

Anatomy of a Terrorist Organisation

Anatomy of a Terrorist Organisation:

The Kurdistan Workers' Party

Edited by

Serhat A. Erkmen and Burak Güneş

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contributors.....	viii
Introduction	xix
Serhat A. Erkmén & Burak Güneş	
Chapter I.....	1
Describing the PKK: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Organisation in Terms of Organisation, Ideology and Leadership Serhat A. Erkmén & Hatice Varol Dağdelen	
Chapter II.....	12
Terror, Fear of Partition and the Sacred Homeland: Re-Membering Collective Trauma through PKK Actions Akif Bahadır Kaynak & Deniz Ülke Kaynak	
Chapter III	35
Continuity and Change in the PKK: An Examination of Evolutionary Dynamics from Foundation to Present Arman Sert	
Chapter IV	71
Radicalization and Indoctrination Processes in the PKK Merve Önenli Güven	
Chapter V	90
An Analysis of a Religiousness without a Kibla: PKK and Religion Muhittin İmıl	
Chapter VI	120
Analysis of the Transformation in PKK's Actions from the Perspective of Learning Organisations: Drone Attacks Selim Kurt	

Chapter VII.....	144
The Effect of ISIS Terrorist Organisation on the Action Strategy of PKK/PYD Terrorist Organisation in Tactical and Technical Aspects Gökhan İbrahim Ögünç	
Chapter VIII	188
PKK Terrorist Organisation's Propaganda Activities (1984-2024) Bora İyiat	
Chapter IX	210
PKK Terrorist Organisation's Social Media Propaganda Erol Başaran Bural	
Chapter X	238
Female Militants in PKK Fatma Anil Öztop	
Chapter XI	259
Child Abuse by PKK Terrorist Organisation Begüm Çardak	
Chapter XII.....	285
The Effects of PKK Terrorism on Turkish Economy Necmettin Çelik	
Chapter XIII	301
The Relationship between the PKK and Radical Leftist Organisations in Türkiye: Continuity or Rupture? Yasin Yıldız	
Chapter XIV	336
Analysis of PKK/KCK Terrorist Organisation Youth Structures Alper Güneş	
Chapter XV.....	361
PKK/KCK's Shadow and Shadowing in Syria: The Establishment and Evolution of the PYD-YPG Emre Çitak	

Chapter XVI	389
PKK's Organisation in Iran	
Mehmet Çağatay Abuşoğlu	
Chapter XVII	409
Terrorism Policy of the United States and the Russian Federation:	
The PKK and its Syrian Branch PYD	
Özdemir Akbal	
Chapter XVIII.....	423
Russia's PKK/PYD/YPG Policy	
Sabir Askeroğlu	
Chapter XIX	451
The US Grand Strategies' Consequences for the Evolving PKK Threat	
to Türkiye	
Özgür Uğurdan	

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INTRODUCTION

SERHAT ERKMEN & BURAK GÜNEŞ

The process of writing a book on the the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* / PKK) is not always as straightforward as one might assume. This is due to the fact that the PKK represents a significant phenomenon not only within Türkiye but also in the wider region, with ramifications that extend beyond the region's borders. The organisation in question cannot be considered a mere terrorist organisation; it has also been acting like an organised crime organisation for many years. The organisation, which is engaged in a multitude of illicit activities, seeks to establish a presence in a diverse array of domains, including drug trafficking. The PKK has not only retained its original designation but has also established new entities under different nomenclature in disparate jurisdictions. While it operates in Syria and Iraq under designations such as People's Defense Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* / YPG) and Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* / PYD), it exists in Iran as Kurdistan Free Life Party (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê* / PJAK). This circumstance illustrates that PKK terrorism possesses a dimension that merits particular attention.

At its inception in Türkiye, the PKK was characterised by an identity aligned with the Cold War era. Accordingly, the organisation was structured along Marxist-Leninist lines at its inception. This approach has evolved over time, taking on different forms. In the first instance, the PKK established itself on the basis of Kurdish ethnicity, and all of its subsequent policies were shaped in accordance with this identity. The organisation, which initially claimed to adhere to Marxist-Leninist principles, subsequently espoused racist ideologies as it pursued policies based on identity politics. This racist line of thinking gave rise to an ethnically homogeneous vision, including the notion that a state exclusively for Kurds should be established. The objective of creating a nation that is as homogeneous as possible, based on ethnic identity, led to an increase and expansion of terrorist activities by the organisation. However, the organisation was not averse to perpetrating a range of criminal activities; including the use of weapons, drug trafficking and

human trafficking, among others. In this sense, the organisation has come to be regarded as an organised crime entity in addition to its status as a terrorist organisation. Following over four decades of terrorist activities, the organisation has attained the capability to undertake operations in regional states beyond Türkiye, bolstered by the international support it has amassed.

