

**M A S A R Y K O V A
U N I V E R Z I T A**

FAKULTA SOCIÁLNÍCH STUDIÍ

**Comparative Analysis of PKK Insurgencies
in the Middle East in 2004-18:
Examining Conditions for Insurgent Behaviour**

Dissertation Thesis

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Abstract

The presented comparative case study of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgencies in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran in 2004-18 examines variations of insurgent behaviour in different areas and over time. It asserts that the context of insurgencies such as horizontal inequalities, incumbent's policies and power, or presence of active rivalry are determinant in shaping insurgents' choice of behaviour. The PKK opts for a mix of violent and non-violent behaviour depending on the context. Incumbent's policies and power appear to be crucial factors influencing insurgents' choices.

Abstrakt

Předložená komparativní případová studie povstání Kurdské strany pracujících (PKK) v Sýrii, Turecku, Iráku a Íránu v letech 2004-18 zkoumá změny v chování povstalců v různých oblastech a čase. Kontext povstání jako horizontální nerovnosti, vládní politiky a moc státu či přítomnost aktivních rivalů jsou přitom určující při volbě chování ze strany povstalců. PKK volí určité kombinace násilného a nenásilného chování s ohledem na kontext. Vládní politiky a moc státu se jeví jako klíčová faktory ovlivňující rozhodování povstalců.

Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this dissertation thesis titled ‘Comparative Analysis of PKK Insurgencies in the Middle East in 2004-18: Examining Conditions for Insurgent Behaviour’ was prepared on my own under the supervision of prof. JUDr. PhDr. Miroslav Mareš, Ph.D. All sources of information that I used in this thesis are properly cited in the text and are listed in the bibliography.

In Prague, November 19, 2020.

Tomáš Kaválek

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List of Abbreviations

- AKP - Justice and Development Party, in Turkish, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi
- ANF – Fırat News Agency
- APC – armoured personnel carrier
- ARGK - People Liberation Army of Kurdistan, in Kurdish, Artêşa Rizgariye Gêle Kurdistan
- BDP - Peace and Democracy Party, in Turkish, Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi
- BDP – Peace and Democracy Party, in Turkish, Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi
- DAA – Democratic Autonomous Administration, in Kurdish, Rêveberiya Xweserîya Demokratî
- DBK – Kurdish Supreme Committee, in Kurdish, Desteya Bilinda Kurd
- DBP - Democratic Regions Party, in Turkish, Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi
- DEHAP - Democratic People's Party, in Turkish, Demokratik Halk Partisi
- DTK – Democratic Society Congress, in Turkish, Demokratik Toplum Kongresi
- DTP - Democratic Society Party, in Turkish, Demokratik Toplum Partisi
- EMEK Partisi - Labour Party
- ENKS - Kurdish National Council, in Kurdish, Encûmena Niştîmanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê
- ERNK - National Liberation Front of Kurdistan, in Kurdish, Eniyê Rizgariye Navata Kurdistan
- FSA – Free Syrian Army
- GAP - Southeast Anatolian Project, in Turkish, Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi
- GDP – gross domestic product
- GoI – Government of Iraq
- GTD – Global Terrorism Database
- HADEP - People's Democracy Party, in Turkish, Halkın Demokrasi Partisi
- HAT – Counter-terrorism Unit, in Kurdish, Hezên Antî Teror
- HDK - People's Democratic Congress, in Turkish, Halkların Demokratik Kongresi
- HDP – Peoples' Democratic Party, in Turkish, Halkların Demokratik Partisi
- HEP - People's Labour Party, in Turkish, Halkın Emek Partisi

HIICR - Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research

HNKS - Kurdish National Alliance in Syria, in Kurdish, Hevbendiya Niştîmanî a Kurdî li Sûriyê

HPC – Civil Defence Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Parastina Civakî

HPE - Afrin Liberation Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Rizgariya Efrînê

HPÊ – Yazidi Protection Force, in Kurdish, Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanê

HPG – People’s Defence Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Parastina Gel)

HPJ – Women’s Defence Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Parastina Jinê

HPŞ – Shingal Protection Force, in Kurdish, Hêza Parastina Şingal)

HRK - East Kurdistan Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Rojhilatê Kurdistan

HS - Popular Mobilization Forces, in Arabic, al-Ḥašd aš-Ša‘bî

Hüda-Par - Free Cause Party, in Turkish, Hür Dava Partisi

HXP – Self-Defense Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Xweparastinê

ICG – International Crisis Group

IDP – internally displaced person

IED – improvised explosive device

IRGC – Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps

ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KADEK - Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Council

KCK – Kurdistan Communities Union, in Kurdish, Koma Civakên Kurdistan

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party, in Kurdish, in Kurdish, Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê

KDPS - Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria

KDPSS – Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria

KIG - Kurdistan Islamic Group, in Kurdish, Komelê Îslamî Kurdistan

KIU - Kurdistan Islamic Union, in Kurdish, Yekgirtiya Îslamîya Kurdistanê

KJA - Free Women’s Congress, in Kurdish, Kongreya Jinên Azad

KODAR - Complete Text of the Social Contract of the Democratic and Free Society of the East

HPG – People’s Defense Forces, in Kurdish, Hêzên Parastina Gel

Kongra-Gel - People’s Congress of Kurdistan

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq

LND - Democratic Nation List, in Kurdish, Listiya Nîştîmaniya Demokratîk

MERI – Middle East Research Institute

NDF - National Defense Forces

OCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

ÖDP - Freedom and Solidarity Party, in Turkish, Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi

OFPRA - Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides

OHAL - Governorship of Region in State of Emergency, in Turkish, Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği

OHAL - Governorship of Region in the State of Emergency, in Turkish, Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği

PADÊ – Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy, in Kurdish, Partiya Azadî û Demokrasiyê ya Êzidiyan

PÇDK - Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party, in Kurdish, Partî Çareserî Dîmokratî Kurdistan

PCWK - Peoples’ Council of Western Kurdistan, in Kurdish, Meclîsa Gel a Rojavayê Kurdistanê

PDKI - Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran

PJAK – Party for the Free Life of Kurdistan, in Kurdish, Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistanê

PKK – Kurdistan Workers’ Party, in Kurdish, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, in Kurdish, Yekîtiya Nîştîmaniya Kurdistanê

PWD - Patriotic Democratic Party, in Kurdish, Partiya Welatparêzên Demokrat

PYD - Democratic Union Party, in Kurdish, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat

RP – Rojava Peshmerga

RPG – rocket-propelled grenade

SDC – Syrian Democratic Council

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces, in Arabic, Quwāt Sūryā ad-Dîmuqrāṭīya

SDP - Socialist Democracy Party, in Turkish, Sosyalist Demokrasi Partisi

SNC – Syrian National Council

TAK - Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, in Kurdish, Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan

TEVDA – Yazidi Democratic Movement, in Kurdish, Tevgera Êzidiyan a Demokratîkû Azad

TEV-DEM – Movement for a Democratic Society, in Kurdish, Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk

UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program

UN HRC – United Nations Human Rights Council

UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VBIED – vehicle-borne improvised explosive device

VG - Village Guards, or Security Village Guards of Turkey, in Turkish, Türkiye Güvenlik Köy Korucuları

YBŞ – Sinjar Resistance Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê

YDG-H – Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement, in Turkish, Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi

YJA-Star - Free Women's Units, in Kurdish Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star

YJÊ – Yazidi Women's Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Jinên Êzîdxan

YPG – People's Protection Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

YPJ – Women's Protection Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Jin

YPS – Civil Protection Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Sivîl

YPS-Jin – Civil Protection Units-Women, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Sivîl Jin

YRK – Eastern Kurdistan Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Rojhilatê Kurdistan

1. Introduction

“You know, the PKK is not like other political parties. The PKK is a lifestyle...”

Former PKK member

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (in Kurdish, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or the PKK¹) was established in 1978 as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary organization to create an independent Kurdish state consisting of Kurdish-inhabited areas of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. From humble beginnings, as one of the many (Kurdish) leftist groups in Turkey, the PKK became a successful insurgency that managed to survive and thrive for over forty years of its existence. The PKK insurgency claimed over 40,000 lives since it commenced armed struggle on Turkish soil in 1984. The organization went through remarkable ideological and organizational changes that allowed it not only to survive its leader’s Abdullah Öcalan’s capture by Turkish authorities on February 15, 1999 but to transform into a mass organization and one of the main drivers behind the Kurdish political aspirations in the Middle East. Most importantly, “(...) *the PKK insurgency has resulted in the rise of a newly defined Kurdish political community. War dynamics, along with the insurgent group’s relentless efforts to remake Kurdish identity, have greatly reshaped Kurdishness. The PKK movement and armed conflict have successfully transformed traditional, nonpolitical Kurdish masses into Kurds who are well aware of their Kurdishness.*” (Gurses 2018, 91)

The PKK proved to be a potent military power. Also, it managed to create grass-root political parties, parallel governance structures, non-governmental organizations, associations, and other institutions. These organizations work in concert, pushing for creating the Democratic Autonomy within the Democratic Confederalist governance system as outlined by jailed Öcalan after his capture (Öcalan 2011). While Turkey remains to have a privileged position in PKK’s mindset, it also geographically expanded its activities. It seized the opportunities to bolster its presence in Syria chiefly since 2011, in Iran since 2004, and in several areas in Iraq. Consequently, one organization under one command wages several geographically separated insurgencies inhibiting variation of insurgent behaviour.

¹ While utilizing the Kurdish language (chiefly the Kurmanjî dialect), I use its Latin transcript instead of a modified Arabic script used in Syria and Iraq (Incekan 2014). Latin script is used since it is the preferred mode of writing in Kurdish not only in Turkey but also preferred by the PKK-linked organizations. Turkish words are written without any simplifications. For Arabic, I utilize Hans Wehr transliteration (Cowan 1977), except for using capitals in names. When it comes to local names of places that have commonly used transliteration in English-written sources, I stick to the commonly used versions to avoid further confusion (e.g., Deir Ezzor, Sinjar, or Shingal). Many places described in the study have names both in Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic. As a rule, I try to use the version most widely used, while when it feels useful providing also providing alternatives in other languages.

This comparative case study's central puzzle is what exactly accounts for the stunning variation of PKK's behaviour in different geographic spaces and over time. Building on the rich body of existing literature trying to make sense of variation of non-state armed actors' behaviour, the study argues that the changing context or conditions of insurgency appear to be the most critical factor behind insurgents' choice of behaviour. Among these are mainly but not exclusively works of Kalyvas (2006), Mampilly (2015), Arjona (2016), Wood (2003), Metelits (2010), or Staniland (2012). The research question goes as follows: "Under which conditions have the PKK in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran opted for certain behaviour in 2004-18?" In June 2004, the PKK resumed armed struggle in Turkey after four years of ceasefire during which underwent organizational changes leading to expanding its operation beyond Turkey to Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

From a comparative perspective, it appears that the PKK quickly and flexibly adapts to the changing context, chiefly it reacts to variations of incumbent's power and state policies. For example, when an incumbent's power significantly decreases, insurgents seize the window of opportunity and assume territorial control while focusing on entrenching its political presence as well as building parallel governance. As the concept of insurgency suggests, insurgent behaviour is not only limited to violent activities but also includes non-violent actions (Kilcullen 2010). The PKK also opts for a particular mix of violent (conventional military operations, terrorism, and coercion of the population) and non-violent behaviour (building political structures and governance).

The study has two main ambitions. Firstly, it is an addition to an ongoing academic debate that concerns micro-level studies of non-state armed actors' behaviour. It makes a contribution to explanations what drives insurgent behaviour and what accounts for its variations in different conditions when it comes to both violent and non-violent actions. Secondly, it is true to the case study rationale by putting the PKK case into the centre of its interest. There is no shortage of quality academic literature in the form of monographs, articles and think-tank publications concerning particular aspects of the PKK insurgency. However, what is missing is a comprehensive study looking into the PKK insurgencies in different areas and periods in comparative perspectives shedding light on why its behaviour differs under different conditions.

1.1 The Outline of the Study

The structure of the study goes as follows. Chapter 2 defines the concept of insurgency and discusses the term against the background of 'terminological turmoil' surrounding the contemporary research of inter-state violent conflicts and violent non-state actors. Chapter 3 starts with a discussion on the post-2000 research of insurgencies, specifically the ongoing academic efforts to explain when and why specific insurgent behaviour is likely to occur. The main research question and the puzzle behind this study are introduced: Under what conditions the PKK chooses particular behaviour? The section proceeds with an overview of the literature on the PKK and its insurgencies and highlights the omnipresent 'fuzziness'

and often bias accompanying academic research on the PKK. The chapter concludes with introducing the examined cases of PKK insurgencies in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

Chapter 4 concerns with introducing the comparative case study design of the study and strategies of data collection. Secondly, it provides a detailed discussion of the context of insurgencies and insurgent behaviour. Chapter 5 looks into the development of modern Kurdish (national) identity and its components, and it sheds light on the scope of the so-called 'Kurdish Question' in the Middle East. Secondly, the chapter describes the PKK's emergence in 1978 in the context of turbulent political development in Turkey and outlines its ideology, activities, and peculiarities until 1999. Ideological onsets are discussed, keeping in mind 'insurgency' as the primary conceptual vehicle for understanding PKK's behaviour.

Chapter 6 highlights the organizational and ideological transformation the PKK went through after Öcalan's capture in 1999. The purpose is to make sense of organizational and strategic shifts the PKK went through, mainly in 1999-2004, and paved the way to the PKK as we know it nowadays. The section concludes with a thorough discussion, crucial for this study's logic, on the fact that the PKK is one organization that wages several insurgencies (albeit the Turkish theatre is arguably still central to its struggle).

Subsequently, thorough case studies of PKK insurgencies since 2004 follow. Chapter 7 is dedicated to the Democratic Union Party (in Kurdish, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) insurgency in Syria, and Chapter 8 to Turkey. Chapter 9 concerns the Party for the Life of Kurdistan (in Kurdish, Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistanê, PJAK insurgency in Iran). Finally, Chapters 10 and 11 examine PKK's activities in Iraq (instances of Shingal and Makhmour). Lastly, chapter 12 puts the overall findings into a comparative perspective and argues how insurgent behaviour changes across cases and within cases of PKK insurgencies over time.

2. The Mighty Concept of Insurgency² and Why It Is Useful

In both academic and media discourse, we frequently encounter various terms, often used interchangeably to describe armed conflicts between the incumbent government (the state) and a non-state armed actor. That is the case of the conflict between the PKK insurgency and states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. It is worth noting that an incumbent does not necessarily have to be a state, but the struggle can also occur between two or more violent non-state actors. For example, the People's Protection Units (in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG)/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fought various Islamist rebel groups and, ultimately, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria in 2012-18). Similar or even the same instances of internal (and/or transnationalized) armed conflicts are frequently labelled as insurgencies (O'Neill 2005), civil wars (Kalyvas 2006), rebellions (Weinstein 2007), guerrilla warfare (Taber 2002), or asymmetric conflicts (Arreguín-Toft 2001). Violent non-state actors waging their armed campaigns are then labelled as rebels, insurgents, terrorists, or revolutionaries interchangeably, often with ideological connotations.

Møller (2003) makes a useful distinction between three armed conflict levels: international (inter-state), transnational, and intra-state. The PKK waged different campaigns in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran in 2004-18. These struggles significantly differ up to a point we might argue that they can be approached as different instances of intrastate armed conflicts. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that there is a high level of transnationalisation (see Salehyan 2009). The PKK has its main safe haven in mountain ranges of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), usually dubbed simply as 'Qandil,' despite it controls more areas than just Qandil Mountain and its surroundings. The PKK's command resides in the mountains in the KRI, along with training facilities, arms depots, and bases through which recruits are deployed to various battlefields. Fighters and commanders of different nationalities traverse different PKK's campaigns (Ferris and Self 2015), and ultimately high-level 'Qandilians' hold the discretion on strategic decisions in respective armed conflicts.³

The term 'war' itself is contested in the literature. Šmíd (2011) argues that the term war should be used primarily for armed conflicts between two internationally recognized states. For intrastate armed conflicts, additional qualitative and quantitative criteria should be met to label such conflict as a 'war.' The Correlates of War marks the intrastate armed conflict as a 'civil war' if the following conditions are existent "(1) *military action internal to the metropole of the state system member; (2) the active participation of the national government; (3) effective resistance by both sides; and (4) a total of at least 1,000 battle-deaths during each year*

² The term rebellion or insurgency, or rebels and insurgents is often used interchangeably in the contemporary literature and it will be done so in this work as well.

³ This observation was numerously repeated during interviews, especially when discussing the level of independence of YPG/SDF in Syria on the PKK.

of the war.” (Sarkess 2010, 5) However, as mentioned above, there are also instances of armed conflicts between two or more violent non-state actors in which neither side is the government.

The Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) describes such cases as non-state conflicts (Uppsala Conflict Data Programme 2020). PKK’s insurgencies since 2004 only rarely reached a 1,000 battle-related deaths benchmark while fighting with a state actor (only in the 2015-17 conflict between the PKK and Turkish state). In the case of a non-state armed conflict, YPG/SDF fight with ISIS in Syria in 2014-18 significantly surpassed this benchmark, with 11,000 combat-related deaths until 2019 (CBS News 2019).

In other instances, it is more suitable to classify its insurgencies in more general terms, namely as an armed conflict (or non-state armed conflict). As the UCDP (2020) suggests, such conflicts are considered active if there are at least 25 battle-related deaths a year. Armed conflicts below the ‘war threshold’ are also, especially in the US discourse, described as ‘low-intensity conflicts’ described as “(...) *a political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition (...). It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. (...) It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments.*” (Headquarters 1990, Chapter 1) This description highlights a wide range of ‘tools’ involved in a low-intensity conflict, including political activities, which is highly relevant for the concept of insurgency in detail discussed below.

The term ‘asymmetric conflict’ or ‘asymmetric warfare’ is frequently used to describe internal armed conflicts between the state and violent non-state actors, to highlight the violent conflict between the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’ (see, for example, Arreguín-Toft 2001, or Mack 1975). Vasquez (2009) also distinguishes armed conflicts based on the symmetry of resources and power between dyads; he distinguishes between relatively equal and relatively unequal actors in his typology of wars. The asymmetry premise may be valid for most insurgencies. However, if insurgency successfully unfolds over time, it may come to a tipping point when insurgents are strong enough to fight and defeat the incumbent in conventional warfare.⁴ Such ultimate ‘end-game’ as a final goal or stage was stipulated for the first time by Mao Tse-tung’s People’s War described in his 1937 book *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Tse-tung 1989). It is, however, not in the scope of this work to further dwell into terminological nuances and inconsistency both on the side of academia and practitioners.

