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INSURGENCY AND COUNTER- INSURGENCY IN TURKEY

The New PKK

Spyridon Plakoudas



Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Turkey

PRAISE FOR *INSURGENCY AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY* IN *TURKEY*

“The Kurdish armed forces aligned with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Syria have received an unprecedented attention in the past few years, owing to their fighting prowess, effectiveness against the Islamic State, and progressive ideals. While much has been written on this hitherto unknown group, the insurgency from which the PYD gets its inspiration, the PKK in Turkey, is what this book aspires to examine. The PKK, formed by a small group of college students in the 1970s, has survived, grown, and evolved into one of the most powerful non-state actors in the Middle East. In this fresh and much needed look at the PKK, Spyridon Plakoudas offers an insightful analysis of one of the most complicated armed insurgencies in the world. This is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the complex nature of the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East.”

—Mehmet Gurses, *Associate Professor of Political Science,
Florida Atlantic University, USA*

“This timely and important, pithy monograph successfully identifies the origins, course, and possible outcome of the long-running, asymmetrical struggle between Turkey and the PKK.”

—Michael M. Gunter, *Professor of Political Science,
Tennessee Technological University, USA*

“Kurdish Question became a regional issue, pulling Turkey into a protracted war with an uncertain future. This alarming but accurate conclusion makes *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Turkey: The New PKK* a must-read. With its insightful narrative and rich data, it is a guide in the convoluted field of Middle East studies.”

—Cengiz Çandar, *Distinguished Visiting Scholar, Stockholm University
Institute for Turkish Studies, Sweden*

“In this topical book on the ongoing conflict between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Spyros Plakoudas caters for many audiences. Practitioners will appreciate his practical findings and may even apply them profitably to issues of their own particular concern; theoreticians will relish his robust theoretical analysis; and laypeople will get many an insight into one of the world’s deadliest insurgencies.”

—Costas Koliopoulos, *Associate professor of International Politics
and Strategic Studies, Panteion University, Greece*

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The New PKK

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*I dedicate this book to the three women in my life: my mother,
my sister and my love*

FOREWORD

I am very much delighted to write this foreword for Dr. Spyridon Plakoudas' great work on Turkey's prolonged conflict with the PKK which has claimed over 40,000 lives so far. In this book, Dr. Plakoudas dwells on the latest period (which he calls the "second phase") with a particular focus on the current stage of the Turkey vs PKK conflict.

In this book, Dr. Plakoudas sheds light on the principal issues related to peace and war in irregular warfare with Turkey as a case study. He applies the general theories of asymmetric conflicts (aka low-intensity conflict, irregular warfare and insurgency) in his analysis on the Turkey vs PKK conflict and draws conclusions on a never-ending inquiry of how protracted conflicts can end.

The approaches that Dr. Plakoudas provide in this book are crucial in one particular way. That is, the outcome of war in counter-insurgency (COIN) is never mutually exclusive—either victory or defeat. In fact, an immediate military victory and control of the territory does not guarantee a conflict's termination in the best interests of the counter-insurgent as it is evident in most COIN campaigns in recent years and in the past. Therefore, "military victory" in its classical definition manifests a critical incompatibility with irregular warfare given the true nature of a COIN campaign. This is owed to the fact that the twenty-first century displays vital differences in the character of war wherein a purely military concept of victory in the traditional sense is not as relevant as it once was. And this is now the case mostly because the lines between the trinity of war (the state, people and the army) as defined by the famous war philosopher Carl von Clausewitz's have been greatly blurred. The belligerents now

include non-state and sub-state actors and the underdogs (insurgents, transnational terrorists or however you call them) utilise asymmetry and indirectness. In this regard, Dr. Plakoudas manifests a novel approach by questioning the “success” of the counter-insurgent, given that the term victory (in its traditional sense) is not applicable in contemporary conflicts. Thus, he seeks answers to the question whether there is a success in Turkey’s COIN efforts after 2004 given that the Turkish Armed Forces clearly defeated the PKK before the 2000s.

It is commonly known that the conflict of the Kurdish minority with the Turkish government over the control of the south-eastern regions of Turkey dates back to the Ottoman Empire. Over the last two centuries, especially since the inception of the Turkish Republic, approximately 25 Kurdish uprisings have been recorded in south-eastern Anatolia. The early years of the Turkish Republic, in particular, were marked by serious Kurdish rebellions. However, the ongoing conflict with the Kurdish separatist militants of the PKK poses the most significant threat to the Turkish Republic. The campaign by the PKK, which was set up in 1978 and officially started to wage its armed campaign in 1984, not only has claimed a high death toll of over 40,000 people but has also incurred costs in the economic, socio-political and socio-psychological realms. The PKK’s armed campaign has changed over time—from a guerrilla insurgency throughout the eastern region of Turkey to urban terrorism in later years. After a cease-fire was declared by the PKK following the capture of their leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, violence declined for several years. However, since 2004 there has been a resurgence in the attacks by the PKK due to various reasons and the conflict evolved into a more complex nature not only owing to the asymmetrical and indirect modus operandi of the PKK’s hybrid warfare but also because the context (within which the conflict occurs) changed and new conditions and influential actors were produced when the Syrian Civil War started in 2011. Therefore, Dr. Plakoudas’ strategic analysis of the last 13 years of the conflict (which he calls the “second phase” and when a new PKK emerged) is timely and important.

Although it is a single case study, Dr. Plakoudas has devoted in his research a considerable focus on multiple dimensions of asymmetrical conflict (e.g. peace negotiations and political discourse analyses) and employed a multi-disciplinary approach (i.e. political science, strategic studies and International Relations [IR]). Using qualitative data, Dr. Plakoudas examined how this course of events (from a low-intensity conflict to direct peace negotiations and then all-out war) can be explained from the angle of strategic studies and International Relations. What do these annals of war reveal about actors (e.g. PYD) and processes (e.g. de-Kemalization)

in Turkey since 2003? What general conclusions about Strategy and International Relations (e.g. the peace negotiations between the insurgents and governments) can be drawn from this case?

Dr. Plakoudas' book boasts important findings. While these findings are clearly applicable to the case of Turkey vs PKK conflict, they offer lessons for other states engaged in an asymmetrical conflict against insurgencies. First, he argues that the conflict was ripe for resolution in 2013 due to a "mutually hurting stalemate" where neither side in the conflict could exterminate (in a military sense) one another with their available means. Turkey's engagement in a resolution process, initially through a "track-two diplomacy" with the PKK delegation in Oslo and subsequently a publicly shared Kurdish Opening (aka the "National Fraternity Project"), was based on this condition for political compromises between states and non-state actors in intra-state conflicts. Secondly, Dr. Plakoudas notes that President Erdoğan, one of the strongest leaders in Turkey's political history, offered far more to the cause of peace in Turkey-PKK conflict than any of his predecessors ever since Kemal Atatürk. Thirdly, he underlines the failure, mismanagement, ill-treatment and erroneous approaches adopted by both sides (Turkey and the PKK) for a successful peace-making initiative. He even underpins the PKK's strategic errors stemming from its organisational culture and entrenched war-fighting mentality after almost four decades of war. Fourthly, Dr. Plakoudas succinctly clarifies what went wrong towards a negotiated peace settlement and attributes responsibility to both sides and draws valuable lessons for other cases. He incorporates the role and impact of the non-state regional actors involved in the conflict due to the regional developments, in particular the Syrian Civil War, that culminated in power shifts between the conflicting parties. Last but definitely not the least, he specifically underlines the mistakes that both parties committed while engaged in a peace process (e.g. multiple actors for the PKK side, no legal framework that reassured any step towards an officiated settlement, spoiler attacks that irritated the mainstream public in Turkey during the resolution process, etc.).

Overall, Dr. Plakoudas' work strongly suggests that peace-making for protracted conflicts requires not only a strong political will and motivation but also a carefully designed roadmap, an institutionalised resolution process (in both the content and conduct of it), timely actions in concert with the public's perceptions and, on most occasions, isolation of the political concerns and populist approaches from the technical administration of a resolution process.

In all, Dr. Plakoudas' book is not only an important contribution to the literature of the Turkish and Middle Eastern studies, but also a strong reminder of the limitations of mismanaged resolution processes in protracted irregular wars in the intra-state context. I do hope his effort in this book contributes to peace around the world in general and to an end to violence in Turkey in particular.

November 2017

Mustafa C. Ünal

PREFACE

I decided to author a monograph about the Kurdish Question in Turkey two years ago—in August 2015. Just one month before, in July 2015, the peace process between Turkey and the PKK (the separatist Kurdish insurgents) had collapsed and the country had plunged into a cycle of violence not witnessed for many years. I could not but wonder how and why a “solution process” (çözüm süreci), which was heartily welcomed by Kurds and Turks alike, just fell apart.

As a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Macedonia (Greece) for the academic year 2015–2016, I started to write my first thoughts about the failed peace talks. After all, I was no stranger to such topics. My PhD thesis studied another communist insurgency, the Greek Civil War (1946–1949)—though from a different angle (the question of victory in counter-insurgency). However, developments in Turkey and the Middle East with regards to the Kurdish Question unfolded at such speed that my topic was quickly rendered quite obsolete: a failed barricade war by the PKK (August 2015–April 2016), a failed coup d’ état in July 2016 and a cross-border operation a month later. My dissertation on the subject was completed in August but I did not try to publish it.

Thereafter, I decided to adopt a “wait-and-see” tactic: when the Operation “Euphrates Shield” ended in May 2017, I determined to author a monograph which used my post-doctoral dissertation as a basis—yet from a different angle this time. I decided thus to examine the second phase of the PKK’s insurgency (2004–2017) on the whole—not a specific topic within a specific timeframe (e.g. the “solution process” from 2013 to 2015). I did not select this timeframe by chance.

First of all, this time period (2014–2017) witnessed numerous fluctuations in the course and outcome of the insurgency: defeat of the PKK in 1999, a unilateral ceasefire by the PKK between 1999 and 2004, a limited war between 2004 and 2011, an all-out war in 2012, a peace process between 2013 and 2015, an all-out war between 2015 and 2017 and now a stalemate (?). Secondly, the end of Operation “Euphrates Shield” in May 2017 signals the shift of the war’s locus *outside* Turkey—in Syria and, to a lesser degree, Iraq. The second phase of the PKK’s insurgency is, in other words, an ideal case study for all academics with a focus on the outcomes of insurgencies (i.e. a military victory, a stalemate or a peace treaty) and the spill-over of insurgencies (i.e. the spread of war to neighbouring countries).

In the summer of 2017, I devoted myself to the completion of this monograph lest the developments in the Middle East on the Kurdish Question (which usually unfold at the speed of light) should overtake me and my research once again. Umberto Eco used to say “there is no news in August”. However, he was disproved. In August, the Syrian Kurds advanced towards Deir ez-Zor in the wake of the city’s liberation by Assad and captured the major oil fields north of the Euphrates River. In late September, the Iraqi Kurds voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence in a contentious referendum, whereas in early October, Turkey intervened once again in Syria—partly to avert a “terror corridor” by the PYD from Afrin to the Mediterranean Sea. With ISIS in its death throes, the Kurds in Syria and Iraq strive to secure their gains vis-à-vis their hostile neighbours (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria).

For that reason, this monograph races against time. This monograph endeavours not only to examine in a critical way the intermittent Turkey vs PKK war but also to estimate (with a fair modicum of certainty) whether the conflict will end in stalemate or not. Only one thing is certain: that the Kurdish Question will be at the forefront of the news media for the next few months, if not years. And maybe then a new book will be needed to light up the new facets of the internationalised Kurdish Question.

Dubai, UAE
November 2017

Spyridon Plakoudas

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ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or Justice and Development Party
BDP	Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi or Peace and Democracy Party
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or Republican People's Party
DTK	Demokratik Toplum Kongresi or Democratic Society Congress
DTP	Demokratik Toplum Partisi or Democratic Society Party
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi or Peoples' Democratic Party
HPG	Hêzên Parastina Gel or People's Defence Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JÖH	Jandarma Özel Harekat or Gendarmerie Special Operations
KCK	Koma Civakên Kurdistan or Kurdistan Communities Union
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi or Nationalist Movement Party
MIT	Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı or National Intelligence Organization
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or Kurdistan Workers' Party
PÖH	Polis Özel Harekat or Police Special Operations
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat or Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TAK	Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan
TKK	Türk Kara Kuvvetleri or Turkish Land Forces
TSK	Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri or Turkish Armed Forces
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
YDG-H	Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi or Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or People's Protection Units
YPS	Yekîneyên Parastina Sivîl or Civil Protection Units



CHAPTER 1

Why Study the PKK versus Turkey Conflict

Abstract This chapter explains in brief the rationale behind a monograph on the intermittent war between the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkey since 2004: first of all, this fluctuating war (i.e. defeat of the PKK in 1999, ceasefire between 1999 and 2004, limited war between 2004 and 2011, all-out war in 2012, peace negotiations between 2013 and 2015, all-out war between 2015 and 2017 and now stalemate?) is indeed an ideal case study for specialists in insurgency and counter-insurgency (COIN), and, secondly, this intermittent conflict is still an ongoing war with a critical peripheral dimension (i.e. Iraq and Syria). This chapter argues that this book will use the insights of the disciplines of International Relations and Strategy to offer an up-to-date and critical account of the Turkey vs PKK conflict.

Keywords Insurgency • Turkey • AKP • PKK • Kurdish summer

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, insurgency (a variant of irregular warfare) undoubtedly represents the most prevalent type of war.¹ With the exception of the (still uninhabited) Antarctica, insurgencies can be currently recorded in every continent—even in Oceania where a low-intensity insurgency rages in Papua since 1962. However, the great majority of these insurgencies are not new: they appeared many years ago and several of them will not end anytime soon.

How does an insurgency end? In general terms, an insurgency can end in three ways: (a) an outright (military) victory for the insurgents or the state authorities (e.g. the Greek Civil War and the Chinese Civil War) (b) a negotiated peace settlement (e.g. the Guatemalan Civil War) or (c) a stalemate (e.g. the War in Donbass).² Despite claims to the contrary,³ the majority of insurgencies between 1815 and 2010 ended in defeat for the insurgents.⁴ Indicatively, Turkey suppressed four uprisings of the Kurds (1925, 1927–1930, 1937–1938 and 1984–1999) in the twentieth century without suffering any territorial losses whatsoever.⁵

Although, according to recent surveys, the most durable peace settlements of such intrastate wars do not occur through accords on the negotiation table but victories on the battlefield,⁶ military victory over an insurgency does not always translate into permanent peace since space and time allow the insurgents to regroup and reclaim any lost ground.⁷ Turkey stands out as a typical case yet again. After its conclusive defeat in 1999, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or PKK) surprisingly started a new war within Turkey in 2004. The PKK, however, declared a ceasefire in 2013 after an earnest appeal by its jailed leader—Abdullah Öcalan. A “solution process” (çözüm süreci) to the chronic Kurdish Issue was inaugurated by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey's charismatic and authoritarian leader since 2003) which, nonetheless, ended in failure in mid-2015 after several ups and downs. Since July 2015, a vicious war between the PKK and Turkey has been raging unceasingly that wrecked south-east Turkey and spilled over to neighbouring Iraq and Syria.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This monograph aspires to answer whether the counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy of Turkey since 2004 can be considered a success or not and, in addition, predict whether the second phase of the PKK's insurgency will end in victory, negotiated settlement or stalemate. Ergo, this monograph will investigate the “peace-and-war” state of affairs from 2004 until 2013, the “solution process” from 2013 to 2015 and the “war on terror” from 2015 onwards—including Operation “Euphrates Shield” in northern Syria (August 2016–March 2017) and the failed coup d'état (July 2016). Consequently, this monograph touches upon the following crucial debates about insurgencies: conflict resolution through peace negotiations or military victory, sustainability of the peace settlements and relapse to violence, as well as strategy and tactics in irregular warfare (insurgency/COIN).

The significance of this war must not be underrated. This separatist insurgency represents the latest and biggest one in a series of unsuccessful Kurdish rebellions ever since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. In recent years, this insurgency acquired a distinct peripheral dimension since the PKK expanded its activities in Iraq and Syria in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Since the outbreak of the war in Syria and its spill-over in Iraq, the Kurds in Syria, Iraq and Turkey capitalised on these opportunities to campaign militarily for their autonomy or independence and, as a consequence, the conflicts in the three countries developed into communicating vessels: the acts of the Kurds in one country decisively impact on the policy of the Kurds in the other two countries.⁸ For that reason, the “solution process” between the PKK and Turkey possessed a special weight. Not only these peace talks represented the most serious attempt by the two parties to resolve this protracted conflict in a peaceful way and “drain” once and for all a wellspring of violence and instability in Turkey; they additionally promised to usher in a “new era” in the relations between Turkey and the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. Unsurprisingly, the collapse of the peace talks in July 2015 dangerously escalated the old conflict inside Turkey and expanded it outside the country’s borders as Operation “Euphrates Shield” demonstrates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This new monograph aspires to examine the Kurdish Question of Turkey from the angle of Strategy and International Relations (not from a historical viewpoint) and answer whether this protracted insurgency (ongoing since 1984 with several intervals) will end in the near future, how and why. Several works by experts on the Kurdish Question of Turkey have been published in the last few years—though almost all study this issue from the perspective of History or Politics.