In particular, the organisation, which served as a front structure for the major powers in the international system, was utilised as a valuable instrument for advancing the interests of these powers at the regional level. In particular, in the context of the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the organisation, with the public support it received from some states, was able to present itself as an innocent and freedom-fighting entity. The organisation has utilised its media outlets, including magazines, newspapers and television channels, to disseminate a range of propaganda activities that it believes will advance its interests. The objective of this book is to provide an overview of the PKK, an organisation with intricate structures, and to ascertain its identity across all its dimensions. The book is comprised of 19 chapters in total. An expert in the relevant field authors each chapter.

Serhat Erkmen and Hatice Varol's chapter concentrates on the structure of the PKK in general. This chapter addresses the organisational structure of the organisation in Iraq, Türkiye, Syria, and Iran, its activities, and the support it receives in carrying out these activities.

In their chapter, Bahadır Kaynak and Deniz Ülke Kaynak employ a psychosocial perspective to analyse the PKK phenomenon, the reflexes of Turkish society against PKK terrorism and the re-emerging traumas.

In contrast, Arman Sert employs a historical narrative approach to evaluate the processes undergone by the organisation. The objective of his study is to examine the continuity and transformation of the PKK from a historical vantage point, with a particular emphasis on pivotal occurrences and discourses, rather than on analysing them in isolation through the lens of cause-and-effect relationships.

In her chapter, Merve Önenli Güven presents a discussion of the formation, development and activist processes of the organisation in the context of radicalisation processes. In her chapter, the processes by which radicalisation with violence in the PKK terrorist organisation is established

are investigated through the identification of the indoctrination methods employed by the PKK terrorist organisation.

In his chapter, Muhittin Imıl analyses the relationship between the PKK's religious and Marxist identities, examining the differences and similarities between them. In this way, he aims to identify the extent to which ideological influences have shaped Kurdish society.

Selim Kurt employs the theory of learning organisations to analyse the PKK. The objective of his chapter was to analyse the transformation in the PKK's actions within the framework of the theory of learning organisations, with the drone example serving as a case in point.

Similarly, Gökhan İbrahim Ögünç employs the learning organisation approach to analyse the similarities between the PKK and ISIS. The PKK has primarily adopted tactics and techniques from ISIS at the tactical and technical levels. The following chapter presents a detailed analysis of these processes.

In his chapter, Bora İyiat provides an analysis of the propaganda techniques employed by the PKK since 1984. Such techniques are employed by terrorist organisations with the objective of achieving the highest level of visibility with the least effort. This chapter presents a discussion of the aforementioned techniques.

Additionally, Erol Başaran Bural directs attention towards the propaganda activities of the PKK. In this regard, he analyses the utilisation of social media. The objective of this chapter is to examine the propaganda activities of those who support the PKK terrorist organisation through the lens of social media.

In this study, Fatma Anıl Öztop employs a feminist lens to examine the phenomenon of female terrorists within the PKK. This study addresses the question of whether PKK women are viewed as sexual objects or passive victims manipulated by men. It does so by examining motivations, roles and reasons for joining the organisation, with the aim of contributing to the existing literature on terrorism.

Begüm Çardak is also implicated in the issue of child abuse within the PKK. The abuse in question is consistent with the definition of "child soldier" as presented in the relevant literature. This framework allows for a detailed analysis of the problematic ways in which the PKK exploits and uses children.

Necmettin Çelik's analysis is primarily concerned with the economic aspects of the issue. He provides a comprehensive analysis of the mounting direct and indirect financial costs of the 40-year-long PKK terrorist activities on the Turkish economy, as well as the significant loss of life that has resulted.

In his study, Yasin Yıldız examines the relationship between the PKK and other leftist organisations. The primary question he addresses is whether there is continuity or a rupture in the relationship with these organisations.