PKK’s insurgencies in 2004-18 only rarely fit into the ‘war’ category. In most instances, it instead fits into a more general ‘armed conflict’ category, which also covers instances of conflict between two or more non-state armed actors. Furthermore, it is safe to argue that PKK’s insurgencies are highly

⁴ On lifespan of insurgencies and shifts from proto- to large-scale insurgencies see Perry, and Gordon IV 2008, 7-12.

transnationalized. Simultaneously, they are flexible in their behaviour and utilize tailor-made approaches for different social and geographic landscapes. The PKK adapts based on local conditions of operation.

On the other hand, there are also periods of an almost full cessation of hostilities (notably during unilateral PKK's ceasefire in Turkey in 1999-2004 and 2013-15). There are even prolonged periods of no armed conflict between the PKK and the incumbent and an apparent mutual tolerance with relatively well-defined 'rules of the game.' Examples may be the relationship between the PKK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (in Kurdish, Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê, KDP) in the KRI, or 'marriage of convenience' between the YPG/SDF and the Syrian regime.⁵ Focusing only on periods of 'armed conflict' or outright 'war' between the PKK and its adversaries would grossly neglect significant time spans when there was no battle-related violence. However, insurgents were still active, perhaps focusing on building up popular support or building up political and governance structures. This argument brings us to the next section, where I argue the concept of insurgency offers a suitable conceptual framework to approach and understand both violent and non-violent behaviour of organizations such as the PKK and its struggle.

2.1 Defining Insurgency and What It Encompasses

The question is how to approach the PKK and its affiliates and their activities analytically. Which conceptual framework best allows for comprehensive analysis for its behaviour and conditions under which it occurs? The PKK conducts both violent and non-violent activities. Its violent behaviour includes hit and run urban and rural operations against military targets and staging terrorist attacks on non-military targets, violence towards the civilian population, and even conventional warfare with a clear-cut control of territory and frontlines. At the same time, the PKK creates political parties, civil society organizations, unions, human rights groups, and even participates in legal politics. Moreover, it has managed to control large swathes of territory in northern Syria, where it created deeply embedded and relatively mature governance structures, assuming many roles of the state institutions. The concept of insurgency offers an analytical framework that includes a wide variety of these activities.

Galula (2006, 2) defines insurgency in his classic work as "*a protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order.*" This definition is focused on the insurgent's ultimate goal rather than on a wide range of activities conducted by an insurgent to attain its goal, which is overthrowing the existing order. The ultimate goal is to change the status quo, not necessarily wrestle the rule over the country from the incumbent government. The

⁵ On wartime orders and different levels of cooperation between insurgency and incumbent government see Staniland 2012.

goal can be a mere change in the political system.⁶ However, it hints that insurgency is, at its core, a political activity. It struggles to alter or overthrow the existing order and replace it with a different one.

As Keister and Slantchev (2014) point out, on the one hand, insurgents are often called ‘state breakers,’ on the other hand, they often behave as ‘state makers,’ build governance and administrative structures in controlled territories, provide bureaucratic services, or maintain the rule of law. Insurgencies were extensively researched during the Cold War era focusing on anti-colonial and Communist-inspired rebellions. Since the 2000s, there has been a new surge of literature due to the experience with the post-Cold War insurgencies, for example, in Iraq or Afghanistan. Bunker (2016, 33-46) offers a thorough overview of legacy (‘old’) and contemporary (‘new,’ or post-Cold War) insurgency form based on literature review. He synthesizes a new typology of insurgencies, mainly building on various works of O’Neill, Metz, Beckett, Clapham, or Kilcullen. He categorizes legacy forms as anarchist, separatist, Maoist People’s, urban left, and contemporary forms such as radical Islamist, liberal democratic, criminal, and plutocratic (ibid.).

The renewed interest in insurgency phenomena of both practitioners was reflected in various counterinsurgency military manuals.⁷ Researchers also gradually brought new topics into research, such as rebel governance issues or violence towards the contested population (see Metelits 2010; Kalyvas 2006; Mampilly 2015; or Wood 2003). A large body of literature stemming from the ‘greed vs. grievance’ research of conflict by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) was also reflected in insurgency literature, which came with resource- and greed-oriented explanations of insurgent violence and activities (see also Weinstein 2007).

The US Department of Defense (2007, 6) maintains that insurgency is ultimately ‘irregular warfare’ which is “*A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.*” This population-centred definition highlights the centrality of politics in insurgency and counterinsurgency efforts since “*(...) it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.*” (ibid.) The main focus in the literature is on the practical side of an insurgency – as a specific form of protracted struggle, a mind-set that produces specific behaviour of rebels and incumbents alike.⁸ Kalyvas (2006, 67) notes that in such armed conflicts “*(...) the state (or incumbents) fields regular troops and is able to control urban and accessible terrain; while seeking to militarily engage its opponents in peripheral and rugged terrain (...).*” Insurgents are then “*(...) hiding and relying on harassment and*

⁶ O’Neill (2005) defines such insurgencies as ‘reformist.’

⁷ See updated US counterinsurgency manual (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2018); The British Army’s 2009 manual (Army 2009); or the NATO’s 2016 manual (NATO Standardization Office 2016).

⁸ See authoritative edited volume providing insight into contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency thinking by Rich and Duyvesteyn (2014).

surprise, stealth and raid (...). Such wars often turn into wars of attrition, with insurgents seeking to win by not losing (...)."

The 2018 US manual titled *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* defines insurgency as "(...) *the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.*" While mentioning subversion as a key component of insurgents' actions, this definition still falls short in acknowledging the importance of political activities. In a way, insurgency should be perceived as a toolkit that, in its coherence, includes both violent and non-violent activities that violent non-state actor – insurgent group – has at its disposal. Kilcullen (2010, 184) offers a more fine-grained definition of insurgency, which takes better into consideration a wide variety of violent and non-violent activities that insurgents may conduct. He defines insurgency as "*a popular movement that seeks to overthrow the status quo through subversion, political activity, insurrection¹⁰, armed conflict, and terrorism.*" Violent actions consist of armed conflict and terrorism. I further include an insurgent's coercive actions towards the local population in the category of violent actions that have been extensively researched in the new body of literature on insurgencies in the past decade.

Thus, an insurgency is a popular movement that seeks to overthrow the status quo through armed conflict, terrorism, and coercion towards the population (violent behaviour) and a range of political activities (non-violent behaviour). The fundamental premise is that insurgents use a particular mix of specific violent and non-violent behaviour in their campaign. The term insurgency thus clearly entails both violent and non-violent activities without giving primacy to one or the other component of the campaign. It is broad enough to provide a conceptual framework to analyse PKK's activities. Different aspects of violent and non-violent insurgent behaviour are thoroughly discussed and conceptualised to be used in the subsequent analysis of PKK insurgencies in Chapter 4.

2.2 The Concept of Insurgency and Terrorism

A common assertion maintains that 'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.' However, Goldberg (2012, 3) asserts in his book that "*It is simply absurd to contend that because people may argue over who is or is not a terrorist that it is therefore impossible to make meaningful distinction between terrorist and freedom fighters.*" Schmitt (2007, 31) also notes that "*(...) the essentially polemical nature of the politically charged terms and concepts remain nevertheless recognizable. Terminological questions become thereby highly political.*" Laqueur (2017) mentions

⁹ The manual also stipulates that the term 'insurgency' can refer not only to activities of an insurgency group but can actually refer to the group itself. See Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018, ix).

¹⁰ It is not exactly clear what Kilcullen means by the term 'insurrection'. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020) defines it as "*an act or instance of revolting against civil authority or an established government*" which hints that it is a rather isolated (spontaneous?) act of rebellion against authority. It also adds that the term "*implies an armed uprising that quickly fails or succeeds*". 'Insurgency' is, on the other hand, described as a state rather than an act: "*a condition of revolt against a government (...).*" Such acts could be subsumed under 'subversion', if they are short of violence, or 'armed conflict', if they are violent. When the term 'insurrection' is used in the literature, it is on occasions used interchangeably with 'insurgency'.

that, for example, the term ‘guerrilla’ does not entail defamatory overtone. Instead, it even invokes a ‘just struggle,’ whereas ‘terrorism’ is viewed as malicious and illegitimate. Therefore, armed groups themselves and sympathetic media have used ‘guerrilla’ to describe even outright cases of terrorist attacks. Calling a group ‘guerrilla’ or ‘insurgent’ automatically attributes it a more legitimate and ‘just’ label.

Gross (2015, Chapters 2-3) argues that there are conditions under which violent non-state actor has the right to war (*ius ad bellum*). That is if there is a ‘just cause’ (right to self-determination, right to live a dignified life) and the existence of legitimate authority (i.e., consent and trust of part of the local population). Such an argument could hardly be made by a group that utilizes terrorism tactics above all else. Kilcullen (2009) pointedly distinguishes between terrorism and insurgency labels by noting that terrorism is a matter of law enforcement. It has a criminal nature, and terrorists are psychologically and morally deranged and represent unrepresentative aberration in society.

In contrast, insurgency represents deeper problems in society. In other words, a ‘root cause’ or ‘roots of the insurgency’ (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2018, iii). Counterinsurgency focuses on winning the hearts and minds of the contested population. It is also a matter that requires the whole government's attention rather than just law enforcement agencies. While we might disagree with insurgents’ methods, their goals (e.g., secessionism) are not necessarily unacceptable.

It is only natural that governments try to downplay the legitimacy of insurgents since such actors represent a direct challenge to both internal and international order resting on nation-states. The case of the PKK is indeed such example where semantics is subdued to political means. For Turkey, both the PKK and its franchises, including the YPG/SDF in Syria are (one) terrorist organisation. The US, however, considers the YPG/SDF its principal ally in fighting ISIS in Syria while downplaying its apparent ties to the PKK, which is, according to Washington, a designated foreign terrorist organisation since 1997. Similarly, in pro-Kurdish media, the PKK fighters are commonly labeled as ‘guerrillas,’ while Turkish media considers them militants or terrorists. Even in academic discourse, the semantics surrounding the PKK is fuzzy, while some label it a terrorist organization, others praise its ‘radical democratic’ model of governance in northern Syria. The bottom line of this argument is that in media or policy-makers’ discourse, the term ‘terrorist’ is hardly ever applied as it is defined. The term ‘terrorism’ should be, especially for analytical purposes, should be used to describe violent tactics employed by a range of actors, whether it be insurgents or even states (Merari 1993; on state terrorism see Blakeley 2007).

Forst (2009, 5) utilizes the following definition of terrorism: *“Terrorism is the premeditated and unlawful use of violence against a non-combatant population or target having symbolic significance, with an aim of either inducing political change through intimidation and destabilization or destroying a population identified as an enemy.”*

Therefore, the term terrorism is strictly used as one of the activities conducted by insurgents in their violent campaign, not as a mere 'label' for a group.

3. The Puzzle of PKK's Behaviour

As established in Chapter 2, the insurgency concept includes both violent and non-violent behaviour of the insurgent organization. Both have to be taken into consideration in order to understand their behaviour sufficiently.

3.1 Examining Literature on Insurgencies and Formulating the Research Question

One of the critical puzzles of the post-2000 research on insurgencies is to determine under which conditions an insurgency organization chooses a specific mix of violent and non-violent behaviour. Researchers were at first and primarily focusing on explaining the violent behaviour of insurgents. Authoritative works of Kalyvas (2006) and also Metelits (2010) try to determine when and why rebels resort to (excessive and often outright brutal) violence towards the contested population. As classic insurgency theories suggest, indiscriminate violence contradicts the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the population. For Kalyvas and Metelits, the main driver is the level of territorial control between the incumbent and insurgent and active rivalry, which prompts coercive behaviour to civilians.

In turn, Weinstein (2007) relies on resource-based explanations of insurgent violence. Resource-rich conditions and/or outside support for insurgents decrease the need to win the population's hearts and minds and increase the chance for excessive violence to occur. Others, like Stanton (2016) and Fortna (2015), focus on explaining when and why insurgents resort to terrorism tactics going beyond the general assumption that terrorism is the weapon of the weak and poor. Another body of literature is trying to make sense of wartime social orders, namely Mampilly (2015), Arjona (2016), and Kasfir (2005), building legitimacy and, in the broader sense, explain under which circumstances rebels focus on building governance structures and provide state-like services.¹¹

The literature also takes into account the preferences of insurgent organizations and their leaders. Some groups, such as the Renamo in Mozambique, showed little interest to 'govern' or create a lasting social contract with civilians (Weinstein 2007). To others, it is at the centrality of their proclaimed goals and behaviour, for example, ISIS. Paraphrasing Olson, the latter resemble 'stationary bandits,' while the former 'roving bandits.' Weinstein (2007) also distinguishes 'opportunistic rebels' and 'activist rebels' who at heart are socially embedded and must have the hearts and minds of the population to thrive. Conditions under which insurgents find themselves are perceived as formative to their subsequent mix of violent and non-violent subsequent behaviour. Studies focusing on conditions as determinants often consider the (democratic or non-democratic) nature of the incumbent regime (see Piccone 2017).

¹¹ See also edited volume on the topic by Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly (2015). Useful summary of the ongoing discussion on rebel governance is likewise presented by Péclard, and Mechoulan (2015).

Regime's policies towards the contested population, existing (horizontal) inequalities¹² (Cederman, Weidman and Gleditsch 2011), and incumbent's power (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

The studies mentioned above have two considerable shortcomings. Firstly, they do not sufficiently control intervening variables. Consequently, it is often unclear whether conditions (cause) and a specific mix of behaviour (outcome) are not affected by other factors. This is arguably an issue, for example, in Weinstein's (2007) or Kalyvas' (2006) studies. As Metelits (2010, 6) argues, "(...) *insurgents become actors with defined choices, not merely groups that respond to whim of the outside forces. Insurgent groups operate rationally within a defined space and therefore have choices (albeit narrow ones at times) about the strategies they adopt.*" The term 'defined space' refers to conditions in which insurgent finds itself. The argument is that an insurgent opts for a particular mix of violent and non-violent behaviour considering these conditions. Insurgents' decision-making and even particular goals could be influenced by other variables, such as ideological preferences. However, in the case of PKK insurgencies, these are constant since it is one organization conducting several insurgencies (for more, see Chapter 6).

Secondly, contemporary studies often focus on very particular components of insurgent behaviour, may it be violent or non-violent, without approaching insurgencies as a whole. The majority of insurgency studies that go beyond thorough case studies of a specific insurgency and utilize larger-N studies usually focus on one or more particular aspects of insurgency. For example, Connable and Libicki (2011) examine conditions under which insurgency is more likely to succeed. In this study, a more comprehensive approach is utilized, looking into different insurgencies of one organization.

Consequently, the main goal is to shed light on variations of PKK's behaviour. By doing so, this research adds to a contemporary academic debate trying to make sense of insurgents' behaviour. Ultimately, it scrutinizes existing assumptions about when (under which conditions) we should expect particular insurgent behaviour. This study aims to solve the central puzzle of why we see changing and different behaviour of the PKK in their insurgencies? Why does the PKK overly focus on building governance structures at times while at others, it does not? Why does it resort to terrorism tactics only in specific periods and theatres? Why does it sometimes opt for coercive behaviour towards the contested population? Why does it pause its violent activities and focus on non-violent activities at times, including participation in legal politics? The main research question goes as follows:

“Under which conditions have the PKK in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran opted for certain behaviour in 2004-18?”

The year 2004 delineates the critical breaking point – the PKK managed to survive the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999 and subsequent turbulent organizational and strategic

¹² See also a more comprehensive study by Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013).

changes while diligently building new political and armed branches in Syria, Iran, and Iraq. On June 1, 2004, the PKK also resumed its armed struggle in Turkey. The end of 2018 is picked because that is when ISIS was territorially mostly defeated.

3.2 The PKK: The 'Fuzzy' State of Research

The presented study essentially has two main added values. The first is to scrutinize existing research about insurgencies, specifically, assumptions about under which conditions (in which context) we should expect to see a particular insurgent behaviour. Interestingly enough, the PKK has been relatively absent as a case in major insurgency studies, surprisingly including those on rebel governance considering the PKK, especially in Syria, built administrative structures and institutions for civilian participation in governance.

It is not that the PKK insurgencies would be entirely outside the interest of researchers. On the contrary, especially since 2010, we see a surge in the literature concerning the PKK in Turkey and activities in Syria in the post-2011 period. What is lacking, however, is a thorough examination of PKK's insurgent behaviour and an effort to explain under which circumstances it changes while focusing on various cases of its insurgency campaigns in different countries. The second added value of this research is a comprehensive comparative understanding of PKK's violent and non-violent activities under different conditions since 2004. There is arguably a lack of comprehensive understanding of PKK's insurgencies, especially when it comes to examining violent and non-violent activities, which, as the concept of insurgency stipulates, are both needed to be taken into account. Also, texts usually focus on a single country (or campaign) where the PKK wages its insurgency.

The PKK phenomenon is mentioned in books concerning either the modern history of the Kurds¹³ or the developments Kurdish population and Kurdish politics in respective countries where Kurds live, i.e., Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. The main focus is, however, on the PKK in Turkey. In contrast, literature concerning Iraqi Kurds focuses mainly on the Iraqi Kurdish uprisings against Baghdad and, ultimately, the KRI's establishment and political developments (Natali 2010). In Iran's case, the focus is primarily on the non-PKK-linked Kurdish political actors since the PJAK, established in 2004, is a relative newcomer to the Iranian Kurdish political landscape (Yildiz and Taysi 2007). The PKK and other essential aspects of Kurdish political life are also mentioned in two useful handbooks, the first published by Routledge (Gunter 2019) and classical Gunter's (2011) 'Historical Dictionary of the Kurds.'