Indicatively, the monumental work by Michael Gunter⁹ examines the continuity and change in the Kurdish Question of Turkey but devotes a few lines to the peace negotiations (2013–2015) and none to the renewed war (2015–present) between Turkey and the PKK. The insightful opus by Emre Caliskan and Simon Waldman on “New Turkey” under the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi or AKP)¹⁰ offers a wonderful summary of the origins, course and outcome of the peace talks (2013–2015); this opus, however, approaches the conflict from the angle of History, not International Relations and Strategy, and, therefore, does not interpret the dynamics of

irregular warfare in a critical way.¹¹ The collective work edited by Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef devotes a whole section to Turkey's Kurdish Issue. Experts on the subject such as Michael Gunter¹² and Henri Barkey¹³ contributed chapters which examine in depth the evolution of the intertwined Kurdish and PKK Questions under the AKP's rule; however, they do not use the concepts of Strategy and International Relations to capture the dynamics of insurgency and COIN. Two chapters by two Turkish writers, Ali Sarihan¹⁴ and Güneş Murat Tezcür,¹⁵ combine History with International Relations to interpret the strategy of the PKK and Turkey in its proper context of Strategic Studies; however, these two chapters do not extend their analysis beyond 2010 and 2014 respectively. And last but not least, the insightful journal articles by Mustafa Çosar Ünal¹⁶ use the insights of International Relations and Strategy to interpret the strategies of Turkey and the PKK in a critical and comprehensive way. However, they do not interpret the policies of other actors (e.g. the Halkların Demokratik Partisi or Peoples' Democratic Party [HDP]), and they do not extend their analysis to the new "war on terror" since July 2015.

Hence, this monograph aspires to answer the "why" and "how" questions about the insurgency of the PKK—not just examine the "when" and "who" issues. In contrast to other academics who approach the Kurdish Question in Turkey as historians and/or political scientists, this new monograph will combine the insights of Strategy and International Relations (from strategy and tactics in irregular warfare to peace negotiations between state authorities and insurgents) with the data from qualitative research (secondary sources such as books and articles and interviews with experts) to achieve two inter-related objectives: first of all, assess the current state of affairs and predict the future course of this war and, secondly, draw general conclusions on how protracted conflicts (such as the one in Turkey) can end and how.

STRUCTURE

This monograph includes several chapters in a mixed thematical and chronological order. The first chapter examines the theory and practice of insurgency and COIN in depth and provides the conceptual basis for the analysis of the PKK's insurgency.

The second chapter surveys how and why the PKK rose like a phoenix from its own ashes in 2004 and how the AKP responded to this new wave of violence with a mixture of repression and clandestine peace negotiations (e.g. the "Oslo Peace Process").

The third chapter investigates the “solution process” per se and examines in a critical way the actors and procedures involved all the way from the “farewell to arms” by Öcalan in 2013 to the declaration of a new “war on terror” by Erdoğan in July 2015.

The fourth chapter examines the conflict between the PKK and Turkey from July 2015 to March 2017 with a special reference to the failed coup d'état in July 2016 and Operation “Euphrates Shield” and their wider implications for the Kurdish Question.

The conclusion reviews the current state of affairs, predicts the future course of the insurgency and offers conclusions about strategy in irregular warfare and peace negotiations in civil wars.

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CHAPTER 2

The “War of the Flea”

Abstract This chapter provides the conceptual basis for the analysis of both the course and outcome of the PKK’s separatist insurgency since 2004. Accordingly, this chapter examines the major themes in strategy for the insurgents and counter-insurgents (e.g. enemy-centric vs population-centric approach) and analyses the possible outcomes of such irregular wars (a peace treaty, a military victory or a stalemate) in a critical and comprehensive way.

Keywords Insurgency • Counter-insurgency • Military victory
• Peace accord • Stalemate

This term originates from the seminal work of Robert Taber on insurgency. “Analogically, the guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog’s disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough—this is the theory—the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anaemia without ever having found anything on which to close its jaws or to rake with its claws”. Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (London: Paladin, 1970), 27–28.

IRREGULAR WARFARE: MANY NAMES, ONE NATURE

What is insurgency?¹ Well, academics cannot even agree on the name of this type of conflict—more so its own characteristics. Guerrilla warfare, low-intensity conflict, asymmetrical war, civil conflict, and so on are just a few of the 20 (!) known terms for insurgency over the centuries.² This plethora of terms should be credited to two main factors: first, the prevailing conditions in each historical cycle (e.g. insurgencies in the nineteenth century were dubbed as “small wars” to distinguish them from the “big wars” among the Great Powers in Europe)³ and, secondly, the underlying political expediencies in each case—since “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” as the old saying argued.⁴

Insurgency is, in effect, an offshoot of irregular warfare which is often confused with terrorism by policy-makers and scholars alike.⁵ But why? Because the insurgents routinely employ terror (e.g. suicide bombings) as a *means* to achieve their (*political*) *ends*, and the governments demonise the insurgents as terrorists for doing so.⁶ However, armed irregulars should not be characterised as insurgents or terrorists on the basis of their tactics. An insurgency amounts to a prolonged struggle by a mass (armed) movement which, first and foremost, requires the active (or at least silent) support of the population and, secondly, revolves around the question of political control (i.e. the overthrow of a government and the implementation of political reforms or the secession from a country).⁷

In sharp contrast, terrorism stands for indiscriminate violence perpetrated by a militant group without necessarily the support or sympathy of the population and, sometimes, in the name of irrational objectives—for example, to trigger the Apocalypse.⁸ Nevertheless, policy-makers and scholars cannot always agree on how to define armed irregulars. For example, should Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) be designated as a guerrilla movement, a terrorist group or a hybrid threat? The need for proper distinctions is more than ever necessary in today’s complex security environment.⁹ The PKK is yet another typical example. Although the PKK has been labelled a terrorist group by Turkey and its allies and a sizable section of the academic community due to a repeated use of terrorist tactics,¹⁰ the party in reality intermittently wages since 1984 a separatist insurgency in the name of Marxist–Leninist ideology and Kurdish nationalism.¹¹

In fact, popular support and legitimacy is the litmus test for an insurgency.¹² Mao Tse Tung, the well-known warrior–scholar, coined a witty metaphor to capture the essence of this type of war. He likened the people to *water* and the rebels to *fish* to highlight the insurgents’ need for popular

support.¹³ That begs another question: how do people act in such wars? Usually, an active minority supports the insurgents and another active minority supports the government while the majority of the population (i.e. the “silent majority”) remains neutral until the end of the conflict. Since the insurgents and the governments exercise “overlapping sovereignties” over the people, the non-combatants often experience violence by both sides as the weakest side of the equation.¹⁴

STRATEGY IN INSURGENCY: SUBVERTING THE REGIME

Despite industrious efforts by academics to create a typology of insurgencies,¹⁵ such endeavours are not very reliable since each irregular conflict occurs within its own unique context.¹⁶ Indeed, even alike insurgencies erupt, evolve and end differently. For example, insurgencies in Malaya and Vietnam in the 1950s were orchestrated by the same actors (i.e. communists) in the name of the same political ends (i.e. liberation from colonialism)—but they evolved differently. There is, nonetheless, one feature common in every insurgency: *asymmetry*. And this asymmetry between the insurgents and governments relates to the capabilities, modus operandi and organisational structure of the adversaries.¹⁷ In general, the four keys to victory for the insurgents involve time, space, legitimacy and (inside/outside) support.¹⁸

The Element of Time

Time is a crucial aspect of insurgency. This type of conflict is a marathon, not a sprint, and usually ends after years—if not decades!¹⁹ For example, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (or FARC) laid down its weapons in 2016 after 52 (!) years. Owing to the asymmetry in power, the insurgents utilise time to exhaust their opponents and/or re-organise after defeat. For example, the PKK re-launched its armed campaign in 2004—five years after the capture of its leader and defeat. In contrast, a government races against time because a protracted conflict costs dearly in resources and (popular) support²⁰; a government that “runs out of time” will be toppled by internal or external actors—sometimes violently.²¹ For example, four governments succeeded one other during the Greek Civil War until the army and palace intervened in the country’s political affairs. But how can the insurgents utilise time best? Mao argued that the insurgents should prepare for a protracted conflict and adopt a gradualist strategy depending on the shifting balance of power.²² In fact, Mao seized power after 23 long years of war.

The Element of Space

Space is another integral element of irregular warfare. Wide and rough terrain can counter-balance a government's overwhelming superiority in numbers and firepower due to an unfavourable force-to-space ratio.²³ The case of the International Security Assistance Force (or ISAF) in Afghanistan is quite revealing. Insurgencies can, nonetheless, flourish even in small regions (e.g. an island) under special circumstances—as the case of the Cuban Revolution highlights. Nowadays, the cities have developed into the loci of power for insurgents as they accommodate the vast majority of the population and resources in every country. Technological developments (e.g. lethal anti-tank weaponry) render urban warfare relatively cheap and productive for the insurgents²⁴—as the cases of the Syrian Civil War, the Chechen Wars or the Iraqi Insurgency show. This move is, however, a double-edged sword: cities can be both safe heavens and death traps for the insurgents.²⁵ The cases of the First Battle of Grozny (1994–1995) and the Second Battle of Fallujah (2004) exemplify how a city can evolve into an impregnable castle and a cemetery respectively for the insurgents.

The Need for Support

Internal and external support, without doubt, amounts to a key facilitator for an insurgency. Outside support, in particular, is considered a force multiplier for the insurgents²⁶—if not the catalyst for their victory.²⁷ Outside support manifests in various forms: from diplomatic support to military aid (weapons, logistics and even troops). The mujahedeen, for example, triumphed over the Red Army in Afghanistan, thanks to the constant support by the Islamic World, the USA and Pakistan. As Mao pointedly remarked, an insurgency requires the (internal) support of the population. Indeed, the insurgents can win even if the majority of the population does not actively support them, but they cannot prevail if most of the people oppose them.²⁸ Indicatively, Che Gevara was killed in Bolivia within a few months after the start of the insurgency because the peasantry did not actively back him.

The Need for Legitimacy

The insurgents try to win over the “hearts and minds” of the population through “positive action” (e.g. met out justice) and propaganda (i.e. a convincing “narrative”).²⁹ For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan present

their insurgency to the religious Afghan society as a campaign against the “infidel occupiers” and strictly penalise corruption and crime. Although conventional wisdom dictates that the insurgents do not exercise violence against civilians lest they should alienate them, time and time again insurgents have employed violence to enforce their rule on the population.³⁰ The PKK, for example, has notoriously used violence and coercion to impose its authority on Turkey’s Kurds.³¹ The insurgents try to legitimise their armed struggle in the eyes of the public opinion inside and outside the country; thus, they underplay their own wrongdoings and overstate their opponents’ misconduct in the hope of an intervention by outside powers at their side. The Greek War of Independence is a very typical case. The insurgents publicised the atrocities of the Ottoman Empire and, thanks to the support of the Philhellenes, “convinced” the Great Powers to intervene at their side.

STRATEGY IN COIN: STABILISING THE REGIME

Well, how could a government prevent or prevail over an insurgency? Despite the assiduous efforts of various strategists to standardise the optimum practices in COIN, no panacea for insurgency has been invented.³² Two schools of thought in COIN could be, nonetheless, discerned on the basis of their *modus operandi*: an *enemy-centric* and a *population-centric* approach.

According to the advocates of the enemy-centric school of thought, the insurgents are nothing more than criminals and terrorists and, for that reason, they must be annihilated. In other words, the government must try to “kill” the “fish” in Mao’s terminology. Unsurprisingly, this approach is notoriously associated with a propensity for mass violence.³³ For example, Nazi Germany adopted such an approach towards the various insurgencies in occupied Europe during World War II and employed mass violence in a rather indiscriminate and, eventually, counter-productive way.

The partisans of the *population-centric* approach express a diametrically opposite opinion and advice on COIN. They contend that the government should endeavour to “drain” the “water”—in other words, separate the insurgents from the population.³⁴ This school of thought is divided into two variants: one that emphasises the use of *coercion* (on a vast scale if necessary) and another one that insists on the need for *tailored reforms* and *targeted violence*.³⁵

According to the first variant, this irregular conflict is a “contest of coercion” between a legitimate government and a violent minority. Therefore, the state authorities should “out-compete” this minority in violence and punish the population that sides with this minority.³⁶ The French, for example, used mass violence in the Algerian War of Independence to “out-compete” the National Liberation Front (or FLN) and “pacify” Algeria. On the other hand, the second variant uses trust, not fear, to isolate the people from a mass (political) movement and its military wing (aka the insurgents). Thus, state authorities should use a balanced mix of reforms and campaigns which will both address the sources of popular rancour and deny the insurgents access to and control over the people.³⁷ The British, for example, adopted such a policy in the Malayan Emergency with utter success.

The population-centric theory is indeed the new mantra in the policy-making circles in Washington and Brussels; however, this “magic formula” did not eventually achieve the desired effects in Afghanistan and elsewhere.³⁸ Besides, mass violence against civilians has been crowned (under specific conditions) with success in COIN.³⁹ In particular, forcible population transfers have proven a catalyst for victory in COIN⁴⁰ as the cases of the Greek Civil War and the Malayan Emergency show.

How should, then, a government act to avoid a defeat? Irregular warfare entails various principles, paradoxes and imperatives.⁴¹ However, these principles should be used as a guide and not as a gospel and, therefore, a government must always implement a situation-dependent policy.⁴² In general terms, a successful COIN strategy broadly contains five components: political, diplomatic, economic, ideological and military. How these components are used depends on various parameters—from inter-departmental antagonisms to the personality of the leader. One must always remember strategy does not remain static during the course of a conflict—even an irregular one. In fact, the “*reciprocal nature* of all action in war” suggests that the policies of the government interact with the actions of the insurgents and, by extension, evolve over time.⁴³

The Need for Good Governance

Many theorists and practitioners of COIN stressed the imperative of “good governance”⁴⁴ as targeted reforms and just governance usually increase the legitimacy and popularity of governments.⁴⁵ But “good governance” is not associated necessarily with a Western-type liberal democracy—as the USA discovered painfully in Iraq in the 2000s.⁴⁶ Sometimes

the quality of the leadership, not the type of the regime, is far more important in COIN,⁴⁷ and a government should understand this axiom and desist from imposing its own standards of political legitimacy.⁴⁸ For example, in Afghanistan the elders and imams play a pivotal role in the governance of villages—as they did for centuries. In south-east Turkey, as well, the so-called aghas (the Kurdish feudal lords) still administer whole villages through their private armies.⁴⁹ And when an outside power intervenes in an intra-state conflict in support of a beleaguered third government, this power should not imperiously attempt to dictate their preferred political system to their allies but strive to improve the quality of governance at local and national levels in co-operation with them.⁵⁰ Yet, in the absence of other parameters (e.g. security, welfare, etc.), “good governance” alone cannot win such a war.⁵¹

The Factor of Outside Support

Since several scholars claim that outside support for the insurgents can tilt the scales of war in favour of the insurgents,⁵² a government ought to sever the ties of the insurgents with the outside world.⁵³ A government usually endeavours to achieve this via diplomacy (e.g. a direct appeal to the insurgents’ allies and intervention by international organisations). An intensive public relations campaign⁵⁴ and constant support from powerful allies/patrons⁵⁵ can decisively turn the tide of war in the government’s favour. For example, Turkey successfully isolated the PKK in the 1990s regionally and internationally owing to its persuasive counter-narrative and powerful allies (most notably, the USA). However, diplomacy occasionally is not enough and operations inside the territory of the insurgents’ foreign supporters are needed.⁵⁶ Turkey, for instance, threatened Syria with war in the 1990s unless the latter ceased support for the PKK. Conversely, a beleaguered government can appeal to its external allies for aid and even intervention in its support. For example, the pro-Western regime in Saigon invited Washington to intervene militarily against the twin threats of the Vietcong and Vietminh in the 1960s.

The Aspect of Welfare

A government should protect the welfare of its citizens in this intra-state war and, most importantly, redress the socio-economic wellsprings of the insurgency in a competent way.⁵⁷ Such initiatives range from humanitarian

relief to better public services to the population.⁵⁸ For example, the Greek monarchist regime won the “battle for the stomachs” of the population and, thus, the war against the communist insurgency in the 1940s. Sometimes the external allies of a beleaguered government may offer aid (both financial and technical) to support these welfare policies.⁵⁹ However, external aid without a fair measure of transparency will only increase state corruption and, therefore, augment the appeal of the insurgents⁶⁰—as the USA discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s.

The Need for a Good Narrative

According to a decorated veteran of COIN in the Cold War, Sir Frank Kitson, insurgency is “primarily concerned with the struggle for men’s minds”.⁶¹ Truly, this war is a contest for the people’s “hearts and minds”.⁶² A government should propagandise a “narrative” that the population understands and supports—a “story” that even an illiberal individual can comprehend and associate with.⁶³ Turkey, for instance, demonised the PKK as a “Zoroastrian” or “Armenian” terrorist group and effectively decreased its appeal among the conservative and religious Kurds. In addition, a government should try to win the favour of the international audience and vilify its opponents.⁶⁴ For example, Egypt strives to do that with regards to the insurgency in Sinai. The government should additionally broadcast a “narrative of victory” to boost the morale of the soldiers and citizens in this protracted war; however, the government should not generate unrealistic expectations of a swift victory to the public opinion.⁶⁵ For example, the Tet Offensive in 1968 shattered the Johnson Administration’s “narrative of victory” that the USA was winning the war in South Vietnam against the Vietcong.

