in 2013, which envisaged building a process of dialogue with the jailed PKK leader Öcalan, the PKK's declaration of a cease-fire, and the government's implementation of a number of reforms that would improve the quality of democracy and extend the fundamental rights and freedoms in the country.

Nevertheless, there are also reasons to be pessimistic. As of now, the future of the ongoing peace process in Turkey is uncertain. While the AKP government has been accusing the PKK of not properly carrying out its promise of a complete withdrawal from the Turkish soil, the PKK has been accusing the government of not implementing the reforms that would further democratize Turkey. Moreover, the civil war in Syria further complicated Turkey's

Kurdish question. The emergence of Saleh Muslim's Democratic Union Party (PYD) as a key actor in the Syrian civil war and its control over several towns in the Turkish Syrian border created important repercussions for Turkish policy makers. The PYD's control over a significant portion of northern Syria created fears in the minds of the Turks that a new Kurdish autonomous region, similar to that of northern Iraq, has been emerging. Turkish policy makers are concerned that this newly emerging autonomous Kurdish region may encourage parallel demands in the predominantly Kurdish areas of Turkey.

Another reason for pessimism is that despite the progress achieved since the 1980s, Turkish governments still fail to take some key steps to win the loyalty and support of the Kurdish citizens. The failure of the state institutions to uncover the Uludere incident, where 34 young Kurdish smugglers were accidentally killed by air strikes of the Turkish armed forces along the Turkish-Iraqi border and the ongoing KCK trials, where several pro-Kurdish activists, academics, and politicians have experienced long detention terms, show that Kurdish grievances have not been fully addressed, yet. The results of the recent municipal elections on March 30, 2014 also revealed that the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi*-BDP) won a significant percentage of the votes in many cities and towns of the Southeast, where the population is predominantly Kurdish. While the BDP won 4.6 per cent of the votes cast nationally, it was quite successful in the Southeast having acquired control of 80 municipalities. Throughout the election campaign, the BDP expressed its determination to work towards building democratic autonomy in local administrations. In the post-election period, the BDP's newly elected Diyarbakır mayor Gültan Kışanak raised new questions about the concept of democratic autonomy with her suggestion that the Diyarbakır municipality should receive a share from the region's oil revenues.

The latest debates and developments in Turkey surrounding the Kurdish question show that Turkey is still far from reaching a public consensus about how to resolve the

Kurdish question through peaceful means. The regional developments involving Syria also make the Kurdish question more complex. However, the increasing recognition in Turkey that it takes more than the use of military force and coercion to deal with the PKK effectively is a significant progress in the history of Turkey's Kurdish question.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ü. Özdağ and E. Aydınli, 'Winning a Low Intensity Conflict: Drawing Lessons from the Turkish Case', in E. Inbar (ed.), *Democracies and Small Wars* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 101-121.

<sup>2</sup> For a few examples, see G. S. Aktan and A. M. Köknar, 'Turkey' in Y. Alexander (ed.), *Combating Terrorism: Strategies of Ten Countries* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2002), pp. 260-98; M. Van Bruinessen, 'Turkey, Europe and the Kurds After the Capture of Abdullah Öcalan', in M. Van Bruinessen (ed.), *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism versus Nation-Building States* (İstanbul: Isis Press, 2000), pp. 1-10; S. E. Cornell, 'The Kurdish Question and Turkish Politics', *Orbis* Vo. 45, No. 1 (2001), pp. 31-46.

<sup>3</sup> Here, it should be noted that the arguments of this paper only account for why Turkey's military defeat of the PKK in the late 1990s did not mean much for the fate of the PKK insurgency. It does not attempt to explain the reasons why the PKK decided to put an end to its unilateral ceasefire in 2004 and revived its armed struggle against the Turkish state from the mid-2000s onwards. While the first question focuses on the causes of the PKK's ability to survive as an insurgent organization in spite of its experience of military defeat, the second question can be answered only by achieving a deep understanding of the domestic and regional developments that took place in the early 2000s, such as the increasing salience of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP*) in the Southeast and the changing expectations of the Kurds in the region within the context of the United States' war in Iraq. For a few examples on the latter subject see G. M. Tezcür, 'When Democratization Radicalizes: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (2010); P. Tank, 'Analysis: The Effects of the Iraq War on the Kurdish Issue in Turkey', *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2005); M. Rubin, 'A Comedy of Errors: American-Turkish diplomacy and the Iraq War', *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (2005).

<sup>4</sup> This system allowed the participation of the Kurdish militias from the Southeast in the struggle with the PKK.