The most comprehensive English-written account on PKK's history remains Marcus' (2007) book *Blood and Belief*, which, despite primarily based on interviews with ex-PKK members, remains a highly objective work. The problem is that it does not cover extensively changes the organization went

¹³ Good starting points are Gunter (2017) and McDowall (2004).

through following the capture of Öcalan in 1999 (for more on this formative period see Chapter 6). However, several studies cover the post-2004 era when the PKK officially resumed its armed struggle in Turkey. Notably, these include Balci's (2017) study concerning PKK's regional politics; White (2015) writing on the PKK's organizational and ideological development. Allsopp and Wilgenburg (2019) extensively cover the post-2011 development in northern Syria. Aydın and Emrence (2015) concern about the PKK insurgency in Turkey until 2008. Saeed (2017) examines changes from the PKK to the Kurdistan Communities Union (in Kurdish, Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), or in his words, evolution from a one-dimensional political movement to a multi-dimensional social movement. Gurses (2018) then explores the socio-political impacts of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK. An edited volume on 'Kurdish awakening' by Bengio (2014) looks into supposed Kurdish spring in the post-2000s. It is also useful to look into Romano's and Gurses' (2014) edited book in this period. Plakoudas' (2018) work is also useful since it looks into Turkey's current dynamics since 2013 and into Turkish incursion to Syria in 2016-17 as an integral part of its counterinsurgency strategy. Many think-tank-originating studies are also extensively covering PKK insurgencies or closely related topics. One can highlight comprehensive publications of the conflict-preventing organization International Crisis Groups (ICG).

Furthermore, we can find a relatively high number of publications concerning particular aspects of PKK insurgencies and, in general, the conflict between the PKK and the (Turkish) state. Özcan (2006), Posch (2016a; 2016b), or Leezenberg (2016) were looking into the PKK's ideology and how it evolved compared to the pre-1999 era. Similarly, others focused on particular aspects of PKK's ideology, notably its political-economic vision (Yarkin 2015) or women's role in the organization and society (Haner, Cullen and Benson 2019). With emerging PKK-linked governance structures in northern Syria since 2012, there has been a variety of researchers covering various aspects of the PKK's 'Democratic Autonomy' (or Democratic Confederalism) and its practice on the ground in larger works of Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019), Khalaf (2016), Khaddour (2017), or al-Tamini (2018). Other works concern how the PKK builds up its popular support, for example, Davis et al. (2012, 99-118), or Gunes (2012). A large body of literature also focuses on resolving the PKK-Turkey conflict as a precursor to the 'resolution of Kurdish issue' in Turkey, such as Çandar (2012) or Ünal (2015). Interestingly enough, only little can be found on PKK's coercive behaviour towards the civilian population. It is covered for the pre-1999 period, for example, by Marcus (2007), Masullo and O'Connor, or Stanton (2016). However, it lacks systemic coverage in the post-2000 era, except for Metelits' (2010) attempt to make sense of PKK's violence towards the civilian population. On occasions, the PKK insurgencies also appear in larger-N studies of intrastate armed conflicts; see Connable and Libicki (2010); and Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Savitsky (2013). Nevertheless, these are not detailed enough to sufficiently and in-depth grasp the nature of PKK insurgencies.

There is also a discrepancy in coverage of the PKK insurgencies. Most of the researchers' attention is directed towards the PKK in Turkey, or more recently in Syria. In contrast, insurgencies of the PJAK in Iran or PKK's activities in northern Iraq (in Shingal district) are grossly under-researched, apart from several think-tank publications (Kaválek 2017; International Crisis Group 2018). We may argue that this gap is partly due to limited access for researchers to these areas (Iran, Shingal) contrary to Turkey or northeast Syria in the post-2011 era. Secondly, these 'omitted' instances of PKK insurgencies are arguably viewed as less important or 'hot topics' compared to the PKK and 'Kurdish struggle' in Turkey, or as attractive as building governance and combating ISIS in Syria.

Consequently, this study fills significant gaps in understanding the cases of PKK insurgencies in Shingal or Makhmour in Iraq and improve our knowledge in other under-researched areas, such as PJAK in Iran. Also, it is a unique comparative study that puts all PKK's insurgencies together, looking at them from one perspective (the concept of insurgency) and ultimately wants to make sense of overall PKK's insurgent behaviour. Such endeavour is utterly absent from the contemporary literature on the PKK.

3.3 Examined Cases and Reasoning behind Their Selection

This study examines PKK insurgencies in four countries in the Middle East: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. All four have a significant Kurdish minority (for more on Kurdish populations, see Chapter 5). Although Turkey still clearly has primacy for PKK's focus, all experience the PKK-linked actors' significant presence and high level of both violent and non-violent activities. Moreover, they can be considered separate insurgencies with a distinctive mix of violent and non-violent behaviour across cases and time in the examined period 2004-18.

In Iraq's case, there are two distinctive PKK-linked insurgencies: the Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy (in Kurdish, *Partiya Azadî û Demokrasiyê ya Êzidiyan*, PADÊ)/Sinajr Resistance Units (in Kurdish, *Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê*, YBŞ) in Shingal district; and the PKK in Makhmour. In a similar, albeit less distinctive manner, respondents¹⁴ identified variations in insurgent behaviour in Syria. The PYD-led insurgency exerts different behaviour for revolutionary hotbeds and places where it has more robust unchallenged support such as Kobanî or Afrin compared to other areas, notably Qamishli and al-Hasaka. In Turkey, we can make observations that suggest that some rural border areas experience somehow different behaviour compared to Kurdish urban centres such as Diyarbakır or Cizre.

While these geographic peculiarities are covered throughout the case studies, there is no need to separate cases. Even the PKK essentially considers these strictly as one campaign. Narrative of the PKK stubbornly maintains that its insurgencies in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria are all waged by separate organizations, coming from local populations and sharing the same ideological inspiration from teachings

¹⁴ This notion was repeated by a number of respondents from academia, NGO workers, and local Kurds from north-eastern Syria.

of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, this narrative is very far away from reality. These are several separate yet transnationalized insurgencies waged by one organization – the PKK.

The selected countries: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, are arguably an exhaustive list of PKK insurgencies waged in the Middle East among Kurdish populations. The PKK has a strong foothold among Kurdish diasporas, where it also pursues both legal and illegal¹⁵ activities. These networks are present, especially in Western European countries, namely France, Germany (Baser 2016), the UK (Sozer and Yilmaz 2019), Austria, Sweden (Baser 2016), and the Netherlands. In a strict sense, in Western Europe, the PKK does not want to change the political status quo. It merely uses it as logistics, support, and financial base and mobilization pool for both recruitment and political activity to influence public and decision-makers’ opinion in said countries on the PKK and its struggle. Consequently, these cases are not included in the study.

Examined cases are further divided into periods where applicable. These are not chosen deliberately by a researcher or identified by insurgent-linked actors themselves. Breaking time points are determined mainly by significant changes in the insurgency context, which are in more detail discussed in the table presenting examined cases below (see Table 3.3). Based on the above-laid out logic, the study puts the total five distinctive cases examined for the period 2004-18 under scrutiny while some of them are divided into periods: 1) the PYD insurgency in Syria; 2) the KCK/PKK insurgency in Turkey; 3) the PJAK insurgency in Iran; 4) the PADÊ/YBŞ insurgency in Shingal district of Iraq; 5) the PKK insurgency in Makhmour, Iraq.

Country and Chapter	Case No.	Insurgency	Time	Breaking Points
Syria (Ch. 7)	1)	PYD insurgency in Syria	2004-2011	Following PYD’s establishment in 2003, the PYD kept a low profile instead, especially following the 2004 Kurdish riots and subsequent repressive measures of the Syrian state.
			2012-2018	With Syrian war intensifying and regime’s grasp over the country weakening, the PYD managed to bolster its position. Since June 2012, it assumed a largely predominant role in the part of the Syrian Kurdish areas. Later on, it gained prominence by gaining US

¹⁵ While learning about illicit activities of the PKK in European countries, one could also refer to regular intelligence and policy reports both of the European nation-states and by the EU (Europol) (see also Roth and Sever 2007).

				support in combating ISIS and securing more (including non-majority Kurdish) territories in northern Syria.
Turkey (Ch. 8)	2)	KCK/PKK insurgency in Turkey	2004- 2014	The Turkish government was gradually signalling a more positive approach towards the Kurdish minority, which eventually led in 2009 to the announcement of the so-called Kurdish Opening. The efforts culminated in March 2013 and resulted in another ceasefire and indirect talks with the PKK.
			2015- 2018	The period of ceasefire concluded with a renewed violence and mutual escalation of violence between the Turkish state and the PKK after June 2015 elections. The state introduced significant repressive measures.
Iran (Ch. 9)	3)	PJAK insurgency in Iran	2004- 2011	The PJAK was established in 2004 and started to ramp up its armed campaign which gradually intensified over the years reaching its peak in 2011 following a withdrawal to Iraq. Iran was responding with heavy-handed security measures.
			2012- 2018	Following its military defeat in 2011, the PJAK has only sporadically conducted both violent and non-violent campaign directly in Iranian soil.
Iraq (Ch. 10- 11)	4)	PADÊ/YBŞ insurgency in Shingal, Iraq	2004- 2014	The PKK-linked forces gradually increased its presence in Shingal and worked on establishing structures among the Yazidi community.
			2014- 2018	After KRG forces withdrew from the area facing ISIS, the PKK and the YPG forces moved in from Qandil and Syria marking the beginning of the process in which the pro-PKK forces build up a permanent military presence, as well as launch efforts to establish governance.

	5)	PKK insurgency in Makhmour	2004-2018	The PKK has enjoyed decisive largely unchallenged control of the Makhmour Camp which for the most part enjoyed relative peace and stability. The PKK-linked actors could realize their political-ideological visions largely unconstrained.
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Table 3.3: List of Examined Cases of PKK Insurgencies (prepared by the author).

4. Designing Framework for Analysis of Insurgencies: Conceptualizing Conditions and Insurgent Behaviour

4.1 The Logic of the Study, Design & Methodology

The core logic of this study stipulates that insurgents' behaviour differs in contexts they find themselves in. In other words, context shapes behaviour. If we identify significant changes in the context, we should also experience changes in insurgent behaviour as insurgents react to new challenges and opportunities. This logic does not counter the indisputable fact that insurgents themselves may be agents changing the context, may it be deliberately or a by-product of their activities. This mechanism is illustrated in Figure 4.1a and in more detail in Figure 4.1b below. The insurgency context is broken down into five groups, and similarly, insurgent behaviour is broken down into violent and non-violent types of behaviour.

One could argue that such causal logic might be flawed, mainly because it does not account for possible key intervening variables, which is the choice of insurgents based on the preferences of their leaders or ideological convictions. However, this is accounted for since I argue that the PKK is one organization waging various insurgencies (for more, see Chapter 6). Consequently, as will be shown throughout the study, the differences in PKK's behaviour across cases and times are results of different conditions insurgents find themselves in.

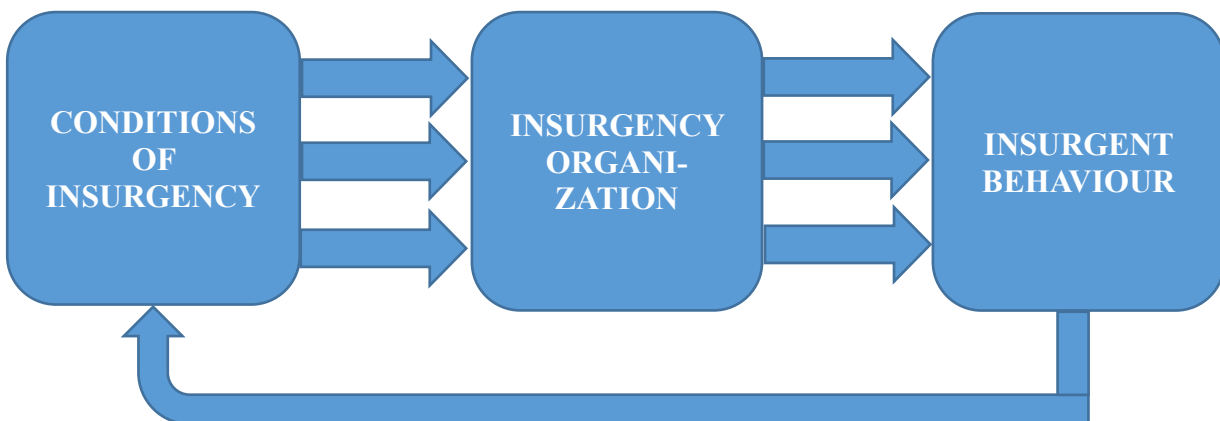


Figure 4.1a: Mechanism of Insurgent Behaviour (prepared by the author).

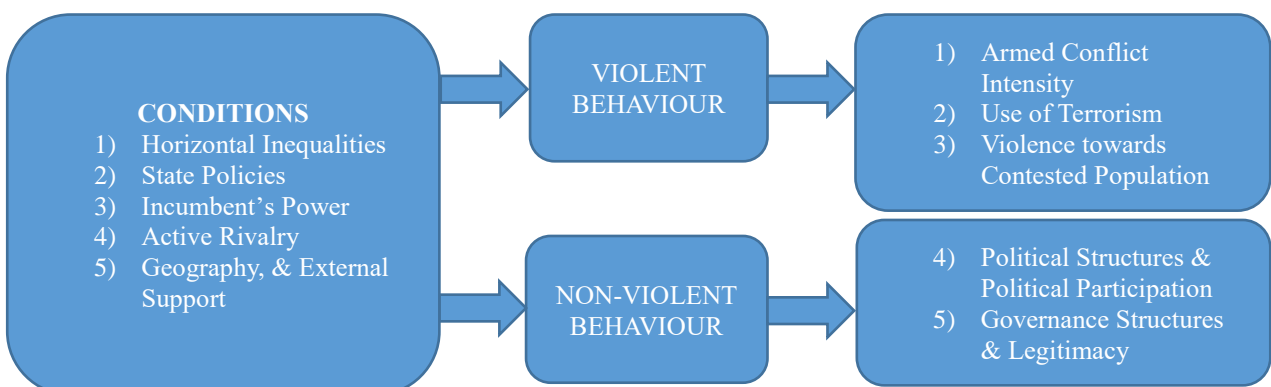


Figure 4.1b: Conditions and Violent and Non-violent Insurgent Behaviour (prepared by the author).

The research is a comparative case study by design as it concerns several cases and conducts their across-case analysis (Karlas 2008). The comparison is not limited to the various insurgencies the PKK wages in 2004-18 in the Middle East but also to comparison within-cases themselves as the PKK's behaviour significantly varies within one case over time due to the changing context (conditions) of insurgency.

In the first stage of data collection, various secondary academic sources in peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and policy-oriented think-tank publications on the PKK were gathered. Apart from English-written primary and secondary sources, I also consulted various primary sources, including PKK's publication, their own media production, and regional media outlets in Arabic and Turkish. These sources (albeit at times difficult to navigate due to their objectivity deficit) has helped to paint a better understanding of the scope of PKK's behaviour. When it comes to analysing the context of insurgencies, a mix of primary and secondary sources was utilized to obtain necessary data stemming from academic literature or existing datasets (e.g., on the intensity of armed conflicts).

In the second stage, after acquiring enough understanding of the situation on the ground from open sources, I also conducted a series of research stays in Turkey and the KRI, totaling almost three years with close to two years spent in the KRI. This provided me with an opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews and engage in numerous informal conversations with local and foreign respondents on the topic that enhanced my understanding of the topic. Given the fact that most of the areas where PKK operates are conflict zones due to political and security reasons, there are admittedly some gaps in data (especially in the cases of PJAK insurgency in Iran, and to an extent also in the case of PKK insurgency in Turkey, especially after 2015). These challenges, gaps, and limitations are discussed in length in Chapter 4.4.

4.2 Conceptualizing the Context of Insurgency

The literature on insurgencies offers a wide variety of conditions under which an insurgent is more likely to opt for a particular behaviour. This body of literature mainly builds upon the assumption that insurgent is indeed a rational actor who wishes to maximize its benefits to attain its ultimate goals. As Tarrow(2007) argues, the rationalist approach usually utilized large-N studies that sought to infer motivations for participation in insurgency (and insurgency behaviour). Lately, however, a new qualitative-focused body of literature “(...) *digging deeper into historical contexts; taking seriously the variety of dispositions of the people they encounter; relating their struggle to structural situations; focusing on the interactions among insurgents, governments, and host communities; and demonstrating how the conflicts themselves produce new incentives, alignments, and outcomes.*” (Tarrow 2007, 587)

In this sub-chapter, five crucial aspects of the context of insurgency are discussed. Firstly, general context, specifically the role horizontal inequalities is covered; secondly, state policies towards contested

population; thirdly, incumbent's power; fourthly, presence of active rivalry; and finally, the role of geography and external support for insurgents.

4.2.1 General Context: Existence of Horizontal Inequalities

Collier and Hoeffler (2004) conclude that there is no significant connection between economic inequality and civil war. On the other hand, Muller and Seligson (1987, 425) argue that the effect of income inequality holds a merit “(...) *in the context of a causal model that takes into account the repressiveness of the regime, governmental acts of coercion, intensity of separatism, and level of economic development.*” Cederman, Weidman, and Gleditsch (2011, 478) also infer that “(...) *in highly unequal societies, both rich and poor groups fight more often than those groups whose wealth lies closer to the country average.*” The existence of horizontal inequalities in a country is, in general, mentioned as one of the crucial factors influencing whether internal armed conflict occurs or not (Stewart 2010). Gurr (1993) mentions a similar notion arguing that ‘relative deprivation’ of a group may cause a successful insurgency to emerge since it helps mobilization of support. Stewart (2010) further argues that not only horizontal income inequalities should be accounted for but also social (access to a range of services), political (inequalities in the distribution of political opportunities and power among groups), and finally cultural status horizontal inequalities (recognition and standing of groups’ language, religion, customs, norms, and practices). While we primarily look into income inequalities, the relative in-depth nature of presented case studies also allows for examining other types of horizontal inequalities.

Thus, the degree of economic development of contested areas and groups living there compared to the country average (as well as government efforts to alleviate it) could play a significant role in shaping insurgent’s behaviour. Other existing horizontal inequalities similarly could play a crucial role. However, these changes are typical of a longer-term nature than the period observed in this study (PKK insurgencies in 2004-18). Consequently, one could argue that if there are no substantial horizontal inequalities, insurgency should be weak. Insurgents should struggle to obtain popular support, legitimacy, resort to the population’s coercion, or use terrorism tactics.

4.2.2 State Policies towards Contested Population

Fearon and Laitin (2003) infer that internal armed conflict is more likely to occur in undemocratic countries. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) also consider a lack of democracy as a significant factor. There could be a fair assumption that if the regime is oppressive towards the contested population (often religious or ethnic minority such as the Kurds), the opportunity to rebel increases. Most importantly, it serves as a critical ‘root cause’ for an insurgent to be exploited. Insurgency is more likely to develop from proto-insurgency into a large-scale insurgency, survive, and thrive (Perry and Gordon IV 2008).