The Imperative of Security

The security policy, as the word itself implies, aspires to offer security to the people and, therefore, demonstrates to the people that the government is a far better guarantor of security and stability than the insurgents.⁶⁶ Since this conflict is waged among the people, a government ought to use the military tool with caution to avoid civilian casualties. In summary, indiscriminate violence⁶⁷ and disrespect for the rule of law (as well as the local norms and beliefs) tend to greatly minimise the popularity and legitimacy of a government.⁶⁸ For example, the mass violence by Nazi Germans turned away even those peoples of the Soviet Union who had greeted them as liberators in 1941.

The security policies of a government usually undergo an evolution: first, absorption of the harsh lessons of COIN (often after years of failed measures), secondly, adaptation to the new tactical conditions (sometimes via substantial revisions of the military manuals) and, last but not least, experimentation with a new *modus operandi*.⁶⁹ The British, for example, underwent this uphill process and prevailed over the communist insurgents in Malaya. In COIN, just like conventional warfare, intelligence is king: without reliable intelligence in real time, victory cannot be easily achieved. This quality of information, however, presupposes cordial relations with the population and an understanding of the human terrain.⁷⁰ The failure of the ISAF in Afghanistan was owed partly to the failure of the international coalition to understand the inner workings of the traditional Afghan society and offer a fair measure of security to the villagers. In general, the government and its armed forces must be willing to adapt and evolve⁷¹ and, in particular, the armed forces must become a learning organisation.⁷²

But security is not practised in a vacuum. As Clausewitz himself cautioned, the military policy must always cohere with the political objectives determined by the country’s leadership and the latter should direct the war—not the generals.⁷³ This “unity of effort”, the coordination of military and non-military actions, is a key theme in the works of renowned COIN strategists.⁷⁴ The French, for instance, delegated every authority to their generals during the nineteenth century’s “pacification” campaigns in Africa and Asia. In general, other variables (e.g. the type of a regime⁷⁵ and its military culture⁷⁶) may exert a heavy influence on a government’s security policy. Unsurprisingly, the British school of thought on COIN was critically different from the Bolshevik (Soviet) one.

OUTCOMES OF INSURGENCIES: THE THREE-WAY RULE

As explained in the introduction, an insurgency can end in three possible ways: (a) a (military) victory for the insurgents or the state authorities (e.g. the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in 2009), (b) a peace deal (e.g. the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and the Irish Republican Army (or IRA) in Northern Ireland in 1998) and (c) a stalemate (e.g. the deadlock in the War in Donbass).⁷⁷

Military Victory

The issue of military victory in irregular warfare always puzzled scholars and policy-makers: how can a military victory be defined accurately? Despite repeated trials,⁷⁸ success in irregular warfare cannot be quantified

and measured with absolute certainty as in positive sciences. Insurgency amounts to one of the most “elastic types of war in terms of defeat” since space and time allow the insurgents to regroup and reclaim any lost ground.⁷⁹

Victory for the insurgents can be partial or complete: partial when the insurgents achieve only a part of their political objectives (occasionally through a propitious peace settlement) and complete when they accomplish their mission (e.g. the overthrow of a government or expulsion of the foreign invaders).⁸⁰ The mujahideen in Afghanistan, for example, scored a major victory in 1989 when the Red Army withdrew from the country. In contrast, the Kurdish insurgents under Barzani achieved only a partial victory when the Iraqi central government agreed to a peace settlement in 1970. Usually, insurgents require five (maximum nine) years to overwhelm a government, whereas a government requires between 12 and 15 years to overcome an insurgency.⁸¹

The defeats of governments (particularly the powerful ones) by insurgents receive far more publicity than their victories.⁸² Indicatively, the defeat of the USA in Vietnam overshadows in terms of publicity the victory of the Philippines (with the support of the USA) over the Hukbalahap Rebellion in 1954. An in-depth analysis of military history since 1815, however, demonstrates that most of the insurgencies have in reality ended in defeat for the insurgents.⁸³ How can victory for the counter-insurgents be measured? The return to the status quo ante bellum appears to be rather unlikely in such type of wars.⁸⁴ Victory for the governments manifests in three main forms: total victory (i.e. the extirpation of the insurgents), temporary victory (i.e. the defeat but not the complete destruction of the insurgents) and sufficient victory (i.e. the only temporary neutralisation of the insurgents’ military capacity).⁸⁵ The rout of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in 2009 is a standard case of a total victory; the defeat of the PKK by Turkey in 1999 is a typical case of a temporary victory; the victories of Israel over Hamas since 2008 are representative cases of a sufficient victory.

Peace Settlements

Peace negotiations represent another “exit strategy” for belligerents in irregular warfare. In fact, peace talks present opportunities for the insurgents and state authorities—as well as risks. Such talks can, first and foremost, potentially convince the leadership of the insurgents to renounce

violence. Secondly, peace parleys can strengthen the position of the moderate factions within an armed group and pave the way for a peace settlement.⁸⁶ On the other hand, peace talks recognise a militant group as a legitimate political actor and, thus, create the negative impression that violence could reward militants with official recognition. In addition, peace talks can potentially injure the legitimacy of a government (especially vis-à-vis a fiercely nationalist public opinion or the relatives of the insurgents’ victims) and even provoke a violent response from pro-government die-hards.⁸⁷ Last but not least, peace negotiations may be instrumentally used by a militant group to regroup and counter-attack as soon as the conditions ripen.⁸⁸

How do peace parleys commence? Usually, military failures and leadership transitions (i.e. the rise in power of moderate leaders) provide a window of opportunity for the initiation or acceleration of a peace process between the insurgents and state authorities.⁸⁹ In addition, a “shock incident” (i.e. a catastrophic incident such as the collapse of an external ally)⁹⁰ and a “mutually hurting stalemate” (i.e. a deadlock in military terms for both sides) can create a “period of ripeness”⁹¹—a propitious situation for peace parleys between the insurgents and state authorities. Sometimes, the mediation of internal or external actors (e.g. individuals or even states) can contribute positively to the initiation of a peace process.⁹² In general, the probability of a civil war’s termination through peace negotiations substantially increases when a civil war is prolonged.⁹³ And ethnic conflicts (e.g. wars of secession) tend to last longer due to the high levels of violence and hatred among ethnic groups that they generate.⁹⁴

However, the pathway to peace is literally mined with various potentially explosive quandaries. First of all, state authorities usually encounter two inter-related issues whenever they initiate a peace dialogue with insurgents: the problem of “delegation” (the confusion about whether the state’s interlocutor can in reality act on behalf of the insurgents)⁹⁵ as well as the problem of “information asymmetry” (the absence of reliable information about the inner workings of the militant group).⁹⁶ In addition, peace negotiations are usually obstructed by the “divisibility issues” (the inability of the two belligerents to divide the stakes over which they quarrel),⁹⁷ the acts of “spoilers” (the dissidents who undermine the peace talks with their provocations)⁹⁸ and, most notably, the reluctance of both sides to sincerely commit to the peace parleys—especially if one side had reneged on a peace deal in the recent past.⁹⁹ Occasionally, both sides undertake military action during the negotiations to improve their bargaining status

and dictate the peace terms from a position of strength.¹⁰⁰ The issue of an insincere commitment to a peace process could be, nonetheless, resolved with two crucial provisions: guarantees by third parties and power-sharing accords between the two warring sides.¹⁰¹

Since the 1980s, a pattern can be discerned: while before the 1980s the majority of the conflicts were resolved through victory on the field of battle, after the 1980s the number of the negotiated terminations of insurgencies has been steadily rising.¹⁰² Since 1945, 12% of insurgencies were settled peacefully in favour of the state authorities, 7% in favour of the insurgents and 20% in a balanced way.¹⁰³ For instance, the peace deal between Guatemala and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) in 1996 amounted to a defeat for the insurgents after a 36-year bloody civil war, the peace treaty between Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005 was a victory for the insurgents in the Second Sudanese Civil War and the peace accord in 2005 between Indonesia and the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) was a balanced conclusion of the "Aceh Disturbance".

The viability, however, of the peace settlements between state authorities is not always assured and relapse to violence has been observed in over 40% of the cases in recent years.¹⁰⁴ For example, the peace agreement between the Εθνικό Απελευθερωτικό Μέτωπο (ΕΑΜ) and the Greek state authorities in 1945 collapsed exactly 12 months after its signature. In fact, the peace deals that follow after a decisive military victory tend to last longer.¹⁰⁵ The survivability of peace settlements is especially difficult in ethnic civil wars (such as the one between Turkey and the PKK) due to the intense violence and radicalisation among the ethnic groups.¹⁰⁶ The terms of the peace settlement, the role of third parties, the internal politics in each side and the military balance in the post-war state of affairs determine in effect whether a peace deal will be stable.¹⁰⁷

Stalemate

Not every insurgency ends in a military victory or peace treaty. In fact, several insurgents degenerate into stalemates.¹⁰⁸ For example, the Yemeni Civil War represents a typical case of a stalemate since the Saudi-led regional coalition cannot completely vanquish the Houthis despite the fact that it possesses the upper hand in the conflict. These stalemates often occur due to the interventions of external actors.¹⁰⁹ The intervention of Moscow in support of the left-wing Afghan government in 1979 against the mujahideen prolonged the survival of a corrupt and ineffective

government (which would have otherwise collapsed) until 1992. In 2013 and 2015, the interventions of Iran and Russia respectively saved the regime of Assad from utter ruin and produced a stalemate in the Syrian Civil War. The stalemates are usually followed by peace treaties or military victories within a few years.¹¹⁰ For example, the stalemate in favour of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka collapsed in 2006 when Colombo initiated an offensive against the insurgents; by 2009, the insurgency had been quelled. Some other stalemates, however, last far longer. For example, the Western Sahara Conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front has been raging for over 47 years despite repeated peace rounds.

NOTES

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The Kurdish “Phoenix” (2004–2012)

Abstract This chapter argues that two critical developments in 2003 can explain the rise of the PKK from its own ashes like a phoenix in 2004: the Iraq War and the AKP Phenomenon in Turkey. However, the new wave of violence differed critically from the vicious war in the 1990s. The chapter argues that both parties were pre-occupied with the consolidation of their influence inside the country vis-à-vis other contenders (the Kemalists for the AKP/the Hizmet and AKP for the PKK) and, therefore, a *limited war* unfolded which was repeatedly interrupted by ceasefires and (open and covert) peace talks. In 2012, the Syrian Civil War acted as a catalyst and the low-intensity conflict escalated into an all-out one.

Keywords Conflict relapse • Democratic/Kurdish opening
• Oslo peace process • Limited war

THE KURDISH PHOENIX (2004–2009)

The PKK was defeated conclusively in 1999 and several scholars argued that the party would never recover.¹ Contrary to these ominous predictions, the PKK rose like a phoenix from the ashes after just five years and, in July 2004, the PKK resumed its armed struggle. Surprisingly enough, the PKK’s declaration of war occurred at a time when the new Islamist government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan started its prolonged reign over

the country's politics.² Why did the PKK start the war anew at a time when Erdoğan was welcomed internationally as a reformer and democrat?³

The seismic developments in the Fertile Crescent impelled the PKK to resume its armed struggle. In 2003, the USA and its allies overthrew Saddam Hussein and a de facto independent Kurdish state (i.e. the Kurdistan Regional Government) emerged in northern Iraq—the first such state after the ill-fated Treaty of Sevres in 1920.⁴ The PKK capitalised on this opportunity to establish its military bases in northern Iraq (in mount Qandil) with impunity. A cross-border operation by the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri or TSK) against the PKK's general headquarters would probably cause a diplomatic incident with the USA—the patron of the Iraqi Kurds.⁵ In addition, the new Islamist government in Turkey (a liberal force in its early days in power) appeared to be concentrated on its struggle against the omnipotent Kemalist establishment and, therefore, the PKK capitalised on the AKP's preoccupation with this struggle in order to apply immense pressure.⁶

In other words, the PKK capitalised on two variables (time and space) to rebuild its military forces and reorient its political ideology. After a thorough “lifting”,⁷ the party abandoned its earlier maximalist and monolithic ideas (e.g. separatism and atheism) and embraced the idea of “democratic confederalism” of its jailed leader.⁸ However, the PKK could not yet offset two critical disadvantages: first, the PKK could no longer count on the support of other states (e.g. Syria) and its support amongst the Kurdish minority was evenly challenged by the AKP⁹ and, secondly, the PKK was characterised as a terrorist group by the European Union (EU) and the USA. Nonetheless, the PKK would capitalise on the resurgent Kurdish nationalism after the Iraq War to reassert its authority over the Kurds of Turkey.¹⁰

After all, in its initial years in office the AKP did not undertake any affirmative action in the Kurdish Question apart from abolishing the state of emergency (olağanüstü hal or OHAL) in south-east Turkey. The unsolved murders and disappearances of thousands of villagers and the forced internal displacement of millions more in the 1990s throughout south-east Turkey¹¹ (a by-product of the “dirty war” against the PKK¹²) were not adequately addressed by the AKP. Rather, the Hizmet (the movement of the self-exiled imam Fetullah Gülen) and the AKP were much more preoccupied with the infiltration of the conservative and religious section of Turkey's Kurds in the name of political Islam.¹³ In other words, the AKP did not address the “grievances” (within the context of the “greed vs grievances” debate¹⁴) of Turkey's largest ethnic minority.¹⁵

However, the conflict did not reach the pre-1999 levels—partly because the PKK was a shadow of its previous self and partly because the PKK intended to use this new wave of violence as a leverage to extract a political settlement from the AKP. By 2010, the PKK mustered no more than 5000 men and women at arms (half of whom operated inside Turkey)—far less than the 25,000 guerrillas in 1993. Partly due to low numbers and partly due to a new doctrine by Murat Karayilan, the PKK adopted a new *modus operandi* which emphasised raids on isolated outposts near the frontier with Iraq and Iran (usually in the evening to avoid enemy aircrafts) by small teams of battle-hardened guerrillas.¹⁶ Eventually, the PKK did achieve its objective as Erdoğan assumed initiatives for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish Issue. These actions cemented the perception of the PKK as the advocate of the rights of Turkey’s Kurds among this ethnic minority.¹⁷

THE “DEMOCRATIC OPENING” (2009)

At a party rally in Diyarbakir (the unofficial “capital” of Turkey’s Kurds) in 2005, Erdoğan for the first time recognised the “Kurdish Problem” in Turkey and stated before the ecstatic audience that “more democracy, not more repression” would solve the Kurdish Issue.¹⁸ In 2009, Erdoğan decided to assume an audacious initiative in the direction of a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish Issue Abdullah Gül, one of the co-founders of the AKP and 11th President of Turkey from 2007 to 2014, supported such a policy. But why then and not earlier? The timing of this initiative must be ascribed to two core reasons: the AKP’s bigger freedom of manoeuvre over the state and the PKK’s rising pressure.¹⁹

In 2009, the PKK-affiliated Democratic Society Party (i.e. Demokratik Toplum Partisi or DTP) won 96 municipalities in south-east Turkey (including the key mayorship of Diyarbakir) in the local elections—a big blow to the AKP.²⁰ Since by 2009 the AKP (in cooperation with the Hizmet) had subdued the once all-powerful Kemalist army²¹ and, ergo, possessed freedom of manoeuvre, Erdoğan decided to address the Kurdish Question. The peace initiatives by Öcalan and Özal in the 1990s were opposed by the nationalist parties and the omnipotent army²² or the mysterious “deep state” (*derin devlet*).²³

However, Erdoğan did not intend to involve the PKK. According to the viewpoint of Erdoğan and the other policy-makers, the PKK and the Kurdish Question were *separate issues*. In the subsequent peace initiatives, Erdoğan and the AKP adopted a new narrative which emphasised the brotherhood of Turks and Kurds (mainly on a religious basis) and divided

the Kurds into “good” (i.e. those Kurds who lived peacefully and, maybe, voted for the AKP) and “bad” (i.e. those who fought under the banner of the PKK or joined the Koma Civakên Kurdistan [KCK]).²⁴ However, as Erdoğan would discover later, the PKK and the Kurdish Question are *separable* but not *separate*. Of course, the PKK does not represent the whole Kurdish minority but it commands the support of a substantial section of the minority.²⁵ The PKK, after all, resurrected a dormant Kurdish nationalism in Turkey in the 1980s.²⁶

In April 2009, the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire as a gesture of good will and in summer, Erdoğan officially inaugurated the *Kurdish Opening* (Kürt açılımı) and later diluted it into the *Democratic Opening* (Demokratik açılım süreci).²⁷ The AKP enacted new laws that improved the cultural rights of the Kurds (e.g. universities were allowed to organise special courses on Kurdish and Zazaki) and abolished certain stern provisions of the anti-terrorist legislation (e.g. children would not be indicted as terrorists).²⁸ Soon, Erdoğan included the PKK into the *Kurdish Opening* and opened, through the National Intelligence Organisation (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı or MIT), a channel of communication with “Qandil” (i.e. the basis of the PKK’s military junta in Iraq) and “Imralı” (i.e. the island prison of Öcalan). But when in October 2009 the “peace caravan” of 34 PKK fighters²⁹ was welcomed by the Kurdish parties and population jubilantly, the AKP—under pressure from the nationalist public opinion and political parties—manifested a knee-jerk reaction. The police arrested 414 top members of the DTP and, in December that year, the Constitutional Court closed down the DTP (just like its predecessors in the 1990s)³⁰ on account of its ties with the PKK.³¹ The clashes between the PKK and TSK resumed and peace seemed far away.