Additionally, Alper Güneş provides an analysis of the PKK's youth organisation. The PKK is engaged in efforts to establish a presence on university campuses and within civil society in Türkiye. Such activities are conducted in these locations by the organisation's youth wing. Alper Güneş raises questions about the operational principles of this organisation.

Emre Çıtak, on the other hand, aims to examine the activities of the PKK in Syria. The PKK is not a structure that is confined to Türkiye. Furthermore, it operates in various states under different names. The activities conducted in Syria under the designation of PYD/YPG constitute the focal point of Emre Çıtak's analysis.

Similarly, Mehmet Abuşoğlu aims to investigate the Iranian organisation of the PKK, with a particular focus on the security implications for Türkiye-Iran diplomatic relations. This chapter will examine the activities and objectives of the Iranian branch of the PKK, known as PJAK.

Özdemir Akbal, in contrast, intends to address the matter from the standpoint of "grant theory." The chapter thus seeks to answer the following question: do states with a significant capacity to act at the international political level attempt to maintain the status quo through the use of terrorist organisations?

In this article, Sabir Askeroğlu examines the relationship between the PKK and Russia. In adopting a historical narrative, the author discusses the relationship between Russia's active presence in the Middle East and the PKK.

In conclusion, Özgür Uğurdan analyses the role and position of the PKK within the context of the US "grant strategy". To achieve this, the author makes use of the theoretical space provided by the disciplines of geography and strategy.

This book has been prepared with the objective of addressing a significant gap in the existing literature on the subject. It is our hope that this work will prove a valuable contribution to the academic literature on the subject, and that it will be well received by the reading public.

Serhat A. Erkmén & Burak Güneş

CHAPTER I

DESCRIBING THE PKK: THE ANATOMY OF A TERRORIST ORGANISATION IN TERMS OF ORGANISATION, IDEOLOGY AND LEADERSHIP

SERHAT A. ERKMEN*
& HATICE VAROL DAĞDELEN**

Introduction

One of the most common topics of discussion in terrorism studies has been the definition of terrorism. Starting from terrorism as a strategy and terrorism as an action, the debate on what terrorism is has occasionally extended to discussions on who is a terrorist and who is a terrorist organisation. For this reason, subjective assessments have been made about many organisations in the world or grey areas have emerged about the nature of organisations. However, there is an indisputable consensus on the nature of some terrorist organisations. Along with organisations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al Qaeda, Shining Path, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Aum Shinrikyo, it can be said that there is a general acceptance worldwide that the PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party / Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) is a terrorist organisation. Today, in addition to international organisations such as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), UN (United Nations) and EU (European Union), many states, including the USA (United States of America), the UK, EU countries, Australia and New Zealand, recognise the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

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When the literature on terrorism studies in the world is analysed, it would not be wrong to say that the number of comprehensive studies on the PKK, which was founded nearly 50 years ago, is less than its counterparts. Of course, there are some important books and articles that examine different aspects of the organisation. However, examining the comparison of an organisation that has been in existence for such a long time with its counterparts in the world from different perspectives would also contribute to terrorism studies. Such an endeavour would require many long and detailed articles and studies. On the other hand, the first step needed before making comprehensive comparisons of a large number of different dimensions is to understand how the PKK has been structured since its establishment. This will make it easier to understand where the organisation has come from and where it is going. The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the stages the PKK has gone through since its establishment from a holistic perspective.

Of course, a holistic perspective sometimes has to include generalisations and evaluations that are far from detail. The most important dilemma of this study in terms of its scope and limits is that it has to include generalisations that are far from detailed case assessments. However, as long as it does not lead to oversimplification and does not contain a lack of information that would change the essence of the phenomenon, including generalisations in social science texts is one of the basic methods of drawing a framework. In this framework, the study will not use methods such as discursive analysis of primary sources, statistical analyses based on international databases on the activities of the organisation, content analysis of the organisation's publications or the statements of its leaders. The methodological approach of the study is simpler. In this study, the structure of the PKK, its development processes, internal dynamics, its relations with the region, and how it responds to the transformation in the world will be analysed from a historical perspective. In this way, it is aimed to produce a benefit beyond the interests of those who are only interested in learning about the PKK. Because studying the PKK is not only instructive for academics in Turkey, which is the main area of activity of the organisation. The PKK has similar characteristics with terrorist organisations in many countries around the world.