<sup>5</sup> Ü. Özdağ, *Türkiye'de Düşük Yoğunluklu Çatışma ve PKK* (Ankara: Üç Ok Yayınları, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Birand, *Apo ve PKK* (İstanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Lieutenant General (R) S. İlhan, *Terör: Neden Türkiye?* (Ankara: ASAM Yayınları, 2002), pp. 306-7.

<sup>8</sup> National Security Council Press Briefings, available at <http://www.mgk.gov.tr/basimbildirileri.html>.

<sup>9</sup> F. Altaylı, 'Pişmanlık Yasası Gerek' [Repentance Law is Necessary], *Hürriyet*, 27 November 1997; 'Apo Zeka Özürlü' [Apo is Mentally Retarded], *Hürriyet*, 3 December 1997.

<sup>10</sup> G. H. McCormick, cited in Colonel G. Wilson, 'Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and the Direct Approach', *Military Review* (November-December 2006), pp. 40-1.

<sup>11</sup> For examples, see R. Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 1964); D. Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 1964); G. Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); E. N. Luttwak, 'Dead End: Counter-Insurgency Warfare as Military Malpractice', *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. 314, No. 1881, (February 2007), p. 7, available at <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2007/02/0081384>.

<sup>12</sup> Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Luttwak, 'Dead End: Counterinsurgency Warfare as Military Malpractice

<sup>16</sup> For examples, see R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966); J. Paget, *Counter-Insurgency Campaigning* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967); F. Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacemaking* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971); I. Arreguin-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict', *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001); I. Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New

York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); I. Arreguin-Toft, 'How to Lose a War on Terror: A Comparative Analysis of a Counterinsurgency Success and Failure' in J. Angström and I. Duyvesteyn (eds.), *Understanding Victory and Defeat in Contemporary War* (London: Frank Cass, 2007); J. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); K. Cragin and P. Chalk, *Terrorism & Development: Using Social and Economic development to Inhibit a Resurgence of Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> I. Arreguin-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars', pp. 123-4.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Wilson, 'Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation'.

<sup>19</sup> Mao Tse-tung, cited in M. Fitzsimmons, 'Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (June 2008), p. 340.

<sup>20</sup> Mao Tse-tung, cited in Michael Fitzsimmons, 'Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy', p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> H. Cemal, *Kürtler* (İstanbul: Doğan Kitapçılık, 2003), p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Kekîtiya Demokrat-PYD*).

<sup>24</sup> The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistane-PJAK*).

<sup>25</sup> A. H. Akkaya and J. Jongerden, 'The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through Breaks?' in M. Casier and J. Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> The KCK is an umbrella term based on Öcalan's idea of democratic confederalism. In the 2000s, Öcalan promoted his project of a form of 'self-government of local communities' for the Kurds. This self-government would be 'organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. See A. H. Akkaya and J. Jongerden, 'Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14 (2012), pp. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed account of ideological training in the PKK, see A. K. Özcan, 'The Nature and Resource Field of the Kurdish Resistance in Turkey: A Dormant Resource', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (May 2005), pp. 391-406.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in M. P. Roth and M. Sever, 'The Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 30, No. 10 (August 2007), p. 906.

<sup>29</sup> S. Çağaptay, 'Europe's Terror Problem: PKK Fronts Inside the EU', *PolicyWatch* 1057 (December 2, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> A. J. Lyon and E. M. Uçarer, 'Mobilizing Ethnic Conflict: Kurdish Separatism in Germany and the PKK', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (November 2001), pp. 933-6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 933.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Roth and Sever, 'The Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 30, No. 10 (August 2007), p. 906.

<sup>33</sup> International Crisis Group, *Turkey: The PKK and A Kurdish Settlement*, Europe Report no. 219 (11 September 2012), 13; Roth and Sever, 'The Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate', p. 906.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 907.

<sup>35</sup> Akkaya and Jongerden, 'Reassembling the Political', p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Akkaya and Jongerden, 'The PKK in the 2000s', pp. 146-7. During this period, the changes in the PKK did not take place without problems. A number of PKK members decided to leave the PKK and establish a new political party, named the Patriotic Democratic Party (*Partiya Welatparez Demokratik-PWD*). However, they failed to occupy an influential place in the Kurdish movement. Moreover, in the aftermath of Öcalan's arrest, many PKK members felt disappointed about their leader's new discourse emphasizing his hope of Kurds and Turks living in a democratic Turkey. These people left the PKK thinking that this discourse was in serious conflict with the PKK's original goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state. However, this did not create an existential crisis for the PKK. Approximately 3000 armed PKK members stayed in the organization and remained loyal to Öcalan. At the end of the day, it did not sound bad "when Öcalan talked about democratic rights, about Kurdish-language education, and about being treated as equal citizens." See Marcus, *Blood and Belief*.