THE OSLO PEACE PROCESS (2009–2011)

However, the renewed clashes did not entirely “kill” the peace dialogue. Unbeknownst to the public opinion in Turkey, the PKK³² and MIT clandestinely parleyed at Oslo under the aegis of an undisclosed intermediary (a Norwegian NGO or the UK) since mid-2009 and the “Habur Gate” scandal³³ in October 2009 only temporarily suspended the negotiations.³⁴ In August 2010, the PKK declared another unilateral ceasefire in the light of the plebiscite on the constitutional amendments in September, and the ceasefire was afterwards extended until the parliamentary elections in June 2011. The PKK intended, thus, to enhance its profile as a pro-democracy

party and, secondly, ensure the smooth participation of the Kurds in the general elections.³⁵ In June 2011, the newly established Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi or BDP) acquired 5.67% of the votes and elected 36 MPs to the Grand National Assembly (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi).

The elections proved a watershed for the “Oslo Peace Process”. According to the Kurdish side, the two parties drafted a protocol with the terms of reference for further negotiations³⁶ which Erdoğan would sign after the elections in June 2011. However, Erdoğan refused to sign it³⁷—most likely perturbed by the defeat of the AKP in south-eastern and eastern Turkey and, ergo, the severe political cost of a peace deal with the PKK. In July, the PKK resumed its attacks on the TSK to pressure Erdoğan; in the same month, the Congress of Democratic Society (Demokratik Toplum Kongresi or DTK)—a platform of 700 civil society organisations in Turkey’s south-east and east provinces³⁸—declared “democratic autonomy” (demokratik özerklik) for Turkish (or Northern) Kurdistan (Bakurê Kurdistanê) at a press conference in Diyarbakir.³⁹ Why did the DTK choose this term? First of all, this term reflected Öcalan’s own prison writings.⁴⁰ And secondly, this idea appeared extremely appealing to a sizable proportion of Turkey’s Kurds who, under normal circumstances, opposed secession from Turkey.⁴¹

The PKK had already started working towards that end. In 2007, the PKK had established the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan or KCK), an umbrella organisation for the civic, political and military groups of the PKK (both inside and outside Turkey) to implement Öcalan’s vision for “democratic con-federalism”.⁴² The establishment of the KCK, in fact, laid the foundations for the de facto autonomy of Turkey’s Kurds. The KCK, presided by the PKK’s co-founder Cemil Bayik, involves a legislative branch (the People’s Congress of Kurdistan or the Kongra-Gel), an executive one (the People’s Defence Forces-Hêzên Parastina Gel or HPG) and a judicial one. The KCK’s structure (legislature, executive and judiciary are presided by a Turkish, Syrian and Iranian Kurd respectively) and composition (60% independents against 40% politicians and 30% Turkish Kurds against 25% Iraqi Kurds, 20% Iranian Kurds, 15% Syrian Kurds and 10% Kurds from the diaspora) reveal the organisations’ pan-Kurdish aspirations.⁴³

As expected, the government answered to the DTK’s declaration with intensified repression and by late 2011, 7748 Kurdish activists and politicians (including 226 members of the local governing bodies and

31 majors) had been imprisoned on charges of collusion with the KCK.⁴⁴ In December 2011, Turkish fighter jets mistook smugglers in south-east Turkey for insurgents and killed 34; instead of apologising for this mistake, Erdoğan defended. Thus, the PKK utilised the KCK's arrests and the Roboski Massacre as a propaganda instrument against the AKP.⁴⁵

It must be noted, however, that the new wave of violence since 2004 was far less violent than the all-out war in the 1990s—both in terms of the casualties and modus operandi of the two adversaries.⁴⁶ First of all, the new war between the PKK and TSK was interrupted repeatedly by cease-fires. Secondly, this war was seasonal (the “campaigning season” started in March, peaked in August and stopped in October) and local (most fighting was confined to Botan, the sparsely populated mountainous zone in Hakkâri and Şirnak).⁴⁷ Thirdly, the overall death toll (especially the number of civilian casualties) was markedly low compared to the war in the 1990s (below 400 fatalities per year until 2012).⁴⁸ In summary, the war since 2004 was in effect a low-intensity guerrilla war since the PKK used war and peace talks as a carrot-and-stick policy to dictate a political solution on its own terms.

A NEW CATALYST: SYRIA

The Syrian Civil War proved the catalyst that radically transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and, by extension, the Kurdish Question in Turkey and beyond. A “by-product” of the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War degenerated into a vicious sectarian conflict and, in effect, a *war by proxy* between the Shia and Sunni powers and actors in the Middle East.⁴⁹ The PKK, which operated in the 1990s through Syria, thanks to the patronage of Hafez al-Assad, seized the opportunity and sent over 1000 fighters to Syria to organise the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat or PYD) in political and military terms amidst the endemic anarchy.⁵⁰

When in July 2012 Assad withdrew his military forces from several frontier towns in northern Syria (with the exception of al-Qamishli),⁵¹ the PYD seized several Kurdish-majority towns without a fight and set up autonomous enclaves.⁵² But why did Assad act like that? The ulterior incentives of Assad have long been debated.⁵³ Did he desperately need every available soldier to thwart the opposition's two main thrusts in

Aleppo and Damascus? Or did he intend to indirectly punish the “Kurdophobic” Turkey for its open support for the armed opposition? Most likely Assad wanted to kill two birds with one stone. This bloodless withdrawal eventually served Assad double: (a) he utilised the units from the northern towns to counter the insurgents’ advance in Aleppo and Damascus in the summer of 2012 and (b) he caused a big headache to Turkey (without a single shot or penny) by allowing the establishment of Rojava (the “West” or “Western Kurdistan”).⁵⁴ By August 2012, almost all Kurdish-majority towns in northern Syria (except for al-Qamishli and Hassaka) had been captured bloodlessly by the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or YPG)—the PYD’s military wing.⁵⁵

Turkey endeavoured to intercept the rise of the PYD by either allying itself with Islamist insurgents (i.e. certain units of the Free Syrian Army or FSA) or allowing the operation of jihadists near and through its territory (i.e. Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria—Jabhat al Nusra).⁵⁶ Ankara perceived these jihadists as a far lesser threat for Turkey than the PYD owing to the latter’s organic ties with the PKK. Ankara consistently endeavoured to achieve two inter-related objectives in the Syrian War: firstly, overthrow Assad and install a friendly Sunni Muslim government in Damascus that would dismantle the “Shia Axis”⁵⁷ in the Middle East and, secondly, prevent the establishment of a semi-independent Kurdish entity in northern Syria which would inflame the irredentism of Turkey’s sizable Kurdish minority.⁵⁸

Very soon, the aftershocks of the earthquake in Syria affected Turkey. In 2012, the PKK decided to imitate the success of the PYD. The party thus resolved to seize a town near its headquarters in Iraq and trigger a popular uprising (*serhildan*). For this purpose, the HPG tried to storm Şemdinli—a town in the easternmost Hakkâri province with an overwhelming Kurdish majority. The TSK abandoned the earlier *cordon and search* doctrine and adopted the *monitor, detect and engage* doctrine to counter the PKK. In summary, the TSK did not use raw recruits (as in previous campaigns) to cordon off the lofty mountains in south-east and east Turkey; rather, the TSK utilised new weapons (most notably Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or UAVs and indigenous satellites) to survey the actions of the PKK efficaciously and deploy the special units (usually the *bordo bereliler*) to the battlefield with minimum delay and casualties.⁵⁹ By autumn, the HPG had been squarely defeated in the fiercest and bloodiest battles since the 1990s.⁶⁰

NOTES

1. For example, see: Matthew Kocher, “The Decline of the PKK and the Viability of a One-State Solution in Turkey”, *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 1–20.
2. Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, “The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through Breaks?” in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey, Political Islam, Kemalism, and the Kurdish Issue*, eds. Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 143–158.
3. Indicatively, see: Hakan M. Yavuz, ed.: *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006).
4. Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Mohammed Shareef, *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 2014).
5. For more information, see: Bill Park, “Turkey’s Policy towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives” (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005), <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/adelphi/by%20year/2005-1a3b/turkey--39-s-policy-towards-norther-iraq-problems-and-perspectives-7982>; Christine D. Gray, *International Law and the Use of Force* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142–143. In fact, in July 2003 the USA arrested 11 commandos of the TSK and caused a “crisis of confidence” between the two countries. Michael Howard and Suzanne Goldenberg: “US Arrest of Soldiers Infuriates Turkey”, *Guardian*, July 8, 2003.
6. Sarihan, “Two Periods”, 89–102; Mustafa Cosar Ünal, “Strategist or Pragmatist? A Challenging Look at Ocalan’s Retrospective Classification and Definition of PKK’s Strategic Period between 1984 and 2012”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (2014): 419–448.
7. The PKK twice renamed itself as the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) in 2002 and the Kurdistan People’s Congress (KONGRA-GEL) in 2003.
8. Coined in 2004, the concept of “democratic confederalism” divides Turkey into 20 to 25 regions based on the socio-economic and national / religious characteristics of the population and delegates every authority (with the exception of justice, defence and foreign affairs) to the local authorities. Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, unknown translator and editor (Cologne: Transmedia Publishing, 2011); Joost Jongerden, “The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK): Radical Democracy and the Right to Self-Determination Beyond the Nation-State” in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, eds. Stansfield and Shareef, 245–257.

9. Until the elections of 2011, the Kurdish MPs in the AKP outnumbered the ones in Kurdish political parties. Angel Rabasa and Stephen F. Larabee, “The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey” (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2008), 67–68, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG726.sum.pdf.
10. Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 286–300.
11. For more information, see: Global Internally Displaced People, “Profile of Internal Displacement: Turkey” (Geneva: Global Internally Displaced People, 2005), <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Europe/Turkey/pdf/Turkey+July+2003.pdf>.
12. Ümit Ösdağ and Ersel Aydınli, “Winning a Low Intensity Conflict: Drawing Lessons from the Turkish Case” in *Democracies and Small Wars*, ed. Efraim Inbar (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 114–117.
13. Doğan Koç, “The Hizmet Movement and its Activities in Southeast Turkey” in *Understanding Turkey’s Kurdish*, eds. Bilgin and Sarihan, 181–183.
14. For the “greed vs grievance” debate, see the seminal work: Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004), 563–595.
15. According to a survey by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEVAP), a think tank in Ankara, in October 2014 the Kurds represented 17.5% of the population. “Türkiye’deki Kürt Nüfusu: Yeni Veri” [“Kurdish Population in Turkey: New Data”], *TEVAP*, October 4, 2014.
16. Sarihan, “The Two Periods”, 92; Spyridon Plakoudas, “The PKK and the Guerrilla Tradition of Turkey’s Kurds”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 18, no. 4 (2014): 9.
17. Cengiz Çandar, “‘Leaving the Mountain’: How May the PKK Lay Down Arms?” (Istanbul: TESEV Publications, 2012), 19–20, http://tese.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Leaving_The_Mountain_How_May_The_PKK_Lay_Down_Arms_Freeing_The_Kurdish_Question_From_Violence.pdf
18. “Erdoğan’dan Diyarbakır’da Tarihi Konuşma: Hataları Yok Sayamayız” [“Erdogan in Diyarbakir History Talk: Do Not Ignore Mistakes”], *Milliyet*, August 12, 2005.
19. Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden, and Nic Walker, “Fruitless Attempts? The Kurdish Initiative and Containment of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 44 (2011): 103–128.
20. Ali Çarkoğlu, “Turkey’s Local Elections of 2009: Winners and Losers”, *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 2 (2009): 1–18.

21. The Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) cases marked the beginning of the decline of the military's tutelage over politics. Dani Rodrik, "Ergenekon and Sledgehammer: Building or Undermining the Rule of Law?", *Turkish Policy* 10, no. 1 (2011): 99–109; Yahya Ayyildiz, *Derin Devletin Anatomisi Ergenekon'dan Teskilt'a* [*Anatomy of the Organization Ergenekon Deep State*] (Istanbul: Cira Yayinlari, 2011).
22. Ünal, "Is It Ripe Yet": 8; Waldman and Caliscan, *The New Turkey*, 173–175.
23. The "deep state" had been accused as the primary culprit for the "dirty war" against the PKK and the Left as well as the purge against non-Muslims in Turkey since the 1970s. For more information, see: Talat Turhan, *Derin Devlet* [*Deep State*] (Istanbul: Ileri Yayinlari, 2005); Attila Akar, *Derin Devlet—Devletin Paralel Iradeleri* [*Deep State— State of the parallel Volition*] (Istanbul: Profil, 2011).
24. Johanna Nykänen, "Identity, Narrative and Frames: Assessing Turkey's Kurdish Initiatives", *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 2 (2013): 96–97.
25. Mustafa Çosar Ünal, "The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Popular Support: Counterterrorism towards an Insurgency Nature", *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 432–455.
26. Cengiz Çandar, "On Turkey's Kurdish Question: Its Roots, Present State and Prospects" in *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish*, eds. Bilgin and Sarihan, pp. 59–72; Clémence Scalbert-Yügel, "The PKK, the Kurdish Movement and the Emergence of Cultural Policies in Turkey" in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, eds. Stansfield and Shareef, 259–272.
27. For more information, see: Kivanç Ulusoy, "The "Democratic Opening" in Turkey: A Historical/Comparative Perspective", *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 1 (2010): 71–90.
28. Casier, Jongersen and Walker, "Turkey's Kurdish Movement", 148–150.
29. This "peace caravan" was a confidence-building measure between Turkey and the PKK.
30. Analytically, the People's Labour Party (Halkın Emek Partisi or HEP), the Freedom and Democracy Party (Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi or ÖZDEP), the Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi or DEP) and the People's Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi or HADEP) were successively banned in 1992, 1992, 1994 and 2003.
31. Rusen Cakir, "Kurdish Political Movement and the 'Democratic Opening'", *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 2 (2010): 185.
32. The PKK was represented by officials from Qandil and Europe.
33. Habur is the name of the border gate in Iraq where the "peace caravan" of the PKK entered Turkey in 2009.
34. Yilmaz Ensaroğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish Question and the Peace Process", *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 2 (2013): 13–14; Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects" (Rome: Instituto Affari Internazionali, 2015), 7–8, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/gte_wp_11.pdf

35. Casier, Jongerden, and Walker, “Fruitless Attempts”, 103–127.
36. The terms of the protocol still remain unclear. According to the Kurds, the terms of reference included various confidence-building measures, such as the establishment of a Constitutional Council, a Peace Council and a Truth and Justice Commission. “CHP 9 Maddelik ‘Oslo Mutabakatını’ Açıkladı” [“9 Points of the ‘Oslo Agreement’ Announced by the CHP”], *T24*, September 18, 2012; “İşte Öcalan’ın Yol Haritası” [“Here’s Öcalan’s Road Map”], *Hürriyet*, March 3, 2011; Cengiz Çandar, “Oslo’dan Bugüne Perde Arkası” [“Today Behind Oslo (Process)”], *Radikal*, April 28, 2013.
37. Waldman and Caliscan, *New Turkey*, 182.
38. International Crisis Group, “Turkey’s Kurdish Impasse: The View from Diyarbakir” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), 8, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-s-kurdish-impasse-view-diyarbakir>
39. “DTK’dan ‘Demokratik Özerklik’ Kararı” [“DTK the ‘Democratic Autonomy’ Decision”], *Hürriyet*, July 14, 2011; “Turkey’s Kurds Declare Democratic Autonomy”, *E-Kurd Daily*, July 15, 2011.
40. White, *The PKK*, 126–149.
41. In August 2012, a survey in south-east Turkey found that 48% of the Kurds wanted “democratic autonomy” and 18% outright independence. “Kürt Sorununun Çözümünde Kişi ve Kurum Değerlendirmesi” [“Views from Individuals and Institutions on a Solution to the Kurdish Problem”] (Ankara: SAMER, 2012).
42. Attila Sandıklı: “KCK Terör Örgütünün Yapısı ve Faaliyetleri” [“The Structure and Activities of the Terrorist Organization Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)”], *TUIC Academi*, March 29, 2011; Aziz İstegün: “Is the KCK a Party, an Organization or an Alternative State Structure?”. *Sunday’s Zaman*, November 6, 2011.
43. International Crisis Group, “Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), 8–9, <https://www.crisis-group.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-pkk-and-kurdish-settlement>
44. Michael M. Gunter, “Reopening Turkey’s Closed Kurdish Opening?”, *Middle East Policy Council* 20, no. 2 (2013): 1.
45. “Uludere Kaymakamı Linç Girişimi’ni Anlattı” [“Uludere Governor Explained the Attempted Lynching”], *Radikal*, January 1, 2012; “The Kurds and Turkey: Massacre at Uludere”, *Economist*, June 7, 2012.
46. Sarihan, “Two Periods”, 95. For more information about Turkey’s COIN policies in the 1990s, see: Ümit Özdağ, *Türk Ordusu’nun PKK Operasyonları: 1984–2007* [*PKK Operations of the Turkish Army: 1984–2007*] (İstanbul: Pegasus Yayınları, 2009), 102–109; Mustafa Coşar Ünal, *Counterterrorism in Turkey: Policy Changes and Policy Effects toward the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