On the other hand, if the state introduces favourable policies, undergoes democratization, and acts to remove or weaken the root cause, the insurgents might have a more challenging time maintaining support. The insurgent must then react to such changes and either shift its root cause, resort to the

population's coercion into submission, employ provocation tactics to force insurgents to retaliate, or possibly participate in legal politics when and if this opportunity in the political system arises. Tezcür (2010) touched upon this issue while studying the PKK case in Turkey in the 2000s. He argues that democratization does not necessarily lead to an end of a violent conflict as long as it challenges insurgent's hegemony over its constituency. Changes in the level of repressive measures towards the population, policies in favour of the population, overall signs of liberalization and democratization of the regime, and amount of space for the contested population to participate politically on local and/or parliamentary level are crucial indicators of policy and polity changes which significantly alter the context of insurgency. Thus, the insurgents are forced to react to it.

Picconne (2017) summarizes the ongoing academic debate on the relation between democracy and internal armed conflicts. He concludes that democracies or stable authoritarian regimes with tight control over society are at much lower risk of experiencing flourishing insurgencies than the only partially democratic regimes or undergoing democratization. Such regimes fall into a broad and contested 'grey zone' with various concepts capturing hybrid regimes that are nor 'fully authoritarian' nor 'fully democratic' (see Diamond 2002). Consequently, when the incumbent's policies towards the contested population start to change significantly, may it be part of the overall democratization or tailored policies to improve contested population conditions, we should experience changes in insurgents' behaviour.

Another vital matter is the regimes' policies of co-optation of the contested population. Dukhan (2019), building on Josua (2011), distinguishes between structural (widening political participation), traditional (approaching traditional leaders), and identity-based (manipulating religious, ethnic, and other identities) and material co-optation. To what extent the regime is successful in co-opting the contested population is a crucial factor in determining how much 'space' there for insurgents to gain popular support.

The general assumption is that if the state policies (regime) change, insurgents react and change their behaviour as well. Essentially, there are two options. First, insurgents can resort to more violent behaviour such as intensifying armed conflict or its terrorism campaign to provoke the incumbent to retaliate and employ repressive measures, staging terrorist attacks or increasing the coercion of the population. Secondly, it may focus on non-violent behaviour. It may utilize the opportunity to focus on building political structures, building governance structures or even participate in legal politics. In other words, we see either more intensive violent behaviour or a more significant focus on non-violent activities.

4.2.3 Incumbent's Power

Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that financially, organizationally, and politically weak government makes insurgency more feasible and likely to flourish. For one, such regimes tend to use an 'iron fist' counterinsurgency strategy, adopt repressive policies, and are not capable of crushing the insurgency.

This gradually makes the contested population more likely to support insurgents. Fearon and Laitin (2003) proxied this 'general weakness' by low per capita income. However, since we are dwelling on relatively in-depth case studies, we may also consider other qualitative indicators showing changes in the incumbent's power. We are looking for periods of political and institutional instability, turmoil stemming from competition between the government and its opponents, or moments of facing more pressing issues that siphon the government's energy and resources to deal with the insurgency.

To better grasp the incumbent's power, we can also look into counterinsurgency capacities. The importance of military power in defeating or weakening insurgencies is often downplayed, and there is a tendency to highlight the necessity of the 'hearts and minds' approach. On the other hand, capable armed forces effectively engaging in irregular warfare such as mountainous operations of Special Forces or in urban environs are crucial for dislodging the insurgent. Effective pro-government local militias could also be considered a crucial component of counterinsurgency efforts (Jentzsch, Kalyvas and Schubiger 2015).

Therefore, if the incumbent's power is lower or is suddenly weakened, we should experience more intensive armed conflict to occur or fight to erupt again after a period when violent activities were non-existent or sporadic. Insurgents simply have more space to develop and are less likely to be decisively crushed. Secondly, if the incumbent is exceptionally weakened, insurgents are more likely to control territory and resort to assuming the state's role and administer such areas.

4.2.4 Presence of Active Rivalry

Kalyvas (2006) offers a control-collaboration model in which he stipulates that both state- and non-state actors in a civil war struggle to ensure civilians' collaboration. In some instances, violence towards the contested population is an essential component of this effort. He argues that indiscriminate violence and generally higher violence levels are more likely to occur in areas with contested control between incumbent and insurgent. He identifies five zones of control: Zones under 1) secure insurgent or 2) incumbent control, 3) zones with insecure insurgents control, 4) incumbent control, and 5) contested zones (ibid., Chapters 4-8). In mixed control zones, higher levels of violence towards civilians are more likely to occur both from the hands of insurgent and incumbent actors with the motivation to force the population into obedience and prevent it from collaborating with the opponent (ibid.). In other words, the lower level of territorial control, the higher levels of violence towards civilians we should experience.

Metelits (2010) further expands on Kalyvas and his explanations of insurgent's treatment of civilians regarding the degree of their level of territorial control. She investigates the conditions under which insurgents opt for coercive behaviour towards civilians and under which they opt for a more contractual approach to win the hearts and minds of the population. Metelits (2009, 674) argues that insurgents opt for more coercive behaviour towards the population if they face "(...) *rivals that extract from the same pool of*

resources indicat[ing] competition.” Active rivalry occurs if rival insurgent groups or political actors are tapping into the same constituency and competing for a population’s allegiance. Rivals do not have to be necessarily insurgent groups or political parties tapping on the same constituency but the incumbent itself, which might opt for more inclusiveness of contested populations or providing considerable incentives for ‘joining the establishment.’ She also argues that the rival can be competing insurgent groups, political parties, and the state. However, she does not explore in detail whether there are variations of her active rivalry mechanism if the rival is of a different nature (ibid.; Metelits 2010). For this reason, I will also explore whether in the case of PKK insurgencies there is a variation if it faces rivalry from the state and or other non-state (armed) groups and what could be mechanisms behind it.

Staniland (2012), building on Kalyvas (2006), identifies six wartime orders with adding the level of cooperation between states and insurgents to territorial control (see Table 4.2.4). He differs between segmented and fragmented control, while the latter can be described as mixed control, without clear ‘frontlines’. According to Staniland (2012), there are three levels of cooperation between insurgent and the state: active (there is coordinated action, share objectives at least short-term, joint rule of the territory), passive (described as a live-and-let-live situation where there are accepted red lines, managed escalations of violence and acceptable levels of violence between the two) and finally non-existent (there is intense violent conflict and hostility, low predictability and fluidity of the situation) (ibid.). These orders influence dynamics of violent and non-violent behaviour of insurgent. We could argue that the more cooperation between the state and insurgent group, the less unpredictable violence towards civilians (and warring sides) we should see. Simultaneously, in segmented types, we should see the more institutionalized presence of insurgents (e.g., rebel governance) than in fragmented.

	Level of Cooperation between Insurgent and the State		
Level of territorial Control	Active	Passive	Non-existent
Segmented	Shared sovereignty	Spheres of influence	Clashing monopolies
Fragmented	Collusion	Tacit co-existence	Guerrilla disorder

Table 4.2.4: Wartime Orders According to Distribution of Territorial Control and Level of Cooperation between States and Insurgents (based on Staniland 2012; prepared by the author).

However, we might argue that there could be alternative mechanisms in play. For example, Péclard and Mechoulan (2015) assert that narratives of economic, social, political, and cultural marginalization play a crucial role in the ‘manufacturing of consent,’ based on these grievances’ mobilization and promises by insurgents to address them. Wood (2003, 225) notes that conventional material benefits could not often explain populations’ support for the insurgency; instead, many opted for support if they “(...) came to

interpret insurgency as justified by the injustice of existing social relations and state violence, and to interpret its costs, even the highest of them, as meaningful sacrifices.” This mechanism may underplay the effect of active rivalry. While there is an active rivalry, a mere cost-benefit explanation is not enough. An insurgent group may downplay the effect of active rivalry and incentives provided by a rival if they can craft convincing narratives. Thus the rival is not a severe competitor for the hearts and minds of the population. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 4.2.2, the state policies towards the contested population and insurgent could be crucial in shaping insurgent behaviour.

4.2.5 Accounting for Other Variables: Existence of Safe Haven, Geography & External Support

Connable and Libicki (2010, 34-40) argue in their study that insurgencies that have a safe haven at their disposal are more likely to result in insurgent’s victory. Counterinsurgency studies often mention a safe base and rough terrain as a critical advantage for insurgents and a disadvantage for the incumbent (state). Galula (2006, 25), in his classic work, describes the terrain ‘most favourable to insurgents’ as “(...) *a large landlocked country shaped like a blunt-tipped star, with jungle-covered mountains along the borders and scattered swamps in the plains, in a temperate zone with a large and dispersed rural population and a primitive economy.*” In turn he notes, that the least favourable for insurgency would be “(...) *a small island shaped like a pointed star, on which a cluster of evenly spaced towns are separated by desert, in a tropical or arctic climate, with an industrial economy.*”

Lately this issue was addressed in a quantitative study by Tollefsen and Buhaug (2015). They argued that both physical and socio-cultural inaccessibility substantially affect the risk of civil wars in post-Cold War Africa. When looking into physical inaccessibility, they argue that sizeable physical distance from the ‘government’ and the existence of potential safe haven increase the likelihood of civil war. They conclude that there is strong evidence that physical inaccessibility is “(...) *a central factor affecting local conflict risk, as remote areas are shown to be significantly more conflict prone than more accessible parts of a country.*” (Tollefsen and Buhaug 2015, 21) To sum up, favourable geography and the existence of an area that can be considered a safe haven for insurgents to flourish and the ability to operate without significant disruption from the incumbent (government) should result in a more successful insurgency. Geography arguably has such a profound influence on the overall context of insurgency and the general likelihood of insurgencies’ success. It is such an essential condition that it can suppress the role of other aspects of the context.

Existing literature is also trying to make sense of external support for insurgents and how it influences insurgents’ behaviour. Byman and Chalk argue that external support becomes crucial, especially when insurgents fail to secure sufficient domestic support among the contested population (Byman et al. 2001). They further distinguish between crucial, valuable, and minor forms of outside support. Crucial external support includes providing safe haven and transit, financing, political support, propaganda, and direct military support. Valuable forms of support, in turn, include training and providing weapons and material (ibid., 84-95). Weinstein (2007) also argues that insurgencies with suitable

natural resources to exploit and/or significant external supporters tend to fall into a category of ‘opportunistic rebels.’ Such rebels are less likely to engage in building governance, provide services for the population, have a contractual relationship with the civilians, and try to be ‘socially embedded.’

4.3 Conceptualizing the Insurgent Behaviour

Insurgent behaviour comprises of violent and non-violent activities that both have to be analysed in order to get a comprehensive understanding of an insurgent campaign. That is the bread and butter of why the concept of insurgency has high explanatory power – it takes into account not only violent activities but also non-violent. When examining violent behaviour, we look into the intensity of armed conflict, the use of terrorism, and, finally, violence towards civilians. In the case of non-violent behaviour, assessing insurgent behaviour is comparably more challenging. It is crucial to determine how successfully (and whether the insurgent organization even tries) insurgents manage to create effective legal or illegal political structures to participate in political life. Furthermore, I explore whether it engages in building governance, state-like structures and whether these have considerable legitimacy, which may stem from its performance (e.g., providing services) and overall inclusiveness and proper representation.

4.3.1 Armed Conflict Intensity

The UCDP defines armed conflict as *“a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year.”* (Themnér 2020, 1) Suppose the threshold of 25 battle-related fatalities is passed. In that case, the armed conflict is considered active. For such periods further conflict consequences (such as level of destruction) and means of the conflict on the insurgent’s side are analysed. To provide more fine-grained diversification of armed conflict intensity, I added a medium intensity category set between 500 and 1,000 fatalities.

Building upon an approach adopted by the Correlates of War, the third level – a high intensity violent conflict is at the benchmark of 1,000 or more battle-related deaths a year (Sarkees 2010). We might argue that while passing this threshold, we may consider the armed conflict a war. Both the UCDP and the Correlates of War argue that at least one of the dyads must be a state, i.e., *“internationally recognised sovereign government controlling a specific territory or an internationally unrecognised government controlling a specified territory whose sovereignty is not disputed by another internationally recognized sovereign government previously controlling the same territory.”* (Themnér 2020, 2) However, there are instances of insurgency organizations fighting each other in our analysis, namely in Syria. Such confrontations are also taken into consideration.

The UCDP dataset focuses solely on a ‘body-count’ in determining the intensity of violent campaigns between dyads. The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIICR) offers a more fine-grained and yet intuitive framework for determining armed conflict intensity (HIICR 2016). It also determines conflict means such as weapons utilized by dyads (light arms, IEDs, heavy weaponry

such as artillery, mortars, tanks, APCs), and the level of deployment (i.e., how many combatants are usually deployed). The HIIICR (2016) asserts that a low level is less than 50, medium 50-400, and high over 400 combatants participating in combat operations (ibid.). For our study, it is sufficient to determine whether the units are in tens, a couple of hundreds, or more. Apart from battle-deaths in the second category of ‘Conflict Consequences,’ the HIIICR utilizes the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees and level of destruction “(...) in four dimensions considered essential for civil population’s infrastructure, accommodation, economy, and culture.” (ibid.) If the destruction is significant within no category, it is labelled as low, one or two categories are medium, and three or more is coded as high. The table below summarizes the framework for analyzing armed conflict intensity based on the UCDP’s benchmarks of battle-related deaths and the HIIICR’s framework. The author further modified it by adding several qualitative benchmarks, such as the scale of operations.

Armed Conflict Intensity					
Intensity	Conflict Consequences			Conflict Means of Insurgent	
	Battle-related deaths	IDPs and Refugees	Level of Destruction	Weapons Used	Level of Deployments
Low	25-500 battle-related deaths a year	In hundreds	No significant destruction in any of the categories (infrastructure, housing, economy, culture)	Light arms	Small units of tens of combatants, small scale ad hoc operations often in a hit and run style
Medium	500-1000 battle-related deaths a year	In thousands	Significant destruction in 1-2 categories (infrastructure, housing, economy, culture)	Light arms prevail, but the use of explosive devices, RPGs, mortars occurs	Medium-sized units of up to couple hundred combatants, military operations show signs of continuity and sustainability over a longer period of time
High	1000 or more battle-related deaths a year	In tens of thousands	Significant destruction in 3-4 categories (infrastructure, housing, economy, culture)	Heavier weaponry is used regularly, including mounted heavy machine guns, APCs, tanks, artillery, etc.	A large number of combatants are deployed, front lines or at least ‘hot combat’ zones, e.g., in cities, can be identified, operations resemble conventional warfare

Table 4.3.1: Armed Conflict Intensity (modified by the author from HIIICR 2016).

There are obvious difficulties in assessing these categories that stem from incomplete or non-existent reliable quantitative data. Thus, we must often rely on qualitative data from newspaper articles, educated-estimates from relevant interviews, on-the-ground observations, and audio-visual materials,

which may help determine the level of deployment and the nature of weapons used, and the level of destruction. Regardless of these constraints and gaps in data, applying this framework has greatly enhanced understanding of armed conflict dynamics between incumbent actors and the PKK. The study primarily uses the UCDP database and well-maintained database of PKK operations in Turkey by the ICG (2020) extensively covering the period since 2011.

4.3.2 Use of Terrorism

As Byman (2007, 3) notes, *“Not all terrorists groups are insurgencies, but almost every insurgent group uses terrorism.”* Terrorism is viewed as one of the violent tactics used by insurgents, along with guerrilla and conventional armed conflict. Merari (1993, 14-15) points out that the distinction between terrorism and guerrilla is often blurry and introduces distinctions based on, for example, the unit size (terrorism usually uses small units of less than ten people, while guerrilla uses medium sizes such as platoons), intended impact (terrorism aims at psychological coercion rather than physical attrition of the incumbent), or recognition of war zones (terrorism does not recognize war zones). Forst (2009, 5) utilizes the following definition of terrorism: *“Terrorism is the premeditated and unlawful use of violence against a non-combatant population or target having symbolic significance, with an aim of either inducing political change through intimidation and destabilization or destroying a population identified as an enemy.”* As we see, the target may be the contested population itself, the broader public, or public figures.

Much of the literature’s attention is given to explaining why insurgent groups, on occasion, use terrorist tactics towards the contested population. For example, Kalyvas (2006) argues that it is to deter the population in areas contested with government from aiding the incumbent. Nevertheless, when do some rebels use terrorism attacks with the primary motivation to alter the incumbent government's behaviour? Thomas (2014) convincingly argues that terrorism induces the government to negotiate and make concessions to rebels.

Stanton (2016) uses a cost-benefit explanation of why some insurgents engaged in rebellion use terrorism more and why others choose different tactics. In other words, insurgents utilize terrorism under conditions in which they see it beneficial and less costly. If they see that the government can be forced to alter its behaviour due to terrorism (e.g, there will be more public demand to resolve the root causes of insurgency to which government is likely to react) and at the same time, the group is not risking losing its popularity, it is more likely to use terrorism.

Stanton (2016) infers that the more democratic government, the more likely are insurgents to use terrorism since such regimes are more receptive to public demands. She builds on a well-established argument about democratic regimes being more prone to experience terrorist attacks (see Chenoweth 2010). Secondly, Stanton (2016) notes that rebel groups that seek an appeal to a broader constituency

would not risk public backlash by utilizing terrorism on a larger scale, such as groups with a narrow support base.

Another argument revolves around the argument that terrorism is the ‘weapon of the weak.’ For example, Crenshaw (1981) argues that terrorist tactics are mainly used when the actor is militarily weak compared to the incumbent. In other words, if the insurgency is merely small-scale, it is more likely to use terrorism tactics. Fortna (2015) also convincingly argues that the disadvantages of terrorism tactics, in general, outweigh its advantages. Although it is cheap, it shows weakness than strength but is not useful for actually holding territory.

4.3.3 Violence towards Contested Population

Insurgents can opt for contractual or coercive behaviour towards the contested population. Kalyvas (2006) and Metelits (2010) investigate the conditions under which insurgents opt for coercive behaviour towards civilians and opt for a more contractual approach to win the hearts and minds of the population. Metelits (2009, 674) argues that insurgents opt for more coercive behaviour if they face “(...) *rivals that extract from the same pool of resources indicat[ing] competition.*” Active rivalry occurs if rival insurgent groups or political actors (it can also be incumbent government trying to win the favour of the population) are tapping into the same constituency and competing for a population’s allegiance. We are looking into whether there are reports of insurgents engaging in authoritarian practices, persecuting political opponents, forcing the population to show allegiance to insurgents, punishing ‘disloyal’ behaviour such as working with the incumbent government, or allowing for little or no space for the population to express its opinions. Similarly, insurgents may force the population to deal only with their political and governance structures or forcibly extract resources from civilians.