<sup>37</sup> Marcus, *Blood and Belief* 292-3.

<sup>38</sup> H. Barkey and G. Fuller, 'Turkey's Kurdish Question: Critical Turning Points and Missed Opportunities', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 1997); H. Yavuz, 'Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey', *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 13-4.

<sup>39</sup> İ. İmset, *The PKK: A Report on Separatist violence in Turkey (1973-1992)* (Ankara: The Turkish Daily News Publications, 1992), p. 240.

<sup>40</sup> A. Marcus, 'City in the War Zone', *Middle East Report* 189 (July-August 1994), p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in C. Kutschera, 'Mad Dreams of Independence: The Kurds of Turkey and the PKK', *Middle East Report* 189 (July-August 1994), p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> M. van Bruinessen, 'Turkey's Death Squads', *Middle East Report* 199 (April-June 1996), p. 22. During this period, although the PKK also used violence against the Kurdish villagers—especially until the late 1980s—this did not discredit the organization because despite its mistakes, the PKK was considered 'as the only organization with the will and strength necessary to pursue Kurdish goals of self-determination'. See Marcus, 'City in the War Zone', p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous author, 'The Case of the PKK: History, Ideology, Methodology, and Structure (1978-99)', *Ankara Papers* 9 (2004), pp. 55-56.

<sup>44</sup> Özdağ and Aydınli, 'Winning a Low Intensity Conflict', 115; Cornell, 'The Kurdish Question in Turkish Politics', p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Akkaya and Jongerden, 'The PKK in the 2000s', p. 149.

<sup>46</sup> These differences resulted from the fact that this coalition government was composed of an ultranationalist, a center-left, and a center-right political party. The MHP had a security perspective about the Kurdish question and it was only open to discussing the problem of PKK terrorism without referring to its political, social, and economic dimensions. On the other hand, the DSP had a regional perspective and this political party was labeling the most important problem of Turkey as the Southeast issue rather than the Kurdish issue. The DSP Chairman Bülent Ecevit was of the opinion that it was possible to stop the PKK violence only through ending the feudal structure of the southeast region with land reform and economic investment. The ANAP leader Mesut Yılmaz was the only political leader in the government who was explicitly talking about the ethnic roots of the PKK insurgency. Yılmaz was proposing that further democratization of Turkey through policies such as granting cultural rights to the Kurds would greatly contribute to ending the PKK violence and eventually resolving the Kurdish question.

<sup>47</sup> Nevruz refers to the Kurdish New Year. According to a mythical story, Kurds consider Nevruz the day of their liberation from tyranny. However, Nevruz is actually celebrated in places like Anatolia, Iran, Central Asia and Caucasus around 21 March as the arrival of the spring. It is known to be of Persian origin. For a detailed analysis on Nevruz, please see Lerna K. Yanık, '“Nevruz” or “Newroz”? Deconstructing the “Invention” of a Contested Tradition in Contemporary Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (March 2006), p. 285.

<sup>48</sup> A. K. Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 201-3. Also see A. K. Özcan, 'The Vacillating PKK: Can it be Resurrected?' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 107-124.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>50</sup> The reason why there are different pro-Kurdish political parties participating in subsequent elections is that soon after these political parties were established, they were closed by the Turkish Constitutional Court due to their connections with the PKK.

<sup>51</sup> A. Güney, 'The People's Democracy Party' in B. Rubin and M. Heper (eds.) *Political Parties in Turkey*, (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 122-137.

<sup>52</sup> A. Güneş-Ayata and S. Ayata, 'Ethnic and Religious Bases of Voting' in S. Sayarı and Y. Esmer (eds.), *Politics, Parties & Elections in Turkey* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), pp. 137-156.

<sup>53</sup> G. M. Tezcür, 'When Democratization Radicalizes: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (2010), p. 780; also see N. A. Özcan and E. Gürkaynak, *Kim Bu Dağdakiler?* TEPAV, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> M. Van Bruinessen, 'Turkey, Europe and the Kurds After the Capture of Abdullah Öcalan', in M. Van Bruinessen (ed.), *Kurdish Ethnonationalism versus Nation-Building States* (İstanbul: The ISIS Press, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 292.

<sup>56</sup> See F. Bila, *Komutanlar Cephesi* (İstanbul: Detay Yayıncılık, 2007); H. J. Barkey, 'Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan', United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 237 (May 2010).