47. In fact, 42% of casualties occurred in Botan and 74% in six Kurdish-majority provinces in south-east Turkey (Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Hakkâri, Siirt, Şırnak, and Tunceli). Güneş Murat Tezcür, “Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question: A Realist Perspective”, *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 2 (2013): 72–73.
48. Tezcür, “Prospects for Resolution”: 70–71.
49. Adam Ward, “Introduction” in *Middle Eastern Security, the US Pivot and the Rise of ISIS*, eds, Toby Dodge and Emile Hokayem (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014), 7–12.
50. International Crisis Group: “Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2014), 4–7, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria>. For more information on the influences of the PKK over the PYD, see: Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst, 2014), 61–72.
51. Ben Hubbard, “After Defeat in Damascus, Syrian Rebels Expand Fight in Aleppo”, *Associated Press*, July 24, 2012; Ivan Watson, “Battles for Key Cities of Aleppo, Damascus Heat Up in Syrian Civil War”, *CNN*, July 26, 2012.
52. Patrick Markey, “After Quiet Revolt, Power Struggle Looms for Syria’s Kurds”, *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2012.
53. Wyre Davies, “Crisis in Syria Emboldens Country’s Kurds”, *BBC*, July 28, 2012; Luke Harding, “Syria’s Kurds Face Uncertain Future If Assad Falls”, *Guardian*, December 14, 2012.
54. Spyridon Plakoudas, “The Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party: The Outsider in the Syrian War”, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2017): 101–102.
55. The towns without a weighty Kurdish majority such as Rays al-Ayn were divided between the anti-Assad opposition and the PYD until 2013 and 2014. Joe Parkinson, “Syria’s Quiet Revolt: Kurds Take over North-East”, *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2012.
56. In 2016 the militant group separated itself from Al Qaeda and re-branded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and, later on, Tahrir al-Sham.
57. Pro-Iranian Shia parties currently exercise control over four Arab capitals (Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Sana’a) and ally themselves with Iran (the champion of Shia Islam), thus establishing a “Shia Axis”. On the “proxy war” in the Middle East and the “Shia Axis”, see: Spyridon Plakoudas, “The Syrian Civil War and Peace in the Middle East: A Chimera?” (Athens: KEDISA, 2016), 3–4, <http://kedisa.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/The-Syrian-Civil-War-and-Peace-in-the-Middle-East-A-Chimera.pdf>.
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59. Ozkan Kantemir, “Türk Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin Bölücü Terö Örgütü İle Mücadelesinde Teknolojik Gelişmelerin” [“Technological Developments in the Struggle of the Turkish Armed Forces with the Separatist Terrorist Organization”] (PhD Thesis, Kara Harp Okulu, 2015), 48–49; Ünal, “Counterinsurgency and Military Strategy”: 57.
60. “Şemdinli Şafak Operasyonu” [“Dawn Operation Semdinli”], *Hürriyet*, September 12, 2012; Attila Sandiki, “Şemdinli’de Ne Oldu?” [“What Happened in Semdinli?”], *Bilgesam*, July 29, 2012.



The “Solution Process” (2013–2015)

Abstract This chapter demonstrates that a *mutually hurting stalemate* in the all-out war of 2012 compelled the two sides to initiate in March 2013 an epic *solution process* with the mediation of Öcalan. Although this open process involved several actors (e.g. the HDP), the AKP and PKK could not agree on a roadmap for peace. However, the process did not collapse since, as the chapter elucidates, the two parties utilised this ceasefire to advance their other agendas; rather, the process evolved unevenly and endured, thanks to two assertive personalities—Öcalan and Erdoğan. However, the tensions steadily escalated and the triumphs of the PKK’s offshoots in Syria and Turkey in 2015 alarmed the AKP dangerously; the twin bombings by ISIS in July 2015 offered this spark for a new war.

Keywords Peace roadmap • Spoilers • Commitment to peace
• Öcalan • Erdoğan • HDP

A HISTORIC NEVROZ (2013)

During the festivities for the Persian New Year (Nevroz) in March 2013, an appeal by Öcalan to the PKK for a ceasefire was read out loud by the Kurdish MPs in front of an ecstatic audience in Diyarbakir.¹ Months of undercover negotiations between Öcalan and National Intelligence Organisation (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı or MIT) finally paid off. A few days later, Erdoğan established a “wise men committee”—an ad hoc group of 63 academics,

celebrities, intellectuals, activists and journalists assigned with the key mission to explain the new “solution process” (*çözümlü süreç*) to the public opinion and elicit the latter’s support.² But why did the two sides agree to a peace dialogue just a few months after the bloodiest fighting in years? Obviously, Turkey and the PKK perceived the situation as a *mutually hurting stalemate* and, therefore, decided to opt for renewed peace talks.³ The two heavy-weights of the AKP, Bülent Arınç and Abdullah Gül, supported the peace initiative of the party’s co-founder Erdoğan. A new narrative of friendship and brotherhood between the Kurds and Turks was propagandised by Erdoğan and, despite fears and mistrust, euphoria about peace spread among Turks and, primarily, the large Kurdish minority.⁴

However, the two sides could not agree on a roadmap for peace. Turkey expected the PKK to extract its guerrilla forces out of Turkey and disarm prior to implementing any political reforms; conversely, the PKK demanded that Turkey first assumed certain initiatives on the basis of Öcalan’s own ideas (such as constitutional reforms)⁵ before its withdrawal and disarmament.⁶ Due to the failures of the previous peace rounds, both sides mistrusted each other. The PKK, in particular, feared that the TSK would hunt down its fighters during their peaceful withdrawal—just like 1999.⁷ Upon another earnest appeal by Öcalan in May, the PKK yielded and ordered a partial withdrawal from Turkey.⁸ However, the government did not reciprocate with any confidence-building initiatives and, therefore, the PKK suspended its withdrawal in September⁹ but did not resume its armed struggle against the TSK.

But neither did the TSK. But why? Because of a mutually hurting stalemate! Thanks to the lull in the fighting, the two sides focused on their own agendas elsewhere. The PKK supported the PYD intensely and the latter overwhelmed its enemies (primarily al-Nusra) and captured more frontier towns (such as Ras al-Ayn) in northern Syria between July and December 2013. A few months later, in January 2014, the PYD established three autonomous enclaves (i.e. cantons) in Rojava: one in north-western Syria around Afrin, one in the midpoint of the long Turco-Syrian frontier around Kobani and one in the easternmost edge of northern Syria around Qamishli—a city divided between the YPG and Assad.¹⁰ It must be noted that Ankara and the PYD normalised their relations in 2013, thanks to the mediation of the PKK, and the PYD’s leader even visited Turkey in 2013 and 2014.¹¹

The PYD even helped Turkey move the tomb of Suleyman Shah, a sovereign territory of Turkey under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, in 2015 due to threats by ISIS against the tomb and its guardians. Similarly, Erdoğan

capitalised on the ceasefire to implement his own agenda: transition the country to a presidential system *a la Turca*.¹² Most notably, however, Erdoğan could easily overcome the internal opposition to his presidential ambitions after silencing the PKK and HDP. When the violent Gezi Park protests rocked Istanbul in May–June 2013, the Kurds participated passively lest they should provoke a collapse of the still embryonic peace dialogue.¹³ After all, Erdoğan opened a new front in mid-2013 with Gülen—his former mentor and an old enemy of the PKK. Initially, Erdoğan allied himself with Gülen to overthrow the once all-mighty Kemalist establishment via the Gülen-dominated police and judiciary but later on the aspirations of the two leaders diverged. The corruption scandal in December 2013 was yet another episode in the escalating conflict between Gülen and Erdoğan.¹⁴ Once again, the Kurds stayed neutral. The power struggle between them would ultimately shape the internal developments in later years in a profound way—as the recent coup d’ état in July 2016 showed. The mysterious silence of the PKK and HDP in the face of Erdoğan’s increasing authoritarianism created the widespread impression that the HDP would offer AKP the required parliamentary seats for the constitutional amendment¹⁵ in exchange for a broad autonomy in Turkey’s “Kurdistan”.¹⁶ However, the HDP’s co-leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, denied vehemently such claims.¹⁷ Last but not least, peace with the PKK promised peace and stability in south-east Turkey (a precious “commodity” for politicians) as well as relative tranquillity in Kurdish-controlled northern Syria.¹⁸ Turkey even toyed with the idea of cooperation with the PYD—the PKK’s offshoots in Syria.¹⁹ Such a development would only augment Turkey’s influence in Syria and Iraq according to the thinking of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Foreign Minister of Turkey at the time and the theoretician of Neo-Ottomanism (i.e. the vision for the re-establishment of the Ottoman Empire in economic, diplomatic and cultural terms).²⁰ Nonetheless, a genuine will by Erdoğan for peace should not be discounted or underestimated. After all, Erdoğan undertook quite a few initiatives for the democratisation of Turkey’s politics and society since 2003.²¹

Öcalan, another important variable in this equation, demonstrated a vested interest in the continuation and success of the peace process. The peace process decriminalised Öcalan as a terrorist in the eyes of the domestic and international public opinion, reinforced his popularity among the Kurds inside and outside Turkey and increased his leverage over the PKK’s military junta in Qandil.²² In fact, he did re-arrange the top KCK leadership in July 2013 to curtail the opposition of the “hawks”²³ and, by extension, avoid an intra-party rupture similar to the one in 2004.²⁴ The success of the peace talks promised to offer Öcalan even more: according to a leak

to the press which the AKP later denied, the conversion of Öcalan's life sentence to house arrest was even discussed on the table.²⁵

Turkey once again used Öcalan as an intermediary and an asset. In fact, Erdoğan did invest heavily on Öcalan. However, Ankara mistakenly assumed that Öcalan's will would be obeyed unquestionably. The initiatives for the disarmament of the PKK and the cessation of the Kobani Riots would prove that he was respected—but not obeyed. Öcalan did wield substantial influence over the PKK/KCK and HDP—but he did not control them. The PKK adopted its own policies and did not disarm; neither did the HDP assist Erdoğan politically in the transition to a strong presidential system.²⁶

Although the PKK cancelled its partial withdrawal in September, in the same month the AKP introduced a new *democratisation package* (demokratikleşme paketi) with various political and cultural reforms.²⁷ In November, Erdoğan invited Masoud Barzani and Şivan Perwer (the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan and a self-exiled Kurdish folk-singer) to Turkey to augment the momentum of the peace process.²⁸ Ankara, in particular, intended to use Barzani (already an ally of Ankara) to decrease the special weight of the PKK among Turkey's Kurds and, additionally, extend Turkey's influence in Iraq.²⁹ But the peace process was in reality littered with various obstacles.

AN OVER-AMBITIOUS ROADMAP FOR PEACE? (2013–2014)

The Kurdish side insisted that a third party acted as a monitor of the peace talks and, most notably, a guarantor of the government's compliance to the *solution process*. This insistence revealed that the HDP and, most notably, the suspicious military junta of the PKK trusted 100% neither Erdoğan nor the Turkish state apparatus and institutions.³⁰ In contrast to the Oslo Peace Process, no third party was involved this time to offer valid guarantees for the sincere commitment of both parties in the peace talks. But this issue would not be the only one.

The Kurds grumbled that the AKP meted out justice for the crimes of the “deep state” (especially the ones of the mysterious Gendarmerie Intelligence and Anti-terrorism Unit or JITEM³¹) from the 1990s at a snail's pace.³² Öcalan had long insisted on the imperative of a “truth and reconciliation committee”—just like South Africa in the post-Apartheid years.³³ Likewise, Turkey has not yet addressed the issue of the internally displaced people (i.e. those millions of villagers forcibly displaced in the 1990s from south-east Turkey) in a satisfactory way. Despite relative progress, the majority of the internally displaced people could not return

to their lands due to security concerns or inadequate support by the Turkish state authorities.³⁴

The issue of the PKK’s disarmament and disbandment was another key issue. The PKK appeared to be very reluctant to disband its guerrilla force in return for vague promises of leniency. Qandil worried that the PKK would forfeit its leverage over Ankara overnight and feared that Erdoğan would backtrack and try the PKK’s fighters and commanders (just like the “caravan for peace” in 2009).³⁵ Worse, 13 top PKK commanders (including Karayilan) were designated as narcotics traffickers by the USA and this complicated the AKP’s designs.³⁶ Last but not least, the PKK’s military junta was only accustomed to civilian politics in a democratic context and envied the HDP’s rising popularity among the Kurds (and left-wing Turks). The PKK’s military junta thought that the PKK, not the HDP, should monopolise the representation and, thus, loyalty of Turkey’s Kurdish population.³⁷

The PKK counter-proposed the following formula: the disarmament and disbandment of the 50,000-strong village guards (*korucular*) (the paramilitary organisation of Kurds who oppose the PKK and often commit human rights violations)³⁸ and the transformation of the HPG into the new gendarmerie and city police in south-east Turkey—in accordance with Öcalan’s ideas of “democratic autonomy”.³⁹ The Turkish state apparatus (especially the TSK) and village guards were fundamentally opposed to such a proposal; in particular, the village guards were concerned about reprisals by the PKK after disarmament since the latter targeted them heavily in the 1980s.⁴⁰

The de-centralisation of the state constituted another demand by the Kurdish side—a demand closely related to the rising demographic strength of the Kurds within Turkey.⁴¹ This population trend explains partly the increasing share of the votes of the pro-Kurdish party. Indicatively, in the elections in 2015, the HDP won 13 provinces in south-eastern and eastern Turkey.⁴² The success of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq reinforced the pro-independence partisans among Turkey’s Kurds. An opinion poll in 2013 revealed that $\frac{1}{3}$ (up from $\frac{1}{5}$ in 2011) of Turkey’s Kurds supported independence, whereas $\frac{2}{3}$ a broad autonomy.⁴³ The HDP and PKK intended to capitalise on that trend. They subscribed to Öcalan’s concept of “democratic confederalism” (*demokratik konfederalizm*) which divided Turkey into 20 regions and delegated all powers (except for external security and foreign policy) to local governments.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Kurds demanded education in their mother tongue and the use of minority languages in the public services⁴⁵ and even appealed for a new definition of citizenship without a national trait (i.e. Turk).⁴⁶ Interestingly, this

appeal coincided with a new debate in Turkey with regards to ethnicity and identity: “Türkiyeli” (people of Turkey) vs “Turkler” (Turk).⁴⁷ However, the Turkish state apparatus and institutions were vehemently opposed to such ideas that violated the legacy of Atatürk.⁴⁸

The solution process was immensely popular as many Turks and Kurds welcomed it.⁴⁹ Even the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or Republican People’s Party (CHP) (Turkey’s dominant opposition party and the custodian of Kemalism) conditionally supported the peace talks. However, the AKP did not utilise this support properly and did not involve the CHP in the peace process. After all, Erdoğan thought that the CHP would toe the line eventually.⁵⁰ The AKP, a one-man party in effect since Erdoğan sidelined Arınç in the aftermath of the Gezi Park Protests, supported the leader’s policies. However, the peace talks suffered from “expectation” issues as well. The PKK and HDP expected that the peace process would eventuate into a radical transformation of Turkey (and, why not, the remaking of the Turkish Republic on the basis of a co-equal partnership between the Kurds and Turks); however, the other side aspired to achieve the disarmament of the PKK (and maybe a check over the PYD) in return for certain reforms (but not as far-reaching as the Kurds demanded). The peace talks heavily depended on two charismatic and domineering figures (Erdoğan and Öcalan) who commanded substantial support among their own constituencies to overcome the problems.⁵¹ Yet, one swallow doesn’t a summer make!

STALEMATE AND RESET (2014–2015)

In August 2014, the people of Turkey would elect for the very first time a president by popular vote; in the past, the president was appointed by the parliament. Erdoğan, the obvious candidate for this senior office, essayed to “appease” the Kurds on the run-up to the elections by accommodating some of their demands. In March 2014, the government introduced legal reforms that set free several KCK cadres.⁵² In July 2014, the parliament voted a new law that invested the government with the authority (and legal protection) to negotiate with the Kurds.⁵³ Apart from the release of their fellow comrades, the HDP and KCK had repeatedly insisted on the imperative of a legal framework. After all, in May 2012, the judiciary (dominated by the Hizmet) had accused Hakan Fidan, head of MIT and main negotiator with Öcalan since 2007, of treason for his involvement in the ill-fated Oslo Peace Process.⁵⁴

Therefore, Erdoğan expected the HDP to demonstrate roughly the same passivity as during the Gezi Park Protests a year earlier. Much to the disappointment of the strongman of Turkey, Demirtaş challenged Erdoğan with his own candidature. Although Erdoğan won by a landslide (with 51.79% of the total votes) and became the 12th president of Turkey, Demirtaş gained 9.76% of the national vote (just below the psychological threshold for a party's entry in parliament) and 11 provinces in south-eastern and eastern Turkey.⁵⁵ These elections testified to one stark reality once again—the division of the country into three distinct sections: a Kurdish one in south-east and east Turkey, a Kemalist one in west and south Turkey and an Islamist one in Anatolia's heartland.