4.3.4 Building Political Structures

By political structures, I mean mainly political parties both on the local and state level. They can either operate as a part of a state’s political system (such as legal KCK/PKK-linked political parties in Turkey) or outside the system, often illegally. Political structures are classical political parties and a myriad of interconnected ‘civil society’ organizations, or even professional unions that systematically try to penetrate the society and gain influence over the population. The maturity and complexity of these institutions differ significantly in examined cases. It seems that the PKK usually builds these institutions as the first step before trying to establish open structures like political parties or governance (as seen, for example, in the case of Shingal in Iraq in 2004-2014).

4.3.5 Building Governance Structures & Producing Legitimacy

Keister and Slantchev (2014) point out that insurgents are often called ‘state breakers.’ On the other hand, they often behave as ‘state makers’ while building governance and administrative structures in controlled territories, even provide bureaucratic services or maintain the rule of law. An in-depth understanding of variations of wartime socio-political orders crafted by insurgent organizations has long been a neglected

topic. Some groups care little about their relationship with the civilian population and have only a few incentives to engage in civilian affairs beyond violence towards the population. In Olson's (2000) words, these may be 'roving bandits' that do not strive for stable territorial control. However, the population's support and ultimately administering areas under their control is a critical predicament that enables insurgents to thrive and ultimately fulfill their goals.

McColl (1969, 613) also argues that capturing and controlling territory became an imperative for a successful rebellion. He further argues that *"If a system of guerilla base areas evolves, then a parallel state (insurgent state) is formed."* The puzzle revolving around the concept of rebel governance is under which conditions are rebels likely to provide governance to the controlled population? Why, in some cases, they rely on the hearts and minds approach while in others turn mainly or solely to violence when engaging civilians? What are the variations of rebel governance (i.e., wartime socio-political orders)?

The literature on rebel governance that emerged mainly since the 2000s laid down a conceptual framework for analyzing wartime social orders and identified assumptions about conditions under which rebels engage in governance (see Mampilly 2015; Arjona 2016; Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015). As Péclard and Mechoulan (2015, 5) note, researchers acknowledged that insurgents *"(...) do not simply destroy political orders. They contribute to shaping and producing them."* Huang (2016, 9) defines rebel governance as *"a political strategy of rebellion in which rebels forge and manage relations with civilians – across civil wars."* Worrall (2017, 725) pointedly stresses the centrality of 'creating order' and defines rebel governance as *"(...) an attempt to create forms of order which enable the rebels to govern and meet their own objectives in a manner which is relatively stable and which ensures the continuing authority of the rebel group."* Along with Mampilly (2015), one can argue that insurgents' long-term success depends on their ability to rule, which in turn grants legitimacy to their rule.

Arjona (2016) distinguishes between three types of social order crafted by insurgents: disorder, rebelocracy, and aliocracy. The disorder occurs when there is no social contract between insurgents and the population, and both locals and combatants fail to abide by a set of defined rules. Rebelocracy occurs when insurgents broadly intervene in the social order and regulate activities beyond providing security or 'taxation.' In line with Arjona's aliocracy, if insurgents only maintain a monopoly on violence, Mampilly (2015) labels it as 'partially effective governance.' Insurgents often rule through a pre-existing political party or through organizations infiltrated, co-opted, or even created by the insurgents, like unions or 'civil society organizations.' In aliocracy, on the other hand, insurgents intervene minimally and instead limit their engagement to maintain a monopoly over violence and extract resources from the population.

The additional puzzle is whether the PKK-built governance structures are mature, entrenched, and effective (resembling rebelocracy) or exist only 'on paper,' and the governance type is rather aliocracy. Mampilly (2015, 17) offers a useful analytical framework for assessing the effectiveness of rebel

governance. If the following conditions are met, the governance model can be labelled rebelocracy (see Arjona 2016):

- 1) Insurgents must have a force capable of policing the population, providing security, and ensuring a monopoly on violence.
- 2) A dispute resolution mechanism (creating a parallel system or similar institutionalised dispute resolution mechanisms) is in place, and the population utilises it.
- 3) Insurgents provide other public goods beyond security, such as education, healthcare, and essential services such as water, electricity, etc.
- 4) Feedback mechanisms to foster civilian participation in rebel governance (through local councils, town meetings, insurgent-tied political parties) are, according to Mampilly (2015), useful to examine. One can argue that if insurgents allow for civilians' participation in the decision-making processes, it increases their legitimacy in the population's eyes. It may add to the effectiveness and longevity of their governance.
- 5) Arjona (2016) also adds a level of economics, which provides a further understanding of rebels' influence on civilian affairs. Economic regulations revolve around whether the group regulated different (both legal and illegal) economic activities. Moreover, we might argue that forms of resource extraction from the population falls into this category.

Rebel legitimacy is a concept that is closely interlinked with rebel governance and its effectiveness. In Weber's terms, insurgents seek to transform raw power (*Macht*) into domination (*Herrschaft*), which is based on the recognition of authority rather than solely on the use of force. Schlichte and Schneckener (2016) distinguish between symbolic and performance-centered claims of legitimacy. The first relates to how rebels justify their actions (i.e., what they say), and the second is linked to performance. Symbolic and performance-centered claims of legitimacy add to an understanding of whether the group is seen as legitimate by the population.

According to Schlichte and Schneckener (2016), symbolic claims include:

- 1) Using communal myths-symbol complexes, popular beliefs, tradition, or culture. In a way, these claims must be linked to local cultures and beliefs and simply be fully imposed by rebels. For example, in tribal and religious societies, stressing secular, Marxist-Leninist ideas and goals can hardly produce legitimacy within the majority of the population.
- 2) Claims can revolve around the socio-economic and political aspirations of a local community, e.g., secessionist aspirations.
- 3) Other claims derive from outside threats and established enemy images (e.g., oppressive state).

Performance-centered claims include:

- 1) The charisma of the successful warrior and leader.
- 2) Credibility through sacrifice. Rebels may earn respect only for showing readiness to sacrifice themselves and fight for the community.
- 3) Patrimonial loyalty in societies that are based on personal loyalties (e.g., tribal societies).
- 4) Ability to deliver essential services, including security, material gains for supporters, and the population from which it seeks support in general.
- 5) Use of formal procedures to attract followers. Encouraging political participation in political parties, supporting civil society groups, organizing internal elections, and so on may attract a significant number of followers, especially if the space for meaningful political participation was limited.

4.4 Issues and Limitations: Facing Bias & Filling in Blank Spaces

There are several considerable challenges in collecting sufficient and, even more importantly, reliable data. It is impossible to rely solely on interviews or secondary sources that are a product of ‘outsiders,’ such as analysts, academics, journalists. As Posch (2016a; 2016b) or Leezenberg (2016) note, research on the PKK is often subjected to considerable bias, may it be in favour or against the insurgent. While secondary sources or accounts of journalists or researchers provide useful insight, for a more fine-grained understanding of the situation, it is necessary to conduct field work that entails risk collecting biased and/or distorted data.

One has to consider that the PKK phenomenon is a politically, ideologically, and socially charged topic. As Özcan (2006, 5) notes at the onset of his study on the PKK ideology, *“Studying a highly controversial phenomenon carries a grave risk of the studies becoming biased.”* I have sincerely made an extensive effort not to introduce own bias into the research or become a ‘victim’ of bias stemming from secondary and primary written sources and, perhaps most importantly, from interviews and informal communications. What enormously helped to cope with these risks was that I could undergo extensive stays embedded in the local environment for almost three years during the course of the research in 2014-19.

The PKK has an apparent interest in distorting or dismissing allegations about coercive actions towards civilians or the use of terrorism. On the other hand, the pro-PKK actors are more open to providing explanations regarding their political activities short of violence or governance in controlled areas. The incumbent governments, their allies, or in apparent general critics of the insurgents are, on the other hand, prone to highlight violent activities of insurgents. They also provide different outlooks on the pro-PKK’s political structures and activities and administration efforts during which opponents tend to focus on in their eyes ‘criminal’ or ‘terrorist nature’ of these activities (such as extortion, the

coercive purpose of these structures). Civilians themselves or members of civil society organizations might be afraid to talk openly or critically about the insurgent and its activities.

It proved to be a difficult task to have reliable data for each of the examined cases. In Syria, Turkey, and Shingal, there are either enough primary, secondary written sources and/or data from interviews and observations. Iran's and Makhmour's case proved to be more problematic due to a lack of access and even reliable secondary and primary sources. Regardless, these cases are also included to paint as comprehensive picture of the PKK's insurgencies as possible.

5. Kurds, Kurdish Issue in the Middle East and the PKK

To assess PKK's insurgencies' changing context, we must first look into what 'Kurdishness' (or *Kurdayetî*) entails and how complex and flexible Kurdish identity is since tribal, religious, or other loyalties often surpass ethnic identity. Secondly, light needs to be shed on the scope of the 'Kurdish Question' or 'Kurdish Issue' in the region. The dynamics between urban intellectuals and leftist ideologies and traditional tribal and religious structures still play a crucial role in the Kurdish national movement. Thirdly, the PKK's ascendancy in Turkey and the region since the late 1970s is discussed to identify the changes in behaviour and successes and failures until the late-1990s.

5.1 Kurds and Kurdistan

Kurds are often coined as the largest nation in the world without their state. Data about their numbers are, however, estimates often extrapolated from the decades-old census in countries of their origin. Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have always considered Kurds as the fifth column due to their centrifugal tendencies and growing national aspirations. Therefore, governments tried to underrate their numbers or even subdue them to assimilation campaigns or outright denial of civil rights.

A typical example is Syria. During the 1962 census in the al-Hasaka area where most Kurds live, around 120,000 Kurds lost their citizenship. The government argued that those Kurds were not 'Syrians' and categorized them as 'foreigners' (*ajānib*). Furthermore, many of those 120 thousand were considered 'hidden' (*maktūmin*) since they failed to register during the census leaving them in even worse positions having no legal status in the Syrian state's eyes (Tejel 2009). In 2011, it was estimated that since 'statelessness' is hereditary, there were almost 350,000 'ajānib' Kurds and around 170,000 'maktūmin' Kurds in Syria out of the estimated total of 2 million (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2018). This was only partially alleviated by the presidential Decree no. 49 issued in 2011, which resulted in the naturalization of majority 'ajānib' and a significant number of 'maktūmin' (*ibid.*).

There are various estimates available, with the highest figures going as far as 45.6 million Kurds across the Middle East and in diaspora in total (Institut Kurde de Paris 2020). The below Table 5.1a provides us with firstly, estimates based on figures from the authoritative CIA World Factbook (2020) and secondly, with Izady's (2015) thorough estimates combined from local partial and general state census in 2015. According to these figures, there are some 33 to 37 million Kurds in the Middle East. Another estimated 1.5-1.8 million Kurds live in diaspora, mainly in the Western European countries such as Germany (850,000-950,000), France (230,000-250,000), Netherlands (100,000-120,000), Switzerland (85,000-95,000), Belgium (70,000-85,000), Austria (80,000-95,000), or Sweden (85,000-100,000) (Institut Kurde de Paris 2020). Around 75 % of Kurds in diaspora in Western Europe originate in Turkey (*ibid.*). Additionally, an estimated 0.5 million Kurds live in the former Soviet Union (*ibid.*). These are mere estimates since, as Omarkhali (2013) notes, the total number of Kurds living in the former Soviet republics is unknown.

Country	Kurdish Population		Percentage of the Population in the Country	
	World Factbook	Izady	World Factbook	Izady (2015)
Turkey	15.4 million	18.1 million	19 %	24.2 %
Iran ¹⁶	10-12 million	7.87 million	13-17.5 %	10.3 %
Iraq	6.29-8.03 million	7.16 million	15-20 %	21.5 %
Syria	1.94 million	1.92 million	10 %	8.9 %
Total	33.63-37.37 million	35.05 million	-	-

Table 5.1: Kurdish Population in the Middle East (prepared by the author; figures from Izady 2015 and CIA 2020).

Kurds are Indo-European people of heterogeneous origin. Kurds are most likely descendants of Indo-European peoples' waves moving westward through today's Iran to the Zagros Mountains area since the middle of the second millennia BC (McDowall 2004). Many different groups of people have lived, mixed, and were absorbed in today's Kurdish-inhabited areas in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. As van Bruinessen argues *"It is certainly not true that all tribes in Kurdistan have a common origin. During more than eight centuries of contact between Turkish and Kurdish (and Arab) tribes, there have been Kurdish tribes that turkicized and Turkish tribes that gradually became Kurdish."* (van Bruinessen 1992, 117) The etymology of the word 'Kurd' and 'Kurdistan' is also unclear. Seljuk Turks began to use the term 'Kurdistan' to describe what approximately today eastern Turkey is, while it is not clear whether it had any ethnic connotations (Çifçi 2019). Until the 19th Century, the term 'Kurd' was used for any nomadic people living in Kurdistan. Only later, it became a label for tribes speaking dialects of Kurdish, which is distinctive from Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and Arabic (McDowall 2004). Interestingly, at times, 'proper' Kurds were only Kurdish speaking nomadic Kurds, i.e., warriors who were subjugating sedentary peoples in tribal confederations of Kurdish-speaking and non-Kurdish speaking peasantry (Gunter 2011).

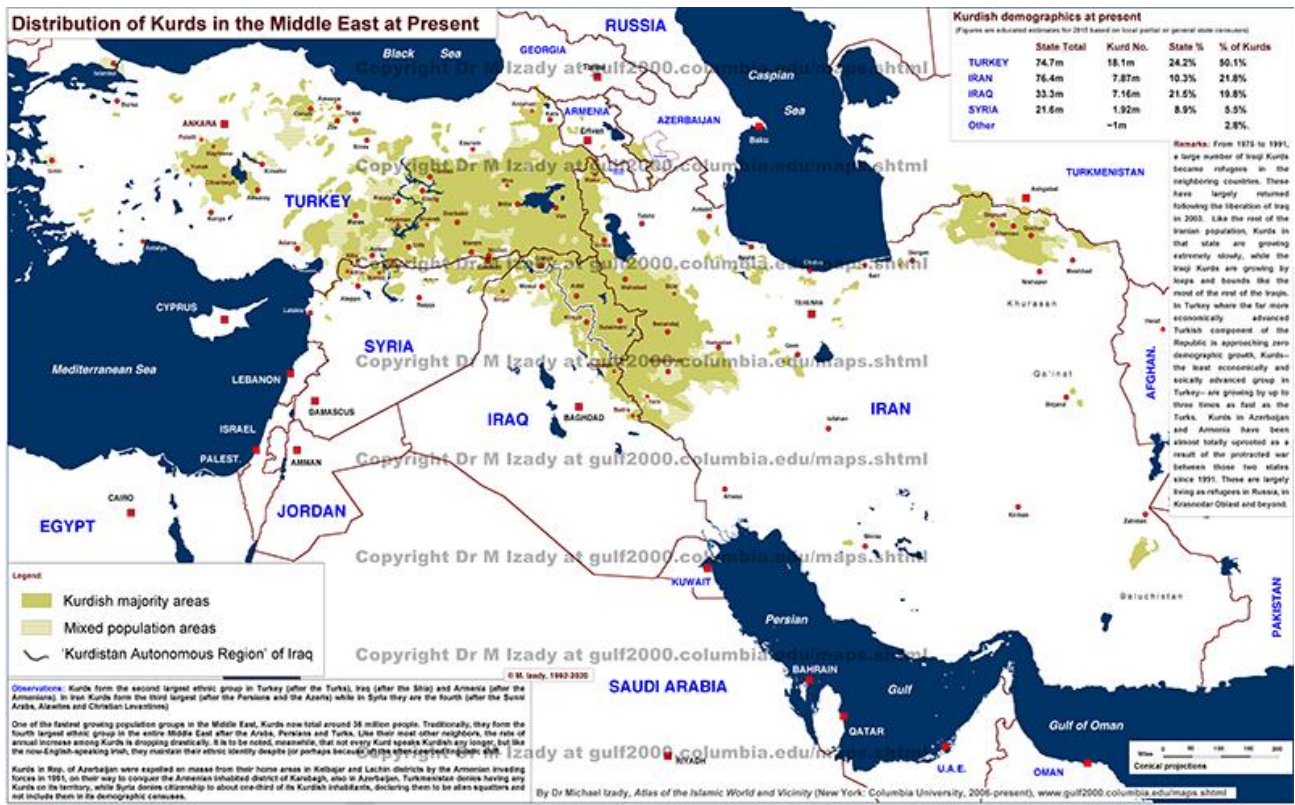
Today, the term 'Kurdistan' is also fluid. While inhabitants of the semi-autonomous KRI simply refer to this entity as 'Kurdistan,' for others, 'Kurdistan' may refer to Kurdish-inhabited territories in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran in general, or 'their' respective Kurdistan (author's observations).¹⁷ In this pan-Kurdish nationalist discourse, many Kurds refer to these parts as Bakur (North, or Turkish Kurdish areas), Başûr (South, or Iraqi Kurdish areas), Rojava (West, or Syrian Kurdish areas) and Rojhilat (East, or Iranian Kurdish areas). The PKK also uses this terminology and refers to its areas of operations in these terms.

In the English language, Kurds often refer to the respective territory as 'Turkish Kurdistan.' However, when talking about specific parts of 'Kurdistan,' the pan-Kurdish terms Bakur, Başûr, Rojava, and Rojhilat are often used and not necessarily by PKK-sympathisers or people championing pan-

¹⁶ The World Factbook does not provide figures for Iran, this figure comes from Institut Kurde de Paris (2020).

¹⁷ Author's observations and informal communications in Turkey and Iraq.

Kurdish nationalist ideas. This goes for Kurds themselves and foreigners, whether researchers, journalists, or humanitarians (author’s observations). In this study, I use neutral terms such as ‘Kurdish areas of Turkey,’ ‘the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,’ or refer to majority Kurdish-inhabited areas geographically, such ‘northeastern Syria,’ ‘southeastern Turkey.’ For an overview of the geographical distribution of the Kurds in the Middle East, see Map 5.1 below.