A holistic and historical examination of the PKK would create a unique opportunity not only for those analysing the organisation, but also for scholars producing general information on terrorism research. The PKK has been in existence long enough to have seen some of Rapaport's famous "four waves", and its ideology, organisation and adaptation to regional

conditions in a changing world provide a useful basis for many terrorism researchers to understand the behaviour of terrorist organisations. For this reason, the study will examine the phases of the PKK from its establishment to the present day in terms of the concepts of continuity, change and adaptation, and will attempt to provide the reader with a panoramic photograph of the organisation.

Defining the PKK

In the terrorism literature, many classifications have been developed about terrorist organisations. These classifications include different categories according to their basic strategic objectives, ideological background, modes of action, forms of organisation and life spans. Going into the theoretical background of all these classifications goes beyond the scope and limitations of this study. For this reason, classifications based on previous studies will be taken as a basis.

Attempting a general definition of the PKK, the most comprehensive generalisation can be made as follows: "The PKK is a classical terrorist organisation with a long-life span, which has constantly differentiated its strategic objectives and ideological background over its long life span, yet has not changed radically since its establishment in terms of its leadership cadre, organisational form and modes of action." When we unpack the elements of this definition, which contains many sub-assumptions and assertions, we can also reveal the main characteristics of the PKK.

The first element of the above definition deals with the lifespan of the organisation. Looking at the studies on the lifespan of organisations in terrorism studies, the PKK can be described as a long-lasting terrorist organisation. Rapoport argues that 90% of the terrorist organisations established in the 1970s, which he describes as the third wave of terrorism, disappeared within the first year after their establishment, while about half of the organisations that survived the first year disappeared within 10 years (Rapoport, 2004). Another more recent study on the subject evaluated more organisations with more data. Taking into account the lifespan of 586 organisations, the study revealed that 26% of terrorist organisations disappeared in their first year, while 68% of them lived less than 10 years. Accordingly, only 6% of all terrorist organisations can survive for more than 10 years. In addition, the average life expectancy of organisations that exceeded one year was found to be 13 years (Gaibullov and Sandler, 2013). Another study examining the average life expectancy of organisations reveals that the average life expectancy of terrorist

organisations that manage to survive in their first year is approximately 3.5 years (Vittori, 2009). Finally, according to another study that classifies the life span of terrorist organisations as short, medium and long-lived, the life span of short-lived organisations is less than 5 years, the life span of medium-lived organisations is 5-15 years, and the life span of long-lived organisations is more than 15 years (Harmon, 2010).

When the above classifications are taken into consideration, it is seen that the PKK is one of the terrorist organisations that has been in existence for a long time in all categories, regardless of the perspective from which it is viewed. Although many studies consider the PKK's first terrorist acts in 1984 as the beginning of the organisation, this is not a correct approach. The PKK was founded in 1978. However, the founding cadre, some of whom are still in the top leadership of the organisation today, decided to develop the organisation in order to make it capable of taking action. The organisation, which had major deficiencies in terms of organisation, the number of militants, financial resources, armed training and ideological issues at the time of its establishment, entered a 5-6 year preparation phase in order to be able to operate on a systematic level. Therefore, it would be correct to say that the organisation has been in existence for 46 years as of the writing of this study. This makes the PKK one of the longest-standing terrorist organisations in modern history, along with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-FARC*), the Basque Homeland and Liberty (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna - ETA*) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Therefore, it can be easily argued that it is an organisation with a "long life span", which is the first element of the above definition.

At this point, we can move on to the second element of the definition. The second element of the definition underlines two main dimensions of organisational change and transformation: Differentiation of strategic goals and ideological background.

The years when the PKK was founded were the years when the Cold War was in full swing. During this period, the rivalry between the US and the USSR was in full swing in Turkey, where the PKK was founded. Even before the establishment of the PKK, other organisations similar to the PKK in terms of discourse and ideology were established in Turkey, but they could not survive for a long time. Moreover, at the time of its establishment, the PKK emerged out of a split within some factions of radical left-wing terrorist organisations in Turkey. Names such as Haki Karer and Kemal Pir, who were among the founding cadre of the

organisation, were members of the leading radical leftist organisations of the period, such as the THKP-C and THKO, before they took part in the establishment of the PKK. Names such as Abdullah Öcalan, Duran Kalkan and Cemil Bayık, some of whom are still among the top leadership cadres of the PKK, came together within the framework of the Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association, a student association founded by the Socialist Workers' Party of Turkey in the 1970s. Therefore, breaking away from radical left-wing terrorist organisations has been one of the determining elements of the PKK's strategic goals and ideological character. At the time of its establishment, the PKK, like its counterparts in Latin America, emerged as a revolutionary left-wing separatist ethnic nationalist movement, blending national liberation movement and socialist ideology.