The opposition of the HDP to Erdoğan terminated the honeymoon between the two sides. Although Davutoğlu (now prime minister) mentioned the peace dialogue in his programmatic statements as head of a new government in September 2014,⁵⁶ the solution process was in fact tottering. The developments across the border in Syria only worsened the impasse. In the same month, ISIS set siege to the capital of the second PYD canton, Kobani, and by early October, stood on the verge of victory. Incited by the KCK, Turkey's Kurds protested violently against the apathy of Ankara in the face of the humanitarian crisis just a stone's throw from the border crossing of Mürşit Pinar.⁵⁷ The violent riots spiralled out of control as the KCK-affiliated Kurdish youth violently clashed with the police and Hüda-Par—the political wing of Turkish Hezbollah.⁵⁸ This bloody turmoil ended after an appeal by Öcalan—who accordingly affirmed once again his authority over the KCK and the Kurds.⁵⁹

These riots, in addition, testified to the PKK's increasing power in south-east Turkey. The KCK had established a "shadow state" in south-eastern and eastern Turkey (e.g. "people's self-defence forces", etc.) which directly challenged the power of the Turkish state authorities. The top military leadership voiced a few times its serious concerns about this issue; however, the army, debilitated critically after the fake trials, could only express its worries and Erdoğan refused to crack down on these parallel structures lest the precarious peace process should collapse.⁶⁰ In October, the government set up an ad hoc body (which comprised of the prime minister and ten ministers without any army officers—an additional indication of the zero role of the army in the process) to oversee the peace process.⁶¹ More steps followed soon after.

In early December, a senior delegation of the HDP visited Öcalan and discussed how the peace talks could be re-set. On February 28, 2015, officials from the government and the pro-Kurdish party publicised a ten-point

memo by Öcalan in a press conference at the Dolmabahçe Palace.⁶² The Dolmabahçe Accord reiterated the willingness of the two sides to resume the peace talks. A few days later, the PKK announced that the organisation would disarm and disband only after Turkey implemented the ten conditions outlined in Öcalan's memo.⁶³ As in March 2013, the HDP acted as an intermediary between Öcalan and the AKP and utilised its influence to allay the fears and mistrust of its voters. And quite predictably, these actions cemented the profile of the HDP as an actor committed to peace; however, they also consolidated the idea (especially popular among the nationalist Turkish hard-liners) that the party acted as nothing more than a spokesman for Imrali and Qandil. These attitudes of the electorate would become visible in the elections in June and November 2015.⁶⁴

However, Erdoğan vehemently opposed this accord and declared that he was not committed by it as he was not consulted in the first place.⁶⁵ Although Erdoğan still dominated the AKP, Davutoğlu was not a subservient pawn of the country's strongman. The Dolmabahçe Accord and the refugee deal with the EU in 2015 demonstrated that more than once the prime minister acted autonomously. However, Davutoğlu could not challenge Erdoğan in full.⁶⁶ Erdoğan had successfully sidelined two co-founders of the AKP, Arınç and Gül, with heavy influence within the party; Davutoğlu, a figure outside the party, could not count on the party officials to challenge Erdoğan. Barely a few months later, the peace talks collapsed and the prime could do nothing to stop the slide to war.

COLLAPSE (JULY 2015)

The elections in June 2015 stand out as the watershed in the peace talks. On June 7, the HDP ranked fourth with 13.12% of the total votes (6,058,489 votes) and outvoted the other parties in 14 provinces in the south-east; ergo, the HDP crossed the untoward threshold of 10% which was instituted by the military junta in 1980 to stave off the entry of the pro-Islamist and pro-Kurdish parties in parliament. The HDP, in fact, elected an equal amount of deputies (i.e. 80 MPs) with the far-rightist Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi or MHP) despite the fewer votes (over 1,500,000 votes less) due to the complex electoral system in Turkey and, therefore, the party was upgraded into the country's third political power.⁶⁷ The HDP's increasing appeal among the Kurds and even left-wing Turks must be ascribed to three factors: the charismatic personality of Demirtaş, the growing dissatisfaction with Erdoğan's authoritarianism and the peace-loving profile of the HDP.⁶⁸

The HDP's stunning performance did shatter the AKP's record of single-party government since 2002 and stymied Erdoğan's plans for a presidential system. The elections were succeeded by a political crisis as Erdoğan intervened in an unconstitutional way to obstruct the establishment of a coalition government and precipitate a snap election—which were scheduled for November 1.⁶⁹

Just a few days after the historical landmark in Turkey, the PYD scored a triumph no less noteworthy than the HDP's in the other side of the frontier. With the support of the USA and allied factions within the FSA, the YPG expelled ISIS from Tell Abyad and thus united the cantons of Kobani and Jazire. The YPG thereafter advanced southwards against al-Raqqa (the capital of the "caliphate") and entrenched itself just 30 kms north of al-Raqqa. These military triumphs alarmed Turkey and awakened the nightmarish ghost of an independent Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Erdoğan implored the USA to establish a no-fly-zone in the 100-km-long strip between the cantons of Afrin and Kobani—allegedly to eliminate ISIS but, in effect, to avert the unification of the PYD's cantons. However, the USA rejected the request of Erdoğan since they regarded quite justly the PYD as their most formidable "boots on the ground" in the campaign against ISIS.⁷⁰

After a deadly terrorist strike against a peaceful rally by left-wing Kurds and Turks in Turkey's Suruç on July 20, which claimed the lives of 33 demonstrators, the PKK accused the AKP of colluding with ISIS against Turkey's Kurds and assassinated two off-duty police officers. Contrary to the other provocations in previous months, Erdoğan did not overlook this new breach of the ceasefire and ordered a punitive raid against the PKK's military bases in Qandil. The peace process was terminated in all but in name. Even the exhortations of the former Turkish President Gül were ignored. By July 2015, Erdoğan was the only pole of power within the party and government—Gül and Arınç had withdrawn from politics in August 2014 and June 2015 respectively. But why did the peace talks collapse in July 2015 and not earlier? After all, several minor and major provocations occurred in previous months that could have easily unravelled the peace process.⁷¹ However, both sides consistently ignored these provocations since the peace talks allowed them to divert their attention and energy elsewhere.⁷² In July, the AKP could no longer afford to ignore them.

Erdoğan realised that the PKK increased its power inside and outside Turkey week by week and, as a consequence, decided to initiate a "preventive war"—in other words, a war intended to intercept the PKK before the latter acquired substantial power.⁷³ In addition, Erdoğan calculated that a new cycle of violence would inescapably activate the nationalist reflexes of

the Turkish public opinion and decrease the HDP's electoral appeal in the impending snap elections to the benefit of the AKP.⁷⁴ As subsequent developments showed, this gamble actually paid off!⁷⁵ Officially, Erdoğan linked the renewed operations against the PKK with Ankara's new "war against terror" after a deal with the USA in July about the use of Incirlik air base against ISIS—cunningly grouping the PKK and ISIS under the same "terrorist" tag. However, the TSK launched just two raids against ISIS in initial 30 days—in contrast to over 130 raids against the PKK during the same period.⁷⁶ How about the PKK? Why did the militant group decide to escalate as well? Because the PKK thought it wielded enough power inside and outside Turkey to force Erdoğan to yield to its demands after a few warning shots. According to the PKK's viewpoint, an already debilitated Erdoğan by the conflict with Gülen could not afford to open a new front against the strengthened PKK in Turkey and Syria.⁷⁷

NOTES

1. "PKK Ateşkes İlan Etti" ["The PKK Declared a Cease-fire"], *Vatan*, March 23, 2013.
2. For over two months, the "wise men committee" toured the whole length and breadth of Turkey and held nearly 60,000 meetings with state officials and the public. International Crisis Group: "Crying 'Wolf', Why Turkish Fears Need Not Block Turkish Reform" (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2013), 5, <https://www.crisis-group.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/crying-wolf-why-turkish-fears-need-not-block-kurdish-reform>
3. Tezcür, "Prospects for Resolution": 73; Ünal, "Is It Ripe Yet": 17–18.
4. Sibel Ulu Bila, "Turkey's Kurds Rally for Peace, But Mistrust Lingers", *Al-Monitor*, March 21, 2013; Constanze Letsch, "Kurdish Ceasefire Boosts Peace Process in Turkey", *Guardian*, March 21, 2013.
5. "İşte İmralı'daki Görüşmenin Tutanakları" ["Meaning of that Meeting in İmralı"], *Milliyet*, March 5, 2013; "Bakan Ergin'den Öcalan Açıklaması" ["Description of Öcalan by Minister Ergin"], *Sabah*, March 29, 2013.
6. Yeğen, "Kurdish Peace Process", 9.
7. The TSK slaughtered many PKK fighters when the latter withdrew from Turkey after an appeal by its jailed leader in January 1999. Murat Karayilan, "Gerilla Sınır Şışına Çekilmiyor" ["The Guerrillas Are Not Withdrawing to Outside Borders"], *Ajansa Nüçeyan a Fıratê*, November 9, 2010.
8. Constanze Letsch, "PKK Begins to Withdraw from Turkey", *Guardian*, May 8, 2013; Christos Minagias, "Ο Οτζαλάν και ο Τουρκο-Ισλαμικός Μηχανισμός του Ερντογάν" ["Öcalan and the Turco-Islamic Mechanism of Erdoğan"], *Geostrategy*, March 27, 2016.

9. "PKK 'Halts Withdrawal' from Turkey", *Al Jazeera*, September 9, 2013; Kadri Gursel, "Time Running Out for Turkey-PKK Peace Process", *Al-Monitor*, November 4, 2013.
10. Erika Solomon, "Special Report: Amid Syria's Violence, Kurds Carve Out Autonomy", *Reuters*, January 22, 2014.
11. "PYD Leader Arrives in Turkey for Two-Day Talks", *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2013; Jonathon Burch, "Syrian Kurdish Leader Visits Turkey as ISIS Advances on Kobane", *Rûdaw*, October 5, 2014.
12. Paul Scharfe, "Erdoğan's Presidential Dreams, Turkey's Constitutional Politics", *Origins* 8, no. 5 (2015): 1–10.
13. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Turkey: Dilemma of the Kurds" in *Reflections on Taksim—Gezi Park Protests in Turkey*, eds. Bülent Gökay and Ilia Xypolia (Keele: Keele University Press, 2013), 31–32.
14. In December 2013, the Gülen-infiltrated judiciary and police initiated a probe on Erdoğan and his associates (mostly ministers and their families) on the grounds of corruption and violation of the international embargo against Iran. This investigation caused a severe intra-governmental crisis and exposed the secret role of Turkey in the violation of the embargo. Orhan Coskun and Ece Toksabay, "Hit by Scandal and Resignations, Turk PM Names New Ministers", *Star Online*, December 25, 2013; Berivan Orucoglu, "Why Turkey's Mother of All Corruption Scandals Refuses to Go Away", *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2015.
15. The AKP already possessed 327 (out of 550) seats in parliament and needed three more seats for the revision of the constitution which could be provided only by the bloc of 35 independent deputies (29 were the Kurdish ones).
16. "Erdoğan-Öcalan Anlaşması Resmileşti" ["Erdoğan-Ocalan agreement was formalized"], *Aydinlik*, November 26, 2013. Aliza Marcus and Halil Karaveli, "How the Kurds' Power Play Backfired in Turkey", *National Interest*, March 27, 2015.
17. "Selahattin Demirtaş, Başkanlık Sistemini Asla Kabul Etmeyeceğiz" ["Selahattin Demirtaş: We will Never Accept Presidential System"], *Haberler*, February 3, 2015; "We Will Not Make you the President, HDP Co-chair Tells Erdoğan", *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 17, 2015.
18. For an analysis of the separatist insurgency's cost, see: Hüseyin Yayman, *Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu Hafızası [Turkey's Kurdish Question]* (Ankara: SETA Yayınları, 2011).
19. "Kürtler İle Türkler İttifak Yapacak!!" ["Alliance between Kurds and Turks!"], *Haber7*, September 17, 2013; International Crisis Group, "Flight of the Ikarus", 18–19.
20. Cengiz Çandar, "The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the 'Opening'", *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 4 (2009): 15.

21. For an in-depth analysis of this issue, see: Ergun Özbudun and William Hale, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of the AKP* (London: Routledge, 2010), 55–67.
22. For more information, see: Galip Dalay, “The Kurdish Peace Process: From Dialogue to Negotiation?” (Doha: Aljazeera Center for Studies, 2015), 1, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/04/2015422115349145185.html>.
23. Cemil Bayık and Hülya Oran were appointed co-chairs of the KCK Executive Council and Presidency General Council. Öcalan remained the overall head of KCK and Murat Karayılan, the former KCK co-chair, was designated as head of the People’s Defence Forces (Hêzên Parastina Gelê or HPG), the PKK’s armed wing. Mutlu Cirovoglou: “PKK Reshuffles Top Leadership of its Executive Council”, *Rudaw*, July 14, 2013.
24. In 2004 Osman Öcalan and several other commanders who opposed a resumption of the armed struggle were sidelined by an intra-party coup and subsequently ousted by the PKK. White: *The PKK*, 151–152.
25. “Öcalan’a Ev Hapsi Yok” [“No House Arrest for Öcalan”], *Al Jazeera Türk*, January 6, 2003; “Başbakan’dan ‘Öcalan’a Ev Hapsi’ Açıklaması” [“Prime Minister ‘House Arrest Öcalan’ Description”], *Sabah*, March 30, 2013.
26. Tezcür, “Prospects for Resolution”: 75–77. After all, the PKK is primarily interested in its survival. Güneş Murat Tezcür, “When Democratization Radicalizes? The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey”, *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 6 (2010), 775–789.
27. Analytically, these reforms allowed the education in mother languages (only in private schools), removed the pledge of allegiance to Turkey and Kemalism at public schools, distributed state economic aid to political parties with at least over 3% of the national vote, authorised the election propaganda in non-Turkish minority languages, reinstated the old names for villages and towns. Yeğen, “Kurdish Peace Process”, 9.
28. “Iconic Kurdish Musician Returns to Turkey after 38 Years of Exile to ‘Sing for Peace’”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 16, 2013; “Barzani, Perwer Meet Erdoğan in Diyarbakır”, *World Bulletin*, November 16, 2013.
29. Fehim Taştekin, “Turkey Returns to Balance in Iraq, KRG Ties”, *Al-Monitor*, November 14, 2013; Nuray Mert, “The Erdoğan-Barzani Alliance: A Turkish Policy Classic”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 16, 2013.
30. Tezcür, “Prospects for Resolution”: 77.
31. Indicatively, Ankara has not even acknowledged that the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Anti-terrorism Unit (JITEM) actually exists. “JITEM Vardır!” [“There JITEM!”], *Milliyet*, February 16, 2006; Murat Kuseyri, “JİTEM Ergenekon’un Askeri Kanadadır” [“JITEM Is the Military Wing of Ergenekon”], *Eyvensel*. October 4, 2008.
32. By 2012, only 62 public officials had been convicted with light sentences for the “dirty war” of the 1990s. Human Rights Watch, “Time for Justice: Ending Impunity for Killings and Disappearances in 1990s

- Turkey” (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2012), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/09/03/time-justice/ending-impunity-killings-and-disappearances-1990s-turkey>.
33. “Ocalan: Three Practical Suggestions to the Government”, *ANF News*, July 9, 2010; Abdullah Öcalan, “Bir Hakikat Ve Uzlaşma Komisyonu Gerek” [“We Need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission”], *Ajansa Nûçeyan a Firatê*, November 18, 2010.
 34. Kurdish Human Rights Project, “The Status of Internally Displaced Kurds in Turkey: Return and Compensation Rights—An Update” (London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2006), 34–46, http://www.khrp.org/khrp-news/human-rights-documents/doc_download/97-the-status-of-internally-displaced-kurds-in-turkey--return-and-compensation-rights-an-update.html; Bilgin Ayata and Deniz Yükseser, “A Belated Awakening: National and International Responses to the Internal Displacement of Kurds in Turkey”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 32 (2005): 32–37.
 35. Alexander Christie-Miller, “The PPK and the Closure of Turkey’s Kurdish Opening”, *Middle East Research and Information Project*, August 4, 2010.
 36. M.P. Roth and Murat Sever: “The Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 10 (2007): 901–920; Mehmet Cetingulec, “Turkey Cracks Down on Drug Cartels”, *Al-Monitor*, May 29, 2014.
 37. Gallia Lindenstrauss, “Back to Square One? The Collapse of the Peace Process with the Kurds in Turkey”, *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 4 (2016): 100.
 38. For the village guards system in Turkey, see: Evren Balta, “Causes and Consequences of Village Guard System in Turkey”, paper presented at the Humanitarian and Security Affairs Conference, New York (USA), December 2, 2004.
 39. “Karayılan: Profesyonel Gerilla Hedefliyoruz” [“Karayılan: Our Aim a Professional Guerrilla Force”], *Dicle News Agency*, August 15, 2013; “Pinar Ogunc, “Kürtler Demokratik Ozerklikle Ne Istiyor?” [“What Are the Kurds Demanding With Democratic Autonomy?”], *Radikal*, April 29, 2014.
 40. International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the PKK: Saving the Peace Process” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2014), 23–24, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-and-pkk-saving-peace-process>
 41. Thanks to higher fertility, the growth rate of the Kurdish population critically outpaces the Turkish one and creates a “siege mentality” among the policy-making circles in Ankara. Palash Gosh, “A Kurdish Majority in Turkey Within One Generation?”, *International Business Times*, June 5, 2012; Burak Bekdil: “Uncle Tayyip’s ‘graying Turkey’ vs. A more Kurdish Turkey”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 15, 2015.