Map 5.1: Kurdish Population in the Middle East (Izady 2015).

5.2 Multi-layered Kurdish Identity

Kurdish identity is indeed multi-layered and complicated, and at certain times or specific situations, different components prevail. Kurdish identity has four major components: ethnicity, tribe, religion and language (see table 5.2 below).

Component of Kurdish Identity	Examples
Ethnicity	Importance of Kurdish ethnicity
Tribe, Tribal Confederacy	Barzani, Zangana, Diza’i, Hartush...
Religion	Sunni (Shafi’i, Hanbali), Shia (Twelver, Fayili), Sufists, Jewish, Yazidi, Ahl al-Haqq...
Language	Kurmanji, Gorani, Sorani, Badini, Zazaki...

Table 5.2: Components of Kurdish Identity (prepared by the author).

Indeed it is essential to keep in mind that due to this ‘identity complexity,’ there are rarely binary categories – not every Kurd is pan-Kurdish nationalist, and not every Kurdish nationalist is a PKK supporter. It is also useful to distinguish between Kurdishness (Kurdîyê) and Kurdish nationalism, which is often used interchangeably. Tunc (2018) argues that ‘Kurdishness’ itself is similar to Hobsbawm’s

proto-national bonds, or Smith's 'ethnic.' Hobsbawm (1992, 77) argues that proto-nationalism itself is not enough to create a 'nation' or a 'nation-state,' however, if "(...) *it existed, made the task of nationalism easier, insofar as existing symbols and sentiments of proto-national community could be mobilized behind a modern cause or a modern state.*"

This indeed fits the development of Kurdish nationalism, which only slowly tapped on Kurdishness to transform it into full-fledged Kurdish nationalism, transpiring geographical boundaries and the importance of different components of Kurdish identity, mainly tribal allegiances. The formation of Kurdish nationalism is still an ongoing process and is subjected to considerable efforts to create national cohesion, for example, in the tribally divided KRI. Aziz (2011) even argued that in the KRI, the term 'Kurdistanîyetî' should label KRI's nationalism, which is predominantly ethnic instead of civic nationalism. In other words, one must take into consideration that the Kurdish nation, as Anderson's (2006) 'imagined community,' is still under lively construction.

5.2.1 Ethnicity

Kurdish nationalism is indeed a clear-cut example of ethnic nationalism, highlighting the importance of shared myths, history, 'blood,' culture, religion, or homeland. Civic nationalism is in an embryonic stage. For example, the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) policy promotes civic nationalism considering non-Kurdish minorities such as Christians or Arabs living there as part of the 'Iraqi Kurdistan Nation' (author's observation in the KRI). Nevertheless, the (Kurdish) population's prevalent feeling falls under ethnic nationalism, considering primarily Kurds part of the 'Iraqi Kurdistan Nation.' Similarly, the PKK highlights its multi-ethnic nature. It tries to attract minority communities, but in fact, it is primarily promoting Kurdish aspirations and is perceived as doing so both by the Kurds and non-Kurdish peoples not only in Turkey but also in Syria and Iraq.¹⁸

Moreover, precisely who has 'Kurdish ethnicity' is relatively fluid and unclear, especially for minority groups with distinctive religion and even language, such as Yazidis, Alevis, or Zaza speakers. They are often not considered (and some do not consider themselves) 'fully Kurdish' (author's observations; see also Kaválek 2017; van Bruinessen 2006). Moreover, the Turkish state itself went to lengths in the past decades to promote the distinct identity of Zazas and Alevis after policies of assimilation to counter Kurdish nationalism (see Çiçek 2017). Also, in some instances, Kurdish ethnicity is not a 'primary identity' for a person. Typically, in Turkey, around half of the Kurds lean towards (Turkish and Kurdish) Islamist political currents instead of the PKK, whose prevailing accent on leftist ideas and secularism alienates them. One also has to consider that for some people, despite being ethnic Kurds, it is simply not such an essential component of their identity that would surpass their other

¹⁸ This notion comes from numerous communications both formal and informal both with people from Turkey, Iraq and Syria.

allegiances. For example, in Syria, Adib al-Shishakli, one of Syria's authoritarian rulers in the late 1940s and 50s, was a Kurd, but he "(...) never acknowledged his Kurdish origins and demonstrated a rather uncompromising attitude toward Kurdish cultural activities." (Tejel 2009, 45)

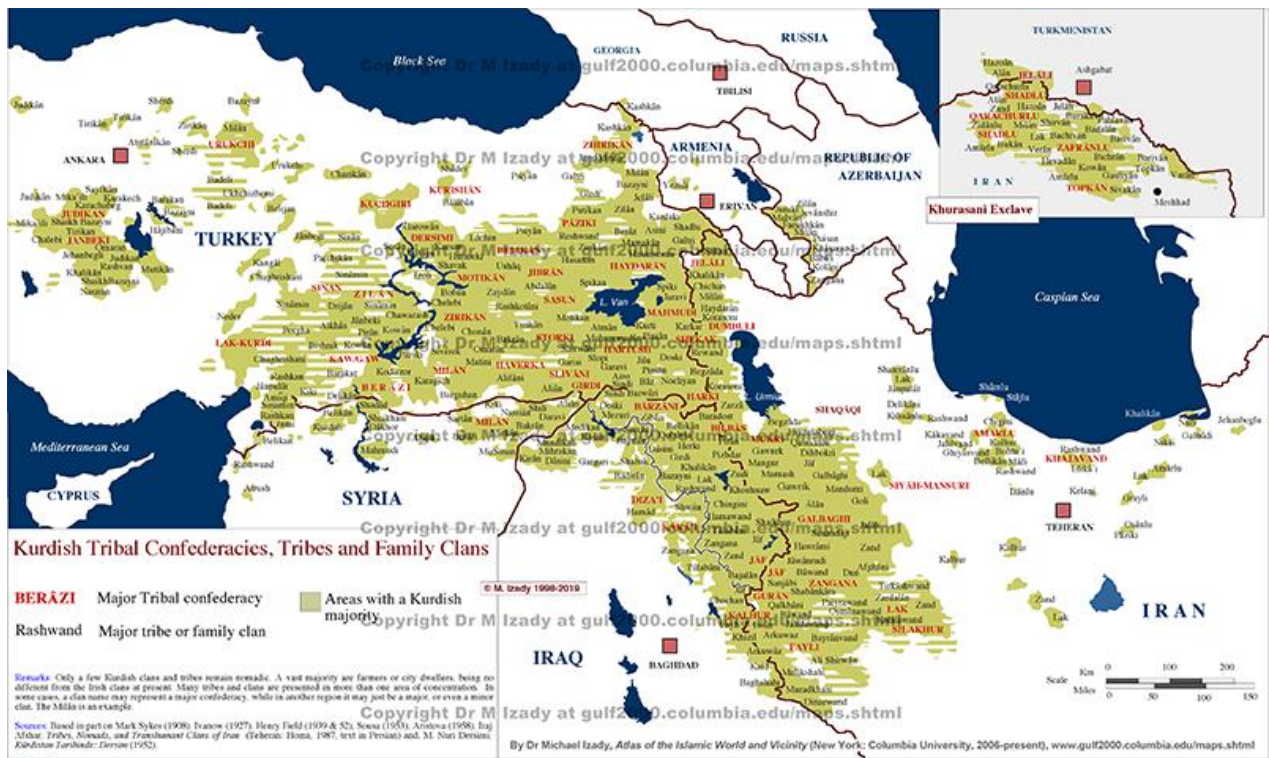
5.2.2 Tribe

Traditional societal structures, such as tribal confederacies, tribes (or aşiret, headed by mir or bag), consisting of clans (headed by agha) guide much of the everyday life (for example, in many areas, it is still relatively uncommon to marry outside the tribe, or to a rival tribe) as well as in politics. Tribes¹⁹ are exceptionally prominent in rural mountainous traditional areas, especially in Iran and Iraq. In the KRI, politics is virtually conducted on tribal lines. The KDP represents Barzani confederacy and their allies, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) representing Talabanis and their allies. Even in Turkey, where more of the population became urbanized either seeking economic benefits in the cities of the east or the west in Ankara, Izmir, and Istanbul, tribes play an essential role, especially in more peripheral areas such as Van, Hakkâri, Şırnak, Muş.²⁰ Van Bruinessen (1992, 51) defines Kurdish tribes as "(...) a socio-political and generally also territorial (and therefore economical) unit based on descent and kinship, real or putative, with a characteristic internal structure." Their economic activities then differ based on whether the given tribe is nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary.

Gunter (2018, 30) argues that "*Continuing primordial allegiances (...) contribute to Kurdish disunity and fracture nascent Kurdish nationalism.*" Even modern Kurdish parties such as the KDP and the PUK in Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI), the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) "(...) seem to function as neo-tribal confederations complete with their traditional spirit of disunity and infighting." (ibid., 30) Prevalent importance of tribal structure is indeed hurdling to the creation of (pan)-Kurdish national struggle across borders and primordial allegiances. As Özcan (2006) claims, in Kurdish society, tribal allegiances still dominate. One must firstly pursue the well-being of fellow tribesmen even at the cost of betrayal of alliance with other (Kurdish) tribes for profit (which has happened in modern Kurdish history on many occasions). To illustrate the complexity of tribal landscape among the Kurds, consult Map 5.2.3.

¹⁹ It is important to note that not all Kurdish population in the Middle East was ever tribal and there were many non-tribal, mostly sedentary peasantry Kurds (called rayat, misken, kurmanj...). They were usually much poorer and landless.

²⁰ For more elaborate discussion on the role of Kurdish tribes on Kurdish political participation see van Bruinessen (2002).



Map 5.2.3: Map of Major Kurdish Tribes and Tribal Confederacies (Izady 2020).

5.2.3 Religion

Two-thirds to three-quarters of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, the vast majority of those follow conservative and rigid Shafi'i mazhab in contrast to Turks and Arabs. They are mainly followers of more flexible Hanbali mazhab (van Bruinenssen 2000). As Bruinenssen (2000, 2) asserts, *“The relationship between religion and nationalism has often been strained and ambivalent in Kurdistan.”* He also argues that despite many 20th Century urban intellectual nationalists who were often not religious, leftist, and even flirting with the Zoroastrian pre-Islamic faith of the Kurds, Sunni Islam has played a crucial role among the Kurds (ibid.).

However, many Sunni Kurds of Turkey and Iraq are no strangers to political Islam. In Turkey, it prompted Kurds to participate in Islamist projects such as the Kurdish Hizbullah, and its legal offshoot the Free Cause Party (in Turkish, Hür Dava Partisi, Hüda-Par), and also the ruling Justice and Development Party (in Turkish, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) (see Kurt 2017). Similarly, political Islam finds its ground in Iraq, where several Kurdish Islamist parties exist, namely Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) and Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU). Sunni extremism among the Kurds is also a significant phenomenon: Ansar al-Islam – an al-Qaeda affiliate operating in northern Iraq was primarily a Kurdish organisation (Romano 2007). Both Iranian, Turkish, and Iraqi Kurds also joined the ranks of ISIS. Mystic Sufi orders also play an essential role among Sunni Kurds. Especially in Syria and Iraq, Sufism flourished in contrast to Kemalist Turkey, where it was banned in 1925 and Sufist Sheikhs expelled (Tejel 2009). In Syria, widespread various Sufists practices somehow undermine strict orthodoxy of Sunni Shafi'i mazhab. In Iraqi Kurdistan, two widespread Sufi orders are also prominent: Naqshbandi order led by hereditary

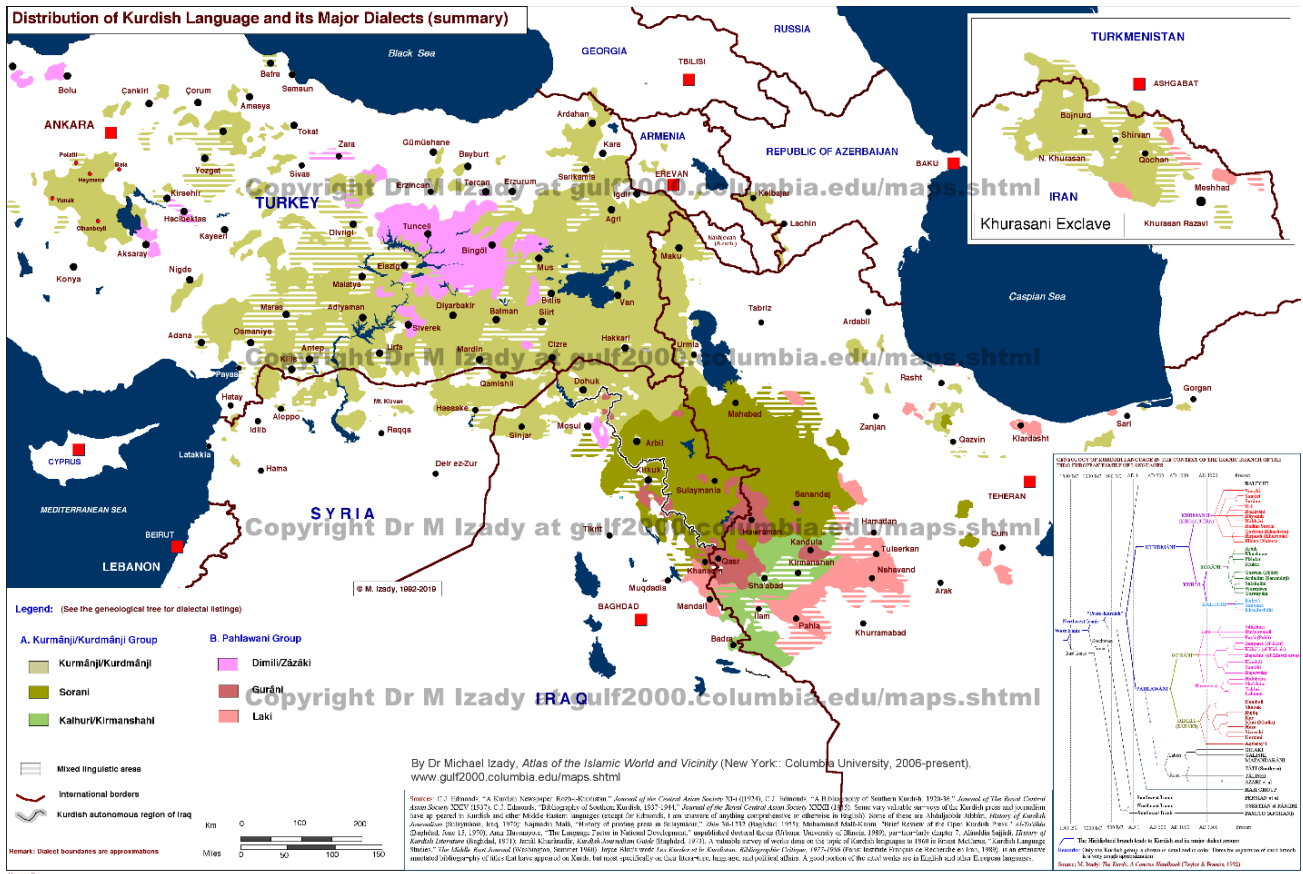
Sheikhs from Barzani family and Qadiri order led by sheikhs from Barzinji and Talabani family (van Bruinessen 1999).

In Turkey, an estimated 20% of Muslims comprise Turkish-, Kurmanjî- or Zazakî-speaking Alevis, a distinctive local branch of Shia Islam (Religious Literacy Project 2020). Twelver Shia Kurds live in Kermanshah and Illam areas in Iran and in Khanaqin and Mandali areas of Iraq, where they are called Fayilis (ibid.). Interestingly, Alevis are sometimes not considered ‘proper Kurds’ precisely due to their different religious practices. Similarly, Fayilis and other religious minorities ascribing to syncretic faiths such as Iraq’s and Kermanshah’s Kaka’i (also called Ahl al-Haqq, or Yarsan) (van Bruinessen 2000), Yazidis, or Shabak are viewed as distinctive from Sunni Kurds of Iraq, sometimes coined as mere ‘cousins’ to Kurds. In the post-2003 Iraq, many Shabaks and Fayilis lean towards Shia Arabs for pragmatic reasons since they dominate Iraqi politics. Many of Kurdish-speaking Yazidis consider their religious identity so important they view themselves as a distinctive nation. In Iran, Shia Kurds have comparably better position compared to Sunni Kurds are comparably better integrated and co-opted into local administrations and consequently less rebellious than Sunni Kurds, more prone to joining the opposition, including the PKK ranks.

While many Kurds are secular-leaning, or at least not proponents of political Islam, for many, their Sunni orthodoxy or various syncretic faiths are the dominant features of their identity superseding ethnic or other components of identity. As van Bruinessen (1999, 2) notes, due to the complex religious landscape of the Kurds, there are two prejudices present: *“One prejudice has it that the Kurds are staunch Sunnis and unyielding religious fanatics, another considers the Kurds as hardly islamised at all.”*

5.2.4 Language

The Kurdish language is a crucial marker often used as a supporting argument to highlight the distinctive identity, history, customs, and literature of the Kurds in contrast to Persian, Turkish/Ottoman, and Arabic cultures. Kurdish belongs to the north-western Iranian branch of the Indo-European language group, which makes it similar to Persian or Pashtu and significantly different from Turkish and Arabic (Sheyholislami 2015). While the majority of Kurds across the Middle East identify themselves as speakers of ‘Kurdish language,’ there are at least five distinctive dialects of the Kurdish language (ibid.): Northern Kurdish (Kurmanjî), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (Kermanshahî/Fayilî/Kalhurî), Zazakî (despite some Zaza nationalists consider Zazas distinct from Kurds and Zazakî, not a ‘Kurdish language,’ see van Wilgenburg 2009) and Gorani/Hawramî. For further discussion on Kurdish dialects, see Sheyholislami’s (2015) article or extensive Izady’s account (1992). For a detailed breakup of different Kurdish speakers, see Map 5.2.4.



Map 5.2.4: Dialects of Kurdish (Izady 2020b).