The PKK's ideological background, starting from the founding text "The Path of Revolution in Kurdistan - Manifesto", is basically based on the goal of achieving socialism. Abdullah Öcalan, the founding leader of the organisation, argues that he has contributed to "scientific socialist theory", claiming that he has brought a new interpretation and contribution to socialism like Abemiel Guzman, the leader of the Shining Path in Peru. It is possible to find similarities of Guzman's strategic approach and ideological explanations based on anti-imperialism, colonialism and violence to counter them (Starn, 1995) based on Leninist and Maoist revolutionism in Öcalan's books written in the 1970s and 80s (Öcalan, 1982; Öcalan, 1987; Öcalan, n.y.). In addition to the aforementioned book, many texts, especially "The Role of Force in Kurdistan" written by Öcalan inspired by F. Engels, show parallels with the books of similar terrorist organisations of the period. Again, the themes covered in the text titled "Kurdistan National Liberation Problem and Solution Path", in which the ideology and goals of the organisation are discussed, are not very different from those in Latin America and Southeast Asia in the same period. Therefore, from the years of its foundation until the mid-1990s, the PKK had a "separatist-national liberationist ideology and strategic goal of socialist revolution". For this reason, it did not only aim to establish a state by separating from the Republic of Turkey, but also, within the framework of its claim of "struggle against imperialism and colonialism", it put forward the strategic goal of uniting the Kurdish areas in Iraq, Iran and Syria under the roof of a single state by breaking away from these states.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR led to a change in the PKK's ideological background and strategic objectives. During the Cold War, the PKK was ideologically close to the USSR and received

direct organisational support since its establishment (Balci, 2017). The collapse of the USSR and the loss of the ideological appeal of socialism were reflected in the ideological character of the PKK in the mid-1990s. At its 5th Congress in 1995, the organisation shifted from a Soviet-type definition of anti-imperialism to a criticism of the "new world order". Of course, the end of the bipolar order was not the only reason for this. The changing domestic political atmosphere in Turkey in the 1990s led the PKK to reorganise its political discourse (Criss, 1995). In addition, the PKK's settlement in the mountainous area in northern Iraq since the early 1990s led the organisation to take its relations with regional states to another level (Olson, 1996). The PKK developed a much closer relationship with Iran and Syria in particular, and the support it received from Turkey's neighbours, including Greece, increased significantly during this period (Sezer, 1999). However, the PKK, which was a focus of tension between Iran and Syria on the one hand and Turkey on the other, was also able to turn into an element of co-operation due to the fluctuating regional conditions. Having lost the support, it received from the USSR, the PKK's goal of finding a new strong external support for itself was not fully realised, and the support it received from Iran and Syria became dependent on the relations of these two countries with Turkey. In the end, Turkey's pressure on Syria yielded results and A. Öcalan was forced to leave Syria, which marked the beginning of a new era for the PKK. Öcalan was captured a few months after he was forced to leave Syria and the PKK was forced to reconsider its objectives.

The most obvious reason for the PKK's ideological differentiation and the parallel transformation in its strategic objectives after 1999 is undoubtedly the capture of the organisation's leader. However, it is not correct to say that this is the only reason. Signs of transformation started to emerge at the 7th Congress, the first congress held by the PKK after Öcalan's capture. The organisation has transformed its Marxist line, which it had been carrying since the 1970s, into a libertarian socialist framework, and transformed its ideology into an eclectic "quest for democracy" claim that combines the old ideological orientation with the concepts fashionable in the social sciences of the time. In the early 2000s, inspired by Murray Bookchin's concepts, Öcalan's process of redefining the PKK's ideology (Leezenberg, 2018) brought about a partial change in the organisation's structure and a radical change in the definition of its goals. This ideological transformation led to a shift from a separatist ethnic nationalist strategy that envisaged the disintegration of multiple countries and the unification of these parts under the roof of a new state to a strategy aiming to transform the structure of the state in which it is located. Thus, "a