42. Abdüllatif Şener, “The Analysis of 2014 Local Elections of Turkey”, *Research Turkey* 3, no. 5 (2014): 19–37.
43. The statistics are derived from an unpublished survey (of 7100 people) by the Ankara think-tank TEPAV. International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the PKK”, 25–26.
44. Michiel Leezenberg, “The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy: The Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Rojava”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 671–690.
45. Deniz Serinci, “On Language Day, Kurds Demand Education in Mother Tongue”, *Rudaw*, May 16, 2014; Fréderike Geerdink, “Kurds Not Giving Up on Education in Mother Tongue”, *Al-Monitor*, September 23, 2014.
46. Henri Barkey and Direnç Kadioglu, “The Kurdish Constitution and the Kurdish Question” (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 2011), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/01/turkish-constitution-and-kurdish-question-pub-45218>.
47. Baskin Oran, “Exploring Turkishness: ‘Turkish’ and Türkiyeli” in *Turkey and the Politics of National Identity: Social, Economic and Cultural Transformation*, eds. Shane Brennan and Marc Herzog (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 23–37.
48. Emre Akoz, “Turkey’s Real Concern: Greater Kurdistan”, *Al-Monitor*, October 2, 2014.
49. Approximately 57% of the respondents in a nationwide public survey supported the solution process. International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the PKK”, 31.
50. Ünal: “Is It Ripe”: 18; Lindenstrauss, “Back to Square One”: 103.
51. International Crisis Group, “Turkey and the PKK”, 10–12.
52. “Turkey: Eight Journalists and 37 Politicians on KCK Trial Released”, *E-Kurd Daily*, March 27, 2014; “Turkey: Kurdish Politician Hatip Dicle Tried in KCK Case Released”, *E-Kurd Daily*, June 29, 2014.
53. Law No. 6551, “Terörün Sona Erdirilmesi ve Toplumsal Bütünleşmenin Güçlendirilmesine Dair Kanun” [“Law to End Terror and Strengthen Social Unity”]; “Çözüm Süreci Toplumdan Yüksek Bir Onay Alıyor” [“Solution Process Receives Wide Backing from Society”], *Anadolu Ajansı*, July 4, 2014.
54. Wladimir van Wilgenburg: “Turkey’s Gulen Movement Could Endanger PKK Peace Process”, *Rudaw*, June 18, 2013; Galip Dalay, “The Kurdish Peace Process in the Shadow of Turkey’s Power Struggle and the Upcoming Local Elections” (Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2014), 1, studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/03/2014324115034955220.html.
55. Ali Hussein Baker, “New Turkey: 2014 Presidential Elections and Future Implications” (Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2014), studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/08/201482791917421354.html.
56. Kurtuluş Tayız, “Ahmet Davutoğlu and Turkey’s Peace Process”, *Daily Sabah*, September 23, 2014.

57. The violent protests raged for three days (8–10 October 2014) in south-eastern and eastern Turkey (where the vast majority of the Kurds reside) and cost the lives of 34 people in total; only the appeal of Öcalan pacified the angry Kurdish crowds. Metin Gurcan, "Kurdish Activist Violence Brings Kobani Conflict to Turkish Streets", *Al-Monitor*, October 8, 2014.
58. Turkish Hezbollah acted as an organ of the "deep state" in the "dirty war" against the PKK in the 1990s and earned the hatred and fear of the pro-PKK supporters. Carolin Goerzig, *Talking to Terrorists: Concessions and the Renunciation of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2010), 109–110; Mustafa Gürbüz, "Revitalization of Kurdish Islamic Sphere and Revival of Hizbullah in Turkey" in *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question*, eds. Bilgin and Sarihan, 168–169.
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The Two-Fold “War on Terror” (2015–2017)

Abstract This chapter examines how a new wave of violence, similar in scale to that in the 1990s, unfolded in two phases: between July 2015 and April 2016, an *urban guerrilla war* in the towns of south-eastern Turkey and, from April 2016 until May 2017, a *rural guerrilla war*—in parallel with the Operation “Euphrates Shield” (August 2016–May 2017) by Turkey and the FSA in northern Syria. Analysing the course of the two-fold *war on terror* (against ISIS and PKK/ PYD) and the impact of the failed coup d’ état in July 2016 for the first time, the chapter demonstrates that the first phase ended in *victory* for Turkey and the second one in *stalemate*.

Keywords War on terror • PYD • ISIS • Euphrates shield
• Coup d’ état

FROM “WAR OF THE BARRICADES” TO THE “WAR OF THE IEDs” (AUGUST 2015–AUGUST 2016)

After the collapse of the ceasefire, Erdoğan declared a two-fold “war on terror” against the PKK and ISIS; indicatively of Turkey’s security priorities, the TSK conducted the vast majority of its initial strikes on the PKK rather than ISIS—the organisation responsible for the summer terrorist incidents.¹ The new war between the PKK and TSK differed critically from their past conflicts. In contrast to the 2000s, the PKK did not

wage a Maoist-type guerrilla war in the countryside; the party, instead, triggered a Leninist-type urban insurrection across cities in south-east Turkey. After all, the PKK did not wage a low-intensity war just to force Turkey into a negotiated settlement as in the first years of the AKP's rule; rather, the party initiated an all-out war to erode the state's authority in south-east Turkey.²

After all, the PKK had transformed several towns in south-east Turkey into a no-go zone for the TSK since 2014. As long as the “solution process” persisted despite its ups and downs, Erdoğan prohibited the TSK from suppressing the PKK's youth militias and “parallel state” structures (e.g. for taxation or justice) lest the peace talks should collapse.³ Yet, this “carte blanche” to the PKK only added to the long-standing grievances of the military's top leadership with regard to the AKP's policies on the Kurdish Issue.⁴ Far worse, this impunity created a misleading feeling of superiority in the PKK's top leaders. After all, they genuinely believed that the PKK fulfilled all four conditions of Galula (the renowned French warrior-scholar on irregular warfare in the 1960s)⁵ for a successful insurgency: an alluring cause (revenge for the killings of Kurds by ISIS and the allegedly conniving AKP), a favourable geography (the proximity to the PKK's safe havens in northern Syria and Iraq), a weak government (the conflict between Erdoğan and Gülen) and outside support (the assistance from the Kurdish diasporas and communities as well as the sympathy from the world public opinion for the struggle against ISIS).

The PKK, accordingly, “franchised” the insurgency to the Revolutionary Youth Movement (Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareket or YDG-H)—a youth militia founded by the KCK in 2013 in the towns of east and south-east Turkey.⁶ In August 2015, the YDG-H set up makeshift barricades within the towns (e.g. Cizre) and neighbourhoods of towns (e.g. Sur in Diyarbakir) in south-east Turkey to cut the TSK off the new laboratories of “Kurdish Self-governance” (Kürtler Özyönetim).⁷ But why did the PKK adopt such a high-risk strategy? Cities can easily be converted from “safe havens” into death traps for insurgents—as modern history from Iraq to Chechnya demonstrates. The PKK intended to accomplish two inter-related objectives with this venture: first, willy-nilly implicate the civilian population in the war and, secondly, capitalise on the outcry of the public opinion (inside and outside Turkey) for the new wave of violence against civilians. Last but not least, the influence of the PYD's modus operandi (i.e. emphasis on urban warfare) on the PKK's new tactics could be easily discerned.⁸

Turkey initially launched air strikes against the PKK’s military bases in Qandil and police operations against the YDG-H. As the conflict in towns escalated, senior AKP officials deliberated on the optimum COIN policy: should the state militarise the police for a conflict within an urban environment or simply depopulate the towns and deploy the army in a typical “search-and-destroy” operation? In October, the AKP decided to adopt a “hybrid” COIN tactic. Analytically, the TSK quarantined the towns⁹ from their surrounding countryside and stripped them off their civilian population; thereafter, the TSK besieged the towns (or the districts within the towns) tightly and stormed them one by one with a mix of police special operation units (PÖH), gendarmerie special operations units (JÖH) and specialised armoured units of the Turkish Land Forces (TKK).¹⁰

In effect, the AKP adopted an “enemy-centric approach”¹¹ towards the PKK—in line with Erdogan’s statement that Ankara would “annihilate the terrorists”.¹² Since the war raged within towns, the heavy-handed tactics of the TSK resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians (over 500) as well as the internal displacement of thousands more (nearly 350,000 individuals).¹³ The TSK was accused by human rights activists of a systematic and wholesale destruction of towns (and neighbourhoods of towns) and repeated human rights violations (including extra-judicial deaths).¹⁴ The civilian Kurdish population experienced high levels of violence and the HDP’s electoral appeal decreased in the snap November elections by *guilt of association* with the PKK.¹⁵ And as modern Turkish history showed time and time again, this created a vicious circle: the escalation of the conflict only restricted the prospects of a non-violent Kurdish political activism which, in turn, aggravates this ethnic conflict.¹⁶ In an effort to improve the profile of the AKP towards the Kurds, in February 2016, Prime Minister Davutoğlu unveiled an ambitious plan of post-war reconstruction and promised to rescind the curfews and the state of emergency in south-east Turkey.¹⁷ The state, however, has not delivered yet on its promises in the war-ravaged provinces.¹⁸

For the first time in the annals of this ethnic war, the clashes continued well into the winter of 2015–2016. However, the scales of war progressively tilted in favour of the TSK owing to the latter’s superior tactics and resources. The PKK was compelled to increasingly use the battle-hardened HPG fighters in the conflict to compensate for the losses of the youth militias. In December 2015, the YDG-H was absorbed by the Civil Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Sivîl or YPS), a military force

increasingly dominated by the HPG¹⁹; yet to no avail. By March 2016, the YPS had been defeated and the PKK adopted a new strategy.²⁰ This PKK reverted to a Maoist-type guerrilla war in the countryside²¹ and used tactics from the Syrian Civil War (e.g. improvised explosive devices or IEDs as well as suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices or SVBIEDs) to offset the tactical superiority of the TSK.²² In fact, the TSK suffered the majority of the casualties from IEDs and SVBIEDs.²³ In March 2016, the use of man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) by the PKK against Turkey's military helicopters crossed another critical threshold in this war.²⁴

In addition, the Kurds decided to expand the war beyond south-east Turkey. From December 2015 onwards, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan or TAK), a splinter group of the PKK,²⁵ launched repeated terrorist strikes against both civilian and military targets in western Turkey.²⁶ Along with the intensified activity by ISIS,²⁷ these attacks frightened off the foreign investors and tourists and, by extension, threatened to wreck the country's economy.²⁸

The TSK countered the PKK's new tactics with new weapons—the domestically produced UAVs. In fact, over 30% of the total PKK casualties in the second half of 2016 were caused by these UAVs.²⁹ After all, the TSK increasingly “tested” new weapons from the indigenous defence industry against the PKK—from Kirpi (a Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle) to Cirit (a laser-guided air-to-ground missile).³⁰ In addition, the TSK increasingly committed exclusively professional and semi-professional troops to the fight against the PKK to maximise combat efficiency and minimise casualties. Even commandos from the Turkish Peace Force (Türk Barış Kuvvetleri) in occupied northern Cyprus were assigned to south-east in early 2016.³¹

The summer of 2016 was one of the costliest for the TSK: despite the inflated statistics of the Turkish general staff about the “neutralized PKK terrorists”, the casualty ratio between the TSK and PKK was 3:1 according to the reports of the International Crisis Group.³² In the battles against the YDG-H, the TSK did not suffer such casualties. Worse, the failed coup d'état in July 2016 and the subsequent purges in the security apparatus affected the command structure of the Second Army—the corps principally responsible for COIN in south-east Turkey.³³ Several officers with combat experience were imprisoned or downgraded—although the real impact of the purges in the TSK's combat performance against the PKK cannot be yet established with 100% accuracy. The subsequent cross-border operations

of Turkey into northern Syria (“Euphrates Shield” from August 2016 to May 2017 and “Olive Branch” since January 2018) would test the limits of the operational capacity of the TSK in the aftermath of the coup.

In summary, the enemy-centric approach of Ankara quelled the urban uprisings in south-east Turkey but did not pacify the region; though severely weakened, the PKK shifted its modus operandi into a low-intensity guerrilla war in the countryside and high-profile terrorist attacks. Ankara would soon launch a new preventive war—this time in Syria against the PYD. This cross-border operation would be the harbinger of the “New Turkey”—a country increasingly authoritarian, anti-Western, pro-Islamist and aggressive with its neighbours (if not outright revisionist with respect to established frontiers).

OPERATION “EUPHRATES SHIELD” (AUGUST 2016–MARCH 2017)

In August 2016, Turkey decided to intervene in northern Syria against the PYD in the context of the two-fold “war against terror”³⁴ against ISIS and the PKK/PYD. Although Turkey cited the repeated border incidents with ISIS³⁵ as the only reason behind this armed incursion, in reality Ankara acted to avert the establishment of a unified Kurdish statelet in Syria.³⁶ After all, Ankara consistently implored Washington in previous months to establish a “no flying zone” (in co-operation with the TSK and FSA) in the 100-km zone between the Afrin and Kobani Cantons (which were occupied by ISIS). However, the USA did not approve.³⁷ In reality, Turkey intended to avert the unification of the Afrin and Kobani Cantons.

Although the TSK’s top commanders shared the same security concerns with the top political leaders, they did not consent to a cross-border operation in Syria.³⁸ In August 2016, the army no longer opposed such a plan. Why? For the primary reasons. First of all, the threat perception by the PYD (PKK) had been augmented dramatically due to the YPG’s military triumphs. In June, the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced into the west bank of the Euphrates River (a *casus belli* for Turkey³⁹) and in mid-August captured Manbij in a sweeping offensive. Al-Bab, the city halfway between the Cantons of Afrin and Kobane would be next in line.⁴⁰ Secondly, the coup d’état in July and the subsequent purges weakened the power of the TSK vis-à-vis Erdoğan even further. Therefore, the TSK’s top commanders could not oppose Erdoğan’s own plans about Syria as in previous months.⁴¹

On August 24, units of the 2nd Army of the TSK and its allies from the FSA⁴² invaded northern Syria near Jarablus and the city was captured in just a few days by ISIS without a fight.⁴³ Operation “Euphrates Shield” was symbolically launched the same day the US Vice President Biden visited Ankara and the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Dabiq occurred.⁴⁴ The SDF, the alliance between the YPG and elements of the FSA under the aegis of the USA,⁴⁵ sallied forth from Manbij and captured the territory south of Jarablus; after clashes with the FSA, Sajur River was delineated as the boundary between the two parties. The USA was confronted with a stark dilemma: should Washington support Turkey (the defiant NATO ally who nonetheless provided the Incirlik air base for the anti-ISIS campaign) or the SDF (the trusted “boots on the ground” against ISIS)? This dilemma underscored a major policy debate in Washington amongst military and diplomatic officials: should the USA support the Kurds against ISIS and provoke the ire of Turkey or should Washington cooperate with the old NATO ally (and second largest military within the alliance) against ISIS and, at a subsequent stage, against Iran and Syria? Finally the USA chose a middle way: Biden called upon the YPG to withdraw east of the Euphrates River while at the same time warned Turkey against any further clashes with the YPG.⁴⁶

Operation “Euphrates Shield” tested the convoluted relations between Russia and Turkey. In fact, the operation commenced only after Russia, which had sealed off the airspace of Syria for Turkey after the downing of the Russian war jet in November 2015, consented. The one strained relation between Ankara and Moscow improved drastically in the second half of 2016 since Putin readily supported Erdoğan in the wake of the ill-fated putsch in July 2016.⁴⁷ However, as the course of the operation would subsequently demonstrate, Russia did not provide Turkey with a *carte blanche* in northern Syria; rather, Putin delimited a specific role for Turkey in the northern theatre of war and, more than once, reminded Erdoğan about the limits of the TSK.⁴⁸ Still, the initial successes of the TSK created a feeling of euphoria: the TSK within just seven weeks had captured 1100 square kilometres with minor casualties and opened the gates of al-Bab (literally the “gate” in Arabic).⁴⁹ As the Battle of al-Bab would clearly demonstrate, however, these successes were owed primarily to the initially weak resistance of ISIS.