It was numerously disclosed to the author that dialects, in some cases, differ to the point that even people living in relative proximity could have issues with understanding each other. A Kurd from Kirkuk speaking Hawlerî dialect of Sorani may have issues conversing over the phone with Badinî (South-eastern Kurmanji) speaker from Dohuk (author's observation in the KRI). On the other hand, others disclosed that more educated Kurds with experience from different cities and following media in various dialects have no significant understanding (ibid.). This may even go for sub-dialects in close proximity: a Kurd from Adiyaman, Turkey, speaking Western Kurmanjî may have a problem having a small talk with Diyarbakır taxi driver speaking Central Kurmanjî (author's observations in Turkey, 2013-2015). Moreover, local variances of Kurdish use numerous borrowed words and even idioms from the prevalent language in the area or proximity – Turkish in Turkey, Arabic in Iraq and Syria, and Persian in Iran and Iraq.

The Kurdish language is lacking standardization. Scripts differ with Iraqi and Iranian Kurds using Arabic-Persian modified script and Turkish Kurds preferring Latin script (the PKK also champions modified Latin script in areas under its influence in Syria or Iraq) (author's observations). Kurdish was officially recognized only in Iraq since the 1930s at the local level (since 2005, on national), and standardized education existed since the 1990s in the KRI (Sheyholislami 2015). However, in the KRI, there is still a deficit of codification of Kurdish. Different dialects are used in formal education; apart from dominant Soranî, Badinî is taught. Hawramî speakers are in pursuit of official recognition as a

'minority language' (Sheyholislami 2017). In Syria from 2011, Turkey from 1992, and Iran from 1942, the Kurdish language is partially tolerated. For the most part, its public usage is frowned upon and does not find its way into official state education (Sheyholislami 2015). Some go as far as delineating cases of the illegalizing Kurdish language in the past from both public and private spheres, especially in Turkey before 1992 as 'linguicide' (Sheyholislami, Hassanpour and Skutnabb-Kangas 2012). Indeed, due to this cultural oppression, many Kurds from Turkey cannot fluently speak Kurdish; the same goes for many Kurds living especially in urban centres such as in Damascus. Many more are also unable to express themselves in writing in Kurdish.

As illustrated, Kurdish identity has four major components, and one cannot say that one or the other always prevails. This is also due to the only gradual transformation of 'Kurdayeti' into full-fledged Kurdish nationalism that would, on most occasions, transcend four other components of Kurdish identity. It adds to the complexity of the insurgency context since the political and armed actors, including the PKK, must tailor its behaviour to satisfy various strata of their audiences in different territories. For example, one cannot openly attack Islam or ignore religious figures among Turkey's Kurds since, for many, their pious Sunni identity is, in most situations, more critical than Kurdish national aspirations. Similarly, in Turkey, Kurdish tribes and major clans often openly declare their allegiance and instruct their members to vote for a particular political party. For example, in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (in Turkish, Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) scored a historic result of 13.12% in 2015 parliamentary elections following tribes across pre-dominantly Kurdish provinces such as Batman, Van, Şanlıurfa, Siirt, or Adıyaman openly switching their allegiance from the AKP before the vote (Tastekin 2015).

5.3 History of Kurdish Nationalism and the Formation of the Kurdish Question

It is not within the scope of this study to dwell on (and one must say still relatively under-researched) medieval and modern history of the Kurds. As for general information about the Kurds and Kurdish issue, earlier history, and the formation of Kurdish nationalism, one could be referred to McDowall's (2004) 'A Modern History of the Kurds,' on Izady's book (1992), Routledge's 'Handbook on the Kurds' (Gunter 2019), Gunter's (2011) 'Historical Dictionary of the Kurds,' or Ozgolu (2004) on Kurdish notables in Ottoman period. Van Bruinessen's (1992) book offers an excellent account of the role of tribal (agha) and religious (sheikhs) leaders in Kurdish social and political life, which is still relevant for understanding dynamics today. For an overview of the modern Kurdish history in Syria, see Tejel's (2009) 'Syria's Kurds,' or Kerim Yildiz's (2005) book; in Iran see Yildiz and Taysi (2007) and Koochi-Kamali (2003); and in Iraq, see Natali (2010), Yildiz (2004), or relevant parts of authoritative Tripp's (2007) 'A History of Iraq.'

For the purposes of this study, it suffices to say that with the stabilization of border between Ottoman and Persian Empires in 16th Century up until the early 20th Century prevailed "*The pattern of*

nominal submission to central government, be it Persian, Arab, or subsequently Turkic, alongside the assertion of as much local political independence as possible, became an enduring theme in Kurdish political life." (McDowall 2004, 21). Kurdish tribes living in border areas were used by Arabs, Turks, and Persians as mercenaries against one another and switched allegiances at their leisure to survive and increase their political autonomy. However, open 'birakujî' (Kurd-on-Kurd fighting) is highly unpopular these days after numerous experience with Kurdish infighting in the past and the rise of (pan-)Kurdish nationalism such as the civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan 1994-97; or Turkey using Kurdish tribes within the Village Guard System against the PKK. Regardless, intra-Kurdish (tribal) rivalries still very much guide the political life – for example, in Turkey, tribes decide which political party to vote for; in the KRI, Barzanis and Talabanis and their respective allies are bitter rivals.

In the 18th and the 19th Century, seemingly Kurdish national aspirations translated into the existence of numerous more or less independent principalities (or emirates), such as Ardalan, Baban, Soran, Hakkari, or Bayazid ruled by Kurdish dynasties (Eppel 2019). Centralization efforts both by the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Empire led to their significant subjugation by the late 19th Century. As a result, sheikhs, i.e., Kurdish religious leaders, became more prominent than tribal chieftains (van Bruinessen 1992; see also Atmaca 2017). It is important to note that famous Kurdish rebellions such as Sheikh Ubeydullah's in 1880-81; Sheikh Ismail Agha Simko's rebellion in early 1918-22 against Persian Empire; or Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji revolt in 1919 and 1922-24 against the British in Iraq were not primarily driven by Kurdish nationalism but were much more a tribal response to centralisation efforts of modernising states (for example, Ateş 2014; Yildiz and Taysi 2007; McDowall 2004). It was primarily a response to what inevitably led to eroding tribal and religious leaders' dominance and undisputed status as nobility in strictly feudal society. By the late 19th Century and in early 20th Century there was also slowly a growing body of urban Kurdish intellectuals.

Şerif Paşa presented the first articulation of a desire for the Kurds to have their own nation state. Paşa, Istanbul-born Kurdish urban intellectual who went from supporting the Young Turk movement to representing the Kurdish delegation during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 (Ozoglu 2004). Later, in 1920, in the Treaty of Sévres, the British, French and Italian government promised to draft a scheme of local autonomy for predominantly Kurdish areas "*(...) lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3).*" (The Treaty of Sévres 1920, Article 62) The idea never came to life yet it is an important milestone in envisioning a united Kurdish nation state spanning over Kurdish-inhabited areas of Ottoman Empire (as well as a source of grievance for the Kurds due to the perceived betrayal of the Western powers on its implementation).

5.3.1. Kurdish Nationalism as a Response to the Modern Nation-States

New nation-states rising from the Ottoman Empire's ashes viewed the gradually transforming and more ambitious Kurdish national aspirations with suspicion. From a historical perspective, this is when the 'Kurdish Questions' or 'Kurdish Issue' was born in the Middle East or at least when it became an inherent part of the post-Ottoman Empire Middle East's broader international dynamics (see Barkey and Fuller 1998). The Kurdish Question is a general term used during discussions on the Kurdish populations' position and state policies towards the Kurds in the Middle East. 'Kurdish Question,' of course, is a multi-faceted issue with varying accents in different areas and periods.

For example, in Turkey since the 1980s, it is closely interconnected with the PKK insurgency. In Iraq, since 2003, it mainly refers to the dynamics between the federal government in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil. In Syria, it refers to the Kurdish population's oppression, and since 2012 the current and future status of Kurdish-led administration in northeastern Syria. It is often coined in Iran that central governments never invested significant resources for the socio-economic development in Kurdish-inhabited areas (Yildiz and Taysi 2007). The term itself is subjected to a lively academic debate. It is changing over time, as Ünver (2015) suggests in his discursive analysis to figure what is the 'Kurdish Issue' and how it developed in Turkish politics since the 1990s.

Despite its centralisation and modernisation efforts, the Ottoman Empire still left the Kurdish chieftains enough free hands to manage their own business. Paradoxically, employing selected Kurdish tribes into the Ottoman army within Hamidiye Regiments since 1891 led to even more freedom and unchallenged coercive power over peasants (including Kurds, Armenians, and Arabs) and less lucky Kurdish tribes (McDowall 2004). The situation in the Qajarian Persian Empire was similar, with the state bureaucracy failing to modernise and exercise centralised power in full.

However, the *modus vivendi* changed dramatically after World War I when new modern nation-states. The Turkish Republic, established in 1923, ended up strongly nationalist, secular, and authoritarian state led by aggressive modernisation ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Centralisation efforts and rapid creation of potent state institutions put Kemalist Turkey at odds with Kurdish notables. They resulted in several revolts throughout the 1920s or the Dersim rebellion of Alevi Zazas in today's Tunceli province in 1937-38. There was no political and cultural space for Kurds, Kurdish customs, culture, or language in the new state. Even Kurdish ethnos' mere existence was staunchly denied by the state bolstered by government-backed 'academic research' claiming Kurds are 'Mountain Turks' who forgot the Turkish language due to their isolation but had Turkish origin (Beşikci 1991). The assimilation policies continued up until the late 1980s. Since then, we could observe gradual albeit slow changes of state policies towards the Kurds, allowing more cultural and political space, culminating in the AKP's era in the 2000s.

Throughout the British Mandatory Iraq era and during the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq (1932-58), promises to ensure Kurdish political and cultural rights never truly materialized. The Iraqi state, especially after King Faisal died in 1933, was plagued by political disarray. As Yildiz (2004, 14) notes, “*Subsequent history, however, is one of conflict, betrayal and dashed promises.*” Various Kurdish revolts ended unsuccessfully but paved the way for young Mullah Mustafa Barzani from Barzani tribal confederation to become the most prominent Iraqi Kurdish leader periodically fighting with the Iraqi state (1931-32, 1943-45, 1961-70, 1974-75) (ibid.). Regardless, the string of promises to grant autonomy to the Kurds never materialized. In 1983-86, Kurdish forces, backed by Iran, once again took up arms against Saddam Hussein’s regime, which prompted Baghdad to defeat Kurdish rebels once in for all. Al-Anfal Campaign in 1986-89 cost 50,000-100,000 Kurdish lives in various campaigns of violence against civilians consisting of ethnic cleansing, mass murders, and indiscriminate chemical attacks (see Human Rights Watch 1993). Subsequently, since the early 1990s, due to the US backing, Iraqi Kurds finally enjoyed de facto autonomy, later de iure affirmed in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which established the Kurdish federal region, the KRI. One could agree with Bengio (2012, 273-96) that Iraqi Kurds relatively quickly transformed from victims to winners in Iraq. They enjoy full cultural and political rights and relative economic prosperity and have a constitutionally-enshrined high degree of autonomy. For some two decades now, various scholars have consistently labelled as a ‘de facto state’ (see, for example, Palani, Khidir, Dechesne and Bakker 2019).

Kurdish areas in the north of Syria are historically and socially interconnected to Kurdish areas across the border in Turkey and partially Iraq. Syrian Kurdish political life was always strongly connected to major tribes across today’s borders with Turkey and Iraq. Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish notables of whom many found temporary refuge in Syria after fleeing the state power in their countries influenced Syrian Kurdish politics. For example, they were instrumental in the KDPS, established in 1957 by Iraqi Kurd Osman Sabri as a sister party of the Iraqi Kurdish KDP (Hevian 2013). The Iraqi Kurdish PUK was established in 1975 in Damascus when Jalal Talabani split from the KDP (McDowall 2004). Syria, experiencing instability and violent coups in the 1950s and 60s, was cautious about the Kurds, considering them fifth column along with other possibly ‘problematic’ minorities such as Druzes (Tejel 2009). Kurds were regularly oppressed faced assimilation and re-settlement campaigns. In 1962, 120,000 of them were stripped of citizenship (see Chapter 5.1). As it became increasingly stable, Hafiz Assad's regime was since the 1970s adopting a more pragmatic approach consisting of coercion of the Kurds combined with careful co-optation. For example, Syria hosted the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan in 1979-98 under the condition he is not going to stir trouble among Syrian Kurds and, on the contrary, help with their control and channel people willing to fight for the Kurdish cause towards theatrum belli in Turkey. At the same time, Damascus viewed the PKK as a card to play against Turkey. There was intense enmity towards Ankara since Syria’s Hatay province fell under Turkish control in 1939. Moreover, the Southeast

Anatolian Project (in Turkish, Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, GAP) allowed Turkey to use a newly built dam system to control water flows in the Euphrates and Tigris since the mid-1970s, which Syria viewed as a security threat (Kaválek and Mareš 2018). Regardless, Syrian Kurds continued to be oppressed by the Ba'athist regime.

Iran, an authoritarian monarchy ruled by the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925-79, also did not provide much political space for the Kurds. The Kurds benefited from the power vacuum created by the weakening of Tehran's power in the periphery during and right after World War II when British and Soviet forces invaded Iran in 1941. Soviets stayed until late 1946, and apart from Azerbaijan separatists entity based in Tabriz and Mullah Mustafa Barzani's Iraqi Kurdish tribal fighters also shortly backed the existence of short-lived Kurdish Mahabad Republic (January-December 1946) before retreating (Yildiz and Taysi 2007). Since then, the Iranian state was even warier about the Kurdish national ambitions and kept a close eye on the KDP-I and other later emerging groups, operating only clandestinely and mainly outside Iran (ibid.). The KDP-I put much trust into Khomeini's revolution in 1978, which they welcomed and supported, hoping it would secure autonomy for the Kurds. However, the new regime refused their political demands. Since then we may say that *"Iranian state has historically allowed space for a modicum of cultural (never political) activity for Kurds that, although small, has at time outshined what was and is offered to some of the other Kurdish populations."* (ibid., 6)

As a result, Kurdish nationalism transformed from either tribal or religious leaders' narrative to muster support for maintaining their prominence or few urban intellectuals' distant dreams into a genuinely mass Kurdish national movement. As one respondent put it: *"Now, the idea of independent Kurdistan in the back of every Kurds' head even if they claim that at the moment they do not seek secession."*²¹ The primary factor boosting Kurdish nationalism was Turkey's oppressive policies, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

5.3.2 Traditional Leaders Vs. Urban Intellectuals

Another profane change in the post-World War I period was the gradual rise of Kurdish urban intellectuals and urbanisation putting 'urban' Kurds directly at odds with local tribal and religious notables. For example, Turkey became part of the world economy in the 1920s, and during the 1950s, it experienced unprecedented growth, modernisation, and industrialisation (White 2015). The mechanisation of agriculture led to mass Kurdish migration from rural to urban areas, including western majority-Turkish cities such as Istanbul (ibid.). By no means this led to a rapid decline of feudal-like tribal structures dominated by tribal/religious leaders as landowners in Kurdish-inhabited areas. As a matter of fact, many remain crucial today, especially in the KRI, certain areas in Turkey, and Iran. Simply, the

²¹ Interview with a Kurdish Alevi, Turkey 2013-2015.

'Kurdish project' was no longer only about a tribal or religious leader's particular desire to secure his dominance and autonomy but more far-reaching projects co-opting one another.

For example, in the KRI, more traditional Barzanis co-opted leftists and intellectuals in the KDP since its ascendancy but later fell off with them. The disagreements led to the establishment of the PUK in 1975 under the leadership of Jalal Talabani, Ibrahim Ahmad, and several other Kurdish leftist figures, such as Nawshirwan Mustafa, leader of the Gorran since 2009, blaming feudal and tribal leadership for shortcomings of revolution (McDowall 2004). The KDP, even at heights of fighting with Iraqi governments in the 1960s and 70s, was embedded in the internal competition, which sometimes even overshadowed the common cause of standing against Baghdad. In 1994-97, the KDP and the PUK even engaged in a bloody civil war resulting in 100,000 displaced due to their political loyalty from one area to another (ibid.). Since then, Iraqi Kurdish areas are still largely administratively, politically and economically divided between the KDP ('Yellow') zone in the west with the centre in Erbil and the PUK ('Green') zone in the east with the centre in Sulaimaniyah.

In contrast, in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish PKK-linked leftist political parties were re-appearing in the political scene periodically after repeatedly banned by the Turkish state since the People's Labour Party (in Turkish, Halkın Emek Partisi, HEP) was established in 1990. These parties rely primarily on urban leftist intellectuals to further their political goals within the Turkish political system.

During the short-lived Mahabad Republic (1946), we could see the dynamics between urban intellectuals and traditional tribal and religious figures working and competing with each other to pursue Kurdish national aspirations. In 1942, influenced groupings of civil servants, merchants, and teachers started the Soviet-influenced Komal-i-Zhian-i-Kurd (or simply, Komala). The Komala was getting immense traction and became a mass organization demanding Persian Kurdish areas' autonomy in a couple of years (Yildiz and Taysi 2007). Traditionally very influential tribal and religious leaders saw its success and engaged with the Komala. Subsequently, a conservative religious Sunni leader Qazi Muhammad gradually asserted dominance within the party (ibid.). While the Kurdish culture and education were supported and thriving, the 'Republic' was dominated by authoritarian tribal and religious currents, embodied by Qazi Mohammad as president with legislative and executive powers (ibid.). Towards the end of 1946, Iranian troops easily re-asserted control, and Qazi Mohammad was eventually hanged in March 1947.

This sub-chapter illustrated three socio-historical points relevant for understanding the context of PKK's insurgency and today's Kurdish aspirations. Firstly, Kurdish nationalism is a relatively new phenomenon that flourished in the post-Ottoman era. Kurdish actors' efforts gradually went from mere attempts to defy centralisation and maintain dominance over their principalities to struggles framed by broader Kurdish national aspirations. Secondly, nation-states rising from the ashes of the Ottoman

Empire – Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran opted for the most part for oppressive and violent policies towards the Kurdish populations. The new states ignored Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights, which boosted Kurdish national aspirations even more and prompted an old saying strongly resonating among the Kurd that ‘Kurds have no friend but the mountains.’ Thirdly, there are complex dynamics between urban proletariat, merchants and intellectuals, often leftist, and traditional tribal and religious structures. One cannot say that they dominate certain areas exclusively. Even the PKK, which since 1978 criticised Kurdish ‘tribal feudalism’ and still considers the KDP dominated by the Barzani tribe as ‘reactionary,’ shifted its practice pragmatically. Since the 90s, it engages with tribal and even religious structures.