The Islamist government in Turkey, at the same time, stepped up the repression against the HDP. The latter was (once again) accused of collusion with the PKK and, in November 2016, the party’s top leaders were imprisoned without any trial.⁵⁰ In reality Erdoğan removed yet another barrier in his way towards a strong presidential system.⁵¹ Demirtaş, the charismatic Kurdish leader, had proven to be a thorn in the side ever since

the presidential elections of 2014.⁵² After all, the HDP could not remove the stigma of a “political wing” of the PKK—despite repeated statements to the contrary by the party’s top leadership. The HDP acted as a junior partner in the “solution process” (in particular as an intermediary between the AKP and Öcalan) and, hence, was associated with the PKK.⁵³

Indeed, the HDP was *squeezed* between the PKK (which wanted to monopolise the loyalty of the Kurds) and the AKP (which forged a new alliance with nationalist hardliners). The MHP was co-opted as Erdoğan promised the leader of the far-rightist party (which consistently opposed the peace negotiations with the Kurds) an aggressive policy towards the PKK and a favourable political function in the “New Turkey” after the coup. The other unlikely allies of Erdoğan included the former Kemalist generals whom he imprisoned in co-operation with Gülen. He released them from prison in 2014 as victims of an alleged conspiracy by the Gülen-infiltrated judiciary and police; these officers, quite predictably, shared the same animus against the PKK and Gülen.⁵⁴ The co-operation with these conservative actors would reach its climax in the constitutional referendum in April 2017.⁵⁵ But even the CHP did not speak up against the prosecution of the HDP. Why? Because the AKP set the political tune in the aftermath of the failed coup d’ état and no party could possibly question the actions of Erdoğan—the victim and hero at the same time of the failed putsch.⁵⁶

Between September and November, the YPG and the FSA/TSK raced towards al-Bab. While the FSA and TSK advanced rapidly in the face of weak ISIS resistance, the YPG of the Afrin Canton inched towards the city from the east; the latter was even directly assisted by the Syrian Arab Army in November in the context of a wider co-operation between the PYD and Assad in the critical Battle of Aleppo (which ended in Assad’s victory in December). Similarly, the SDF sallied forth from Manbij towards al-Bab and seized territory east of the city but the strong opposition of Ankara and the disapproval of Washington stopped the SDF only 18 km away from the city.⁵⁷ In December, the advance of the YPG from the east steamed out due to a dearth in military forces and, most notably, a *red light* by Putin. The above incident underlines the ties of the PYD with Moscow and Washington. The YPG in the Afrin Canton is supported by Russia and the SDF in the other cantons by the USA.⁵⁸ In the same month, the FSA and TSK besieged al-Bab from three directions—although their initial entry into the city was frustrated with heavy losses. In spite of the invaluable experience in urban warfare against the PKK and its proxies, the TSK could not easily overcome ISIS which used high-tech weaponry (in particular, advanced anti-tank systems) as well as tactics (e.g. the use of SVBIEDs).⁵⁹

Turkey increasingly depended on Russia to achieve its objectives in northern Syria. Negotiating with Putin from a position of weakness, Erdoğan yielded to a *deal*: Aleppo for al-Bab. Turkey would cease its support for the insurgent die-hards in Aleppo and, conversely, Russia would consent to the capture of al-Bab by the TSK and FSA.⁶⁰ Just as Turkey realised that Russia was the most powerful actor in Syria west of the Euphrates River, Russia (and Iran) understood that the conflict would never end unless Turkey discontinued its support for the armed opposition in Idlib and Aleppo. December 2016 proved a decisive date for the relations between Erdoğan and Putin. The victory of Assad in the Battle of Aleppo and, most notably, the assassination of Russia's ambassador by an Islamist zealot debilitated the position of Erdoğan vis-à-vis Putin much further. From a position of weakness, Erdoğan accepted a tripartite pact (Iran, Russia and Turkey) for a ceasefire across Syria (excluding ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra⁶¹) and negotiations between Assad and the opposition-in-exile. The "Astana Peace Process", named after the capital of Kazakhstan where delegates of all parties met, marked the high tide of the new "triumvirate". However, this was not a marriage out of love but out of necessity. They needed each other to further their (sometimes conflicting) goals—at least temporarily.⁶²

In exchange, Russia reinforced militarily the operations of the TSK and FSA in late December and early January.⁶³ However, Moscow also supported the advances of the Syrian Arab Army (in concert with YPG from the Afrin Canton) from the south up to the gates of al-Bab in late January and early February; however, Assad did not storm al-Bab—apparently due to a secret deal between the Kremlin and Ankara.⁶⁴ In late February, the TSK and FSA finally captured al-Bab after a three-month siege and a heavy death toll—a testament to the inefficacy of the FSA as an independent military force and the intra-operational problems of the TSK.⁶⁵ Indicatively of the poor performance of the TSK and FSA, the SDF had captured Manbij (a city ten times larger than al-Bab and defended by a far larger ISIS force) within just two months in mid-2015.⁶⁶

The Kremlin was nonetheless reluctant to simply discard this powerful Kurdish card in its precarious relations with Ankara. Much to the chagrin of Ankara, Moscow included a provision for the conferment of autonomy to Rojava in the draft constitution for post-war Syria and invited the PYD for peace talks with Assad in early 2017.⁶⁷ The actions of the USA, nevertheless, caused the greatest headache to Turkey. In November 2016, the USA sanctioned an offensive by the SDF against the capital of ISIS, Raqqa. The SDF advanced rapidly against ISIS, thanks to the increasing military support by the USA, and, after the conclusion of the 4th phase of

Operation “Wrath of the Euphrates” in March 2017, the SDF had captured almost all territory north of the banks of the Euphrates River and isolated Raqqa.⁶⁸

Ankara was incensed that the USA excluded the TSK and FSA from the operation against Raqqa. As a result, Turkey increasingly acted as a “spoiler” in March 2017. The FSA, assisted by the TSK, initiated an assault against the SDF in the direction of Manbij. However, the reactions of Russia and the USA were swift and resolute. The USA condemned this attack and the US military forces displayed their colours in Manbij.⁶⁹ In a similar way, Russia interceded between Assad and the SDF and the latter agreed to cede the regions north and west of Manbij to Assad; the Russians even deployed a military force in Manbij to oversee the process⁷⁰ and even in Afrin to defend it from any attack.⁷¹

Upon encountering the stiff resistance of Russia and the USA, Turkey declared an end to “Operation Euphrates Shield” and dubbed it as a resounding success.⁷² Does this assertion, however, correspond to reality? To answer this question, the core political objectives of Turkey’s operation must be identified first. Turkey intended to neutralise the threat of ISIS along the long Turco-Syrian frontier and forestall the unification of the two Kurdish cantons; the capture of al-Bab appears to have accomplished the two objectives. In reality, however, Turkey only partially achieved its core objectives. The armed intervention of Turkey only cemented the cooperation between Assad and the YPG—as demonstrated by the recent events. Much to the chagrin of Ankara, the unification of the Kurdish cantons occurred via the territories controlled by Assad. In addition, the Kurds tried to thwart Turkey’s military intervention through an understanding with Assad. A deal between Assad and the Syrian Kurds is not an improbable scenario. Both actors perceive Turkey and its Islamist / jihadist allies as a common threat and they could reach an agreement that would (in strategic terms) satisfy the long-term goals of other external actors—Iran, Russia and the USA.

In the same month, the war against the PKK threatened to spill over to northern Iraq. In Sinjar, the stronghold of the Yazidi Kurds, the PKK entrenched itself deeply after the peshmerga of the Kurdistan Regional Government did not defend this minority in the summer of 2014 from ISIS. Venerated as their champion, Yezidis flocked to the PKK and formed a left-wing militia (Sinjar Resistance Units—Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê or YBS).⁷³ The PKK, in effect, consolidated another base in northern Iraq (apart from Qandil) next to the border with Syria that secured the connection between “Rojava” and Qandil. Concerned about the rising power of

the PKK in northern Iraq, Turkey and Barzani (bedfellows in their policy towards the PKK⁷⁴) reacted. Ankara threatened to intervene and Erbil tried to oust the PKK and YBS with a show of military force; the PKK and YBS, however, could not be easily dislodged and a ceasefire was agreed.⁷⁵ Turkey, nonetheless, still contemplates on the option of a unilateral armed incursion in northern Iraq—despite the opposition of the USA and Iraq. In fact, Baghdad warned Ankara that a cross-border operation against the PKK and YBS would be viewed as a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty and would only worsen the already strained relations between the two countries.⁷⁶

The new occupant of the White House set the destruction of ISIS as the top priority of his presidency and, much to the surprise of the Erdoğan who welcomed the victory of Trump, threw his lot with the YPG in his “crusade” against ISIS. In May, Trump decided to arm the SDF with heavy weaponry despite the repeated criticism by Turkey that this equipment would end up at the hands of the PKK.⁷⁷ When Turkey assaulted the YPG in northern Syria and Iraq, the USA deployed their military forces in northern Syria to shield their allies—much to the chagrin of Erdoğan.⁷⁸ The developments since May 2017 in Syria and Iraq have only widened the gap between Ankara and Washington. Ironically enough, Turkey opted to partner itself with Russia and Iran (two historical enemies) against the USA (its old NATO ally). Why? Because Erdoğan perceived the sprawling statelet of the PYD (under the patronage of the USA) in northern Syria as an existential threat for Turkey’s national security and solid proof of the sinister US plot against his regime.

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CHAPTER 6

What Lies Ahead

Abstract The conclusion establishes that, despite the repeated peace initiatives between 2009 and 2015, peace in Turkey is still elusive. The ongoing conflict acquired a new peripheral dimension owing to the civil wars in Iraq and Syria since 2011 and, ergo, the conflicts in the three countries are *communicating vessels*. Analysing in brief the developments on the Kurdish Issue since May 2017, this chapter contends that the current stalemate between Turkey and the PKK will endure—unless, of course, a dramatic shift in the balance of power occurs.

Keywords Elusive peace • Stalemate • Kurdish momentum

THE ELUSIVE PEACE

In summary, Erdoğan adopted a “carrot-and-stick policy” towards the Kurds and the PKK from 2009 until 2015 since Turkey’s strongman was absorbed by a protracted struggle against the once all-powerful Kemalist establishment and, subsequently, against his old ally—Gülen and the Hizmet. Although cold political calculations dictated the peace initiatives towards the Kurds and the PKK first and foremost, one cannot but admit that Erdoğan offered far more to the cause of peace in Turkish Kurdistan than any of his predecessors ever since Kemal Atatürk.¹ Indeed, Erdoğan’s initial actions would open the pathway to the further democratisation of the Turkish political scene.²

The initial initiatives for peace (i.e. the “Kurdish/Democratic Opening” in 2009 and the “Oslo Peace Process” between 2009 and 2011) intended principally to temporarily pacify south-east and east Turkey ahead of crucial political struggles—not to permanently resolve the Kurdish Question. After all, the new wave of violence by the PKK did not present a serious challenge to the hegemony of the AKP due to the PKK’s new *modus operandi* and fundamental weakness. Nor did the PKK intend to engage in an all-out war as in the 1990s; rather, Qandil used the low-intensity conflict to extract political concessions from an (already embattled against the Kemalists) Erdoğan.

The Syrian Civil War, however, acted as a catalyst for the escalation of the war and the subsequent de-escalation through negotiations. In 2012, the PKK-affiliated PYD captured various towns in northern Syria amid the chaos of the sectarian war and the PKK aspired to imitate the success of its Syrian offshoot in south-east Turkey. After the bloodiest battles since 2004, the PKK’s separatist designs were defeated by the TSK. However, both sides understood that they could not overcome the other militarily.

Thanks to the mediation of Öcalan, the “mutually hurting stalemate” eventuated into the inauguration of an ambitious “solution process” in March 2013—arguably the most serious venture by Ankara in the direction of a peace settlement with the Kurds. In contrast to the previous initiatives, the new process was an open and inclusive one. And although the public opinion warmly welcomed a process that promised to terminate an intermittent conflict since 1984, the reality was far less propitious.

First of all, the two sides could not agree on a roadmap for peace since each side expected the other to offer concessions first: Ankara set the withdrawal and disarmament of the PKK as a *conditio sine qua non* for the start of the peace dialogue and the implementation of the “democratization packages”, whereas the PKK said exactly the opposite.³ But the PKK was only one of the various poles of power along with the HDP and Öcalan. And although Öcalan wielded substantial influence over the KCK, PKK and HDP, he did not control them as Ankara erroneously assumed. Additional “expectation” issues plagued the peace process. The Kurds expected that this process would eventuate into the radical transformation of Turkey (and possibly the re-establishment of the Turkish Republic on the basis of a co-equal partnership between Kurds and Turks); however, Ankara aspired to achieve the disarmament of the PKK (and maybe a check over its offshoot in Syria) in return for certain reforms. Far worse, neither

side sincerely committed to the precarious peace process; although they did not confront each other as in 2012, they did undermine each other's authority. Turkey aided the PKK's opponents in Syria, whereas the PKK established a "parallel state" in south-east and east Turkey. However, the two sides did not renounce the "solution process" and concentrated on their top priorities elsewhere.

In the face of these problems, the peace process depended on the strong personalities of Erdoğan and Öcalan to subsist. Indeed, Öcalan intervened twice (in 2013 and 2014) to avert a total breakdown and, in a similar way, Erdoğan ignored the violations of the peace dialogue by the PKK. However, the tensions between the two sides steadily mounted and the suicide bombings by jihadists in early 2015 were the catalyst for a new wave of violence. The PKK accused the AKP of collusion with ISIS against the Kurds and assaulted the TSK; this time Erdoğan did not stay idle and the TSK retaliated in full force. Why did both sides resort to violence? Because Erdoğan decided to declare a preventive war against the Kurds and, conversely, the PKK intended to dictate its own terms on Erdoğan through violence.

A STALEMATE AHEAD

The result? The worst fighting in years: a vicious "barricade war" in south-east and east Turkey with a heavy toll (especially on civilians)⁴ and a new battlefield in northern Syria. Although the TSK did in fact frustrate the PKK's overambitious plans of a popular uprising inside Turkey, the PKK has not been vanquished as decisively as in the 1990s.⁵ Nor did the TSK fulfil the political objectives of Operation "Euphrates Shield" in full. In other words, neither side achieved its primary objectives completely. So, what's next?

The situation is complicated even further now. The Syrian Kurds increasingly act as the agents of the USA in the Fertile Crescent. In September 2017, the YPG decided to advance towards Deir ez-Zor in the wake of the city's liberation by Assad.⁶ Why? By occupying the whole northern bank of the Euphrates River, the YPG intended to disrupt the "Shia Corridor" (Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut) and, in addition, seize the existing crucial assets (dams and oilfields). However, this move disturbed Russia and Assad and increased the possibility of a conflict between Moscow and Washington and their respective protégés—Assad and the YPG. The same month, another seismic development

occurred: an independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan despite the objection of the USA and the ultimatums by the neighbouring countries (Iraq, Turkey and Iran).⁷ Only Israel openly supported this move. Although this plebiscite just legitimised the de facto independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, the aforementioned three countries vowed to nullify this act through an embargo or even an invasion.⁸ Eventually, Iraq and Iran (not least thanks to severe divisions inside the Iraqi Kurds) captured Kirkuk and Sinjar almost bloodlessly in mid-October 2017 and dashed the dreams for outright independence. The “Kurdish Momentum”⁹ was without doubt very strong. However, the Kurds cannot establish a viable state, either in Syria or in Iraq, as long as all neighbouring countries oppose their independence. The USA, at the same time, is strategically adrift: on the one hand, Washington is morally compelled to support the Kurds as allies in the bloody and victorious fight against ISIS; on the other hand, the USA cannot indefinitely support the Kurds because such a course of action will drain the resources of the USA and strain the relations with neighbouring countries (such as Turkey or Iran) even further. When these lines were written in January 2017, the USA had still not decided what to do in Syria or Iraq in a coherent way.

On the other side of the fence, Erdoğan veers increasingly towards Putin—a sign of displeasure from Turkey’s unchallenged strongman about the deepening co-operation between the USA and Syria’s Kurds and the alleged involvement of Washington in the failed coup d’état in 2016. Turkey is indeed concerned about the establishment of two independent Kurdish statelets in its southern and western frontiers and, in an act of self-preservation, decided to ally itself with the “status quo powers” (and its ancestral enemies): Iran and Russia. Though initially adversaries in the Syrian War, Turkey and Iran/Russia strengthened their co-operation and even co-fathered the Astana Process for four de-conflictions zones in Syria.¹⁰ But why? Because both sides need each other. Turkey cannot act against the YPG in the Afrin Canton or Tharir al Sham (formerly al Nusra) in Idlib without the permission and support of Russia and Iran. And the latter cannot end the Syrian War without the active engagement of Turkey. A “New Turkey” now emerges which militarily intervenes in neighbouring countries in pursuit of its national security objectives—without necessarily a “green light” by the USA. The senior officials of the Trump Administration have not understood yet the cataclysmic consequences of the failed coup and the rise of the Kurds in the psychology of the Turkish strongman and society.

Is Turkey capable of a protracted war on multiple fronts given the fact that failed coup d'état and the following “witch-hunt” dealt a heavy blow to the TSK’s spirit and capabilities?¹¹ As the power of the PKK grows, so do the fears of Turkey. Therefore, a new preventive war by Turkey against the PKK/YPG in northern Syria was imminent—even though such a war could well entangle Ankara into a protracted war with an uncertain outcome. When these lines were written in January 2018, Turkey had just launched Operation “Olive Branch” against Afrin—with the “green light” of Russia of course. The operational objectives of Turkey are not clear yet—whether Ankara intends only to establish a buffer zone along its borders with the Canton of Afrin or destroy this enclave completely. How the USA will react to an attack against its allies cannot be determined yet. What about Russia? Well Russia would welcome the deterioration of the strained Turko-American relations and the curtail of the Syrian Kurds’ ambitions. Iran and Syria are not very happy with this incursion by Turkey—although Assad could possibly re-establish his control over Afrin after the Kurds receive a severe punishment first for the cooperation with the USA. No one can predict the course and outcome of this operation yet. Turkey’s Kurdish Question is transformed into a regional issue without easy solutions.¹²

NOTES

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