In Turkey, the rise of the radical left since the 1950s, urbanisation and modernisation, industrialisation economic development and better access to education, the emergence of new rapid means of communications allowed for profound social changes, including among the Kurds (see Bozarslan 1992). These shifts have paved the way for the ascendancy of one of the principal entities claiming to represent Kurdish national aspirations - the PKK - in the late 1970s.

5.4 The PKK’s Ascendancy (1975-1999)

It is not in the scope of this study to discuss in detail the PKK’s history until the late 1990s. If needed, one can turn to an authoritative account of PKK’s history by Marcus (2007) or the Turkish-written work of Birand (1992). Özcan (2006) offers an excellent account of the transformation of PKK’s ideology. The PKK was instrumental in re-shaping Kurdish national sentiment. White (2000) argues that the transformation of the Kurdish peasantry from social rebels into modern Kurdish nationalists also changed Kurdish society’s leadership. It is now comparably less parochial and is driven by ‘purer’ ethnic nationalism. The PKK is indeed crucial in the genesis of Kurdish national aspirations since, as Yavuz (2001, 11) argues, “*In short, it was the PKK which ended the mutually constitutive relationship between Islam, tribe, and nationalism in favour of the latter.*”

Similarly, Özcan (2006, vi) concurs that “*With the PKK-led movement, Kurdish ethnicity has entered into a supra-tribal resistance. It has moved towards becoming a national entity, transcending the societal and geographic boundaries of tribal structures.*” Of course, that does not mean religion, tribe, and traditional leaders would cease to exist, and their influence fully diminished. As Gunter (2007, 15) notes, “*Kurdish nationalism largely developed in the 20th century as a stateless ethnic reaction against the repressive ‘official state nationalisms’ of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.*” Insurgencies need to have a sounding ‘root cause’ or grievance to exploit. Galula (2006) also asserts that it must be ‘deep-seated’ and not readily espoused by the incumbent government. Insurgents exploit existing grievances and create a narrative that “*(...) is used to link conditions-based grievances to the nature or behavior of the incumbent regime and articulate an alternative political vision that will address those grievances.*” (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2018, II-13)

In Turkey (and Iran, Iraq, and Syria for that matter), a root cause exploited by the PKK is valid and straightforward both when the PKK came to the scene in 1978. The root cause is still valid in 2018, when this study concludes, despite the overall socio-political situation of the Kurds improved considerably in certain aspects. These are repressive state policies against Kurdish populations and providing only a little space for exercising their cultural and political rights. This is bolstered by substantial economic, social, political, and cultural horizontal inequalities between Kurdish minority and majority populations, making them a second-tier group. The existence of strong horizontal inequalities indeed provides a fertile ground for an insurgency to occur and prevail.

This sub-chapter illustrates the political, social, and economic context in which the PKK came to the scene in the late 1970s. It explains how this context developed and PKK's strategies and goals, successes, and failures until its leader Abdullah Öcalan's capture in 1999. Secondly, it identifies different stages of the PKK's insurgency in Turkey utilizing Perry's and Gordon IV's (2008) framework for determining different phases in insurgencies' lifespan. Three phases can be identified: proto-insurgency (for PKK 1975-84), small-scale insurgency (for PKK 1984-90), and large-scale insurgency (for PKK 1990-99) phases. See Figures 5.4a and 5.4b below (it also indicates a rapid decline of the strength of the PKK's insurgency in 1999-2000).

Perry and Gordon IV (2008) identify three phases of insurgency: proto-insurgency, small-scale insurgency, and a large-scale insurgency phase. I am also adding the fourth 'conventional' phase marking the tipping point when the asymmetry of tools and strength between incumbent and insurgent diminishes, and insurgents can engage in conventional warfare with relatively equal dyad.²²

In the proto-insurgency phase, *"(...) the movement is small and weak. It is normally composed of a small cadre of "true believers" who are strongly committed to dramatic change in the political-economic status quo of a nation or region. (...) their potential to "make trouble" are limited. (...) the main concern of the insurgents is to survive. Indeed, most insurgencies collapse at this stage (...)"* (Kaválek 2015, 7) Proto insurgency is *"(...) a small, violent group that seeks to gain the size necessary to more effectively achieve its goals and use tools such as political mobilization and guerrilla warfare as well as terrorism."* (Kaválek 2015, 7-8) As Byman's (2007) study suggests, proto-insurgencies require a suitable environment to create its identity, exploit cause, a safe haven, and sustain security forces' attempts to erase it. If the government's provisions are seen as sufficient and if the regime is perceived as 'fair and legitimate' in the eyes of the population, it is hard for insurgents to win their popular support, even though they manage to find a sounding root cause.

A small-scale insurgency is a phase when the group can conduct small-scale attacks, and *"(...) insurgents will have gained sufficient numbers to start to make their presence felt. Rallies led by insurgent leaders, open*

²² The author of this study previously utilized this framework in his study on ISIS insurgency 2003-15, therefore the subsequent paragraphs are modified from Kaválek (2015).

postings in public and on electronic media of calls to overthrow the corrupt government, (...)” (Perry and Gordon IV 2008, 9) However, at this stage, it is still likely and, in most cases, sufficient if the incumbent government does not employ the military and still relies on the police and intelligence.

In the third stage, the large-scale insurgency phase, “(...) *insurgents by now have gained considerable support within the local population. Their numbers may be in many thousand. (...) They will have probably established physical control over various parts of the country and will likely be in position to contest government control in other areas.*” (Perry and Gordon IV 2008, 10) At this point, insurgents have a good chance to prevail and thrive. The intensity of their armed campaign is getting higher and can see not only focus on more sophisticated and larger-scale operations but also focus on building more mature and entrenched political and even governance structures. The fourth stage marks the point when military equilibrium is reached if insurgents can meet the incumbent as equals and wage conventional warfare.

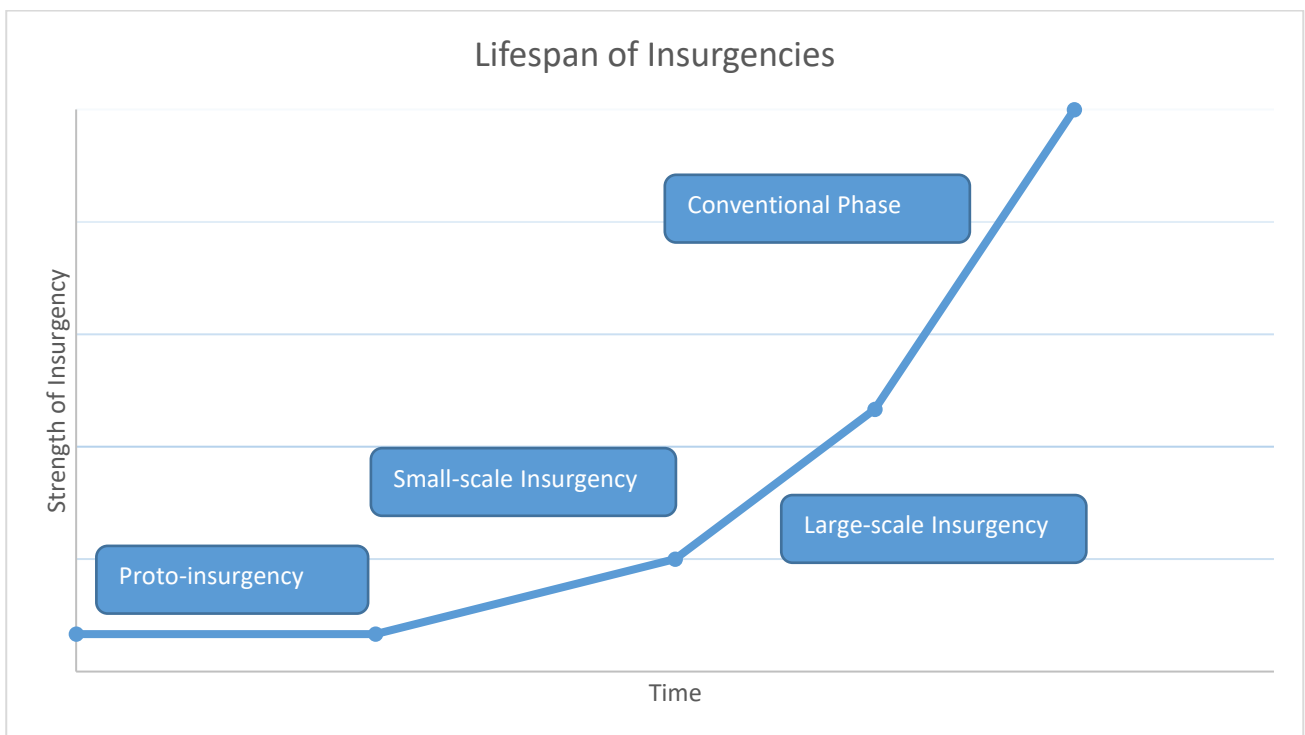


Figure 5.4ab: Lifespan of Insurgencies (modified from Perry and Gordon IV and Kaválek 2015).

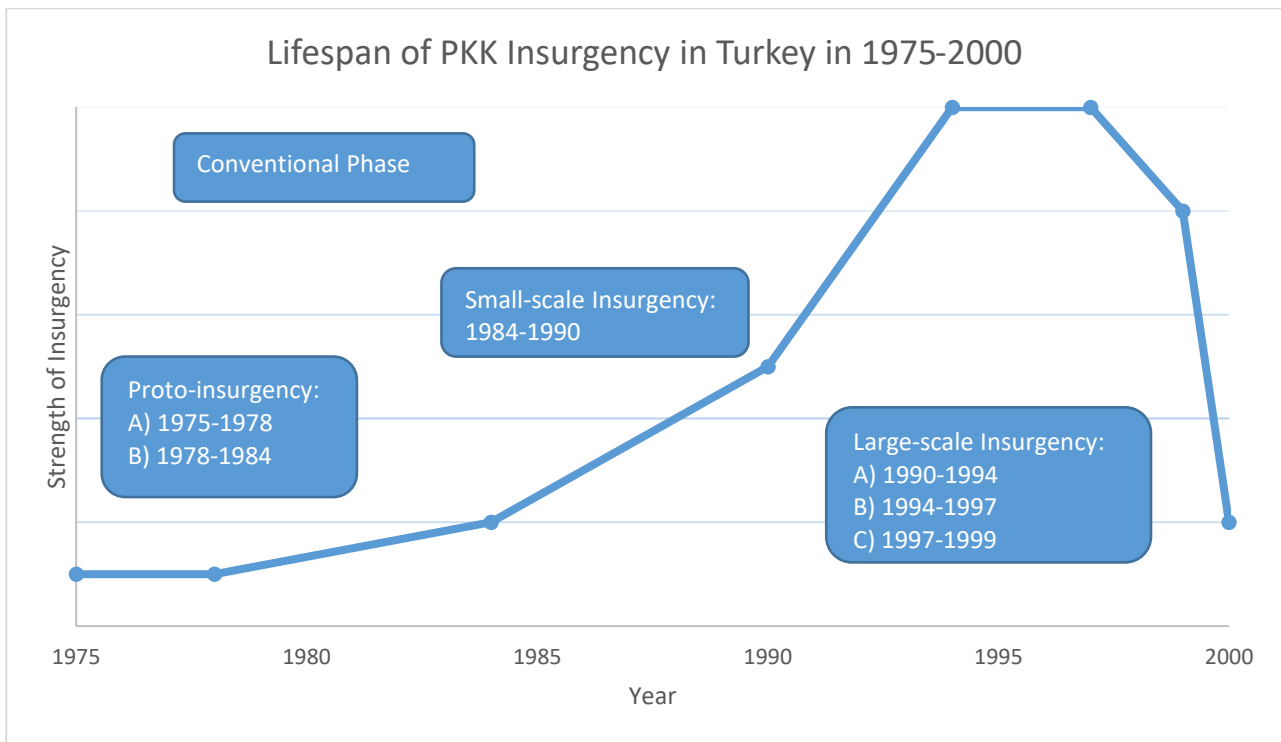


Figure 5.4b: Lifespan of PKK Insurgency in Turkey in 1975-2000 (prepared by the author utilizing framework from Perry and Gordon IV 2008).

5.4.1 PKK's Proto-insurgency (1975-1984)

The PKK was formally established on November 25, 1978, in a safe house in Fis village outside of 'unofficial' Kurdish capital Diyarbakır under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan. This was after two years of intensive one-on-one recruitment into the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, as they called themselves, which gradually bolstered their cadres to 250-300 people (Marcus 2007). Since 1975, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries and after 1978, the PKK were mainly engaged in increasingly violent activities with rival leftists Kurdish groups (there were at least nine at that time), and Turkish radical rightists (Emrence and Aydin 2015). Later, it also ramped up its attacks against Kurdish land-owning tribal leaders who were one of the principal enemies of the revolution. In 1979, the PKK even attempted to assassinate Mehmet Celal Bucak, head of the prominent Kurdish Bucak tribe working with the state.

Öcalan and his followers attracted support by their decisiveness, aggressivity, and simplicity of their message. *"Instead, there was the problem – Turkey's colonization of the Kurdish region coupled with imperialism and capitalism. And the solution - armed struggle and socialism."* (Marcus 2007, 38) Moreover, its ascendancy came at times of depression among the Kurds in the Middle East. In March 1975, the revered symbol of the fight for Kurdish national aspirations, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, was finally defeated in Iraq and retired to live out his final days in exile in the US.

PKK's ascendancy should also be explained against the background of profound political and social changes in Turkey and among the Kurds accompanied by instability and insecurity in Turkey. In

the 1960s and 1970s, Turkey was experiencing the rise of radical left and right, military interventions to politics and political liberalization toppled with political fragmentation, weakness of the state and by the end of 1970s, and economic crisis (on Turkish history at that time see Pope and Pope 2000). Kurds became urbanized, escaping the poverty of their feudal lives in their villages; many got access to higher education and had intimate contact with the Turkish left. In 1950-1975, the Turkish population doubled and experienced rapid urbanisation from 18.5% in 1950 to 41% in 1975 (Sayari and Hoffman 1991). This posed a challenge to traditional societal structures among the Kurds, especially the feudal relationship between tribal leaders and sheikhs and peasants. Political liberalisation paradoxically led to the rise of Kurdish nationalism and awareness about the Kurdish issue among the Kurds themselves. Turkish radical left, for the most part, did not acknowledge the existence of the Kurdish issue.

As stated in the founding document 'Kürdistan Devrimin Yolu' (Road to Kurdistan Revolution, or the Manifesto), the PKK was established as a classic Marxist-Leninist revolutionary organisation seeking to establish 'independent, united and democratic Kurdistan' (Öcalan 1978). The goal was simple: to establish a Kurdish state under one-party rule consisting of Kurdish inhabited areas in the Middle East through the Maoist People's War-style revolution. That is even though Turkey was almost exclusively its sole theatre of armed struggle up until the 2000s. In Özcan's words, *"Its programme is a 'Kurdicized' copy of those customary communist parties that undertake nation's 'national' liberation as an 'initial stage' of the ultimate socialist revolution."* (Özcan 2006, 17)

The Manifesto highlighted PKK's enmity towards religion as well as against traditional Kurdish tribal structures, seeing them as at least as harmful as the oppressive capitalist state (Öcalan 1978). The PKK was supposed to be the sole vanguard, seeking a monopoly on power, politics, and armed struggle for the Kurdish cause viewing other groups as an obstacle to revolution (essentially, a classic Marxist-Leninist revolutionary approach). After the 1980s, the PKK remained the only significant operational Kurdish group. It made sure it will stay this way by regularly violently cracking on dissent even within its own organisation. Harsh Öcalan's stance is felt even in the 1990s when he claims that *"All of these men (...) in the Kurdish groupings which claimed to undertake the national cause are dishonest. Why? Because, I said, they prostitute themselves more than a prostitute."* (Özcan 2006, 89)

The organisation also created a strong personality cult revolving around Abdullah Öcalan (called Apo, uncle in Kurdish, and his followers often Apocular). Öcalan remained the organisation's sole leader with a God-like reputation among supporters, referred to as the President (Reber) or as the Leadership (Önderlik). As Çandar (2012, 43) notes, *"There is an organizational (the PKK and the "mountain") dynamic which works independently from Abdullah Öcalan, yet there are no organizational dynamics that can act despite Abdullah Öcalan."* Up until nowadays, supporters of the PKK consider Öcalan's release or at least improving his life imprisonment conditions a priority.

In 1979, the knot was tightening as it started to appear that the military would step in Turkish politics once again due to worsening security, political and economic situation. Öcalan fled to Syria the same year and established itself there with the Hafız Assad's regime's support. On September 12, 1980, the military under the auspices of Chief of Staff Kenan Evren staged a coup that closed still relatively open space of political activism and cracked down on political and armed groups across the political spectrum, leaving tens of thousands arrested and sentenced, including PKK operatives. Turkish and Kurdish left groups were decimated. No organisation was able to retain its core leadership and members as the PKK because it already had a safe haven in Syria and Lolan, Iraq. Damascus allowed the PKK to open training camps in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, where over 10,000 PKK members went through rigorous Öcalan-led ideological training in 1986-98 (Grojean 2012).

Throughout 1983, a PKK team infiltrated Turkey from Iraq to scout the terrain and gather intelligence between Hakkârî and Tunceli. Albeit being nominally Marxist-Leninist style revolutionary organization, PKK often accented and sometimes outright prioritized ethnonational struggle in their narrative. As one PKK member participating in scouting Turkey in 1983 noted, *"If we met someone who was interested we would talk about Marxism-Leninism, otherwise, we would speak of the national struggle. Either they really weren't able to understand anything about socialism, or else they opposed socialism because they saw it as anti-Islamic."* (Marcus 2007, 77) Finally, on August 15, 1984, the PKK under the command of Mahsum Korkmaz, attacked gendarmerie posts in Erüh in Siirt province, and Şemdinli in Hakkârî. The PKK's armed insurgency in Turkey officially started.

In 1975-84, the PKK was in the proto-insurgency phase. It had relatively modest manpower that rose through one-on-one clandestine recruitment and propaganda to over 1,000 members/supporters by 1980 (Marcus 2007). After the PKK was officially established in November 1978, during its 1st Congress, it was becoming a more cohesive and larger political group communicating its clarified message to the Kurdish population (White 2015). The PKK had only limited potential to pose a genuine threat to the state, nor was it trying to do so before 1984. It is argued that insurgency is the most vulnerable at that stage but also hard to detect by the police and intelligence services. It is not a surprise that the PKK was not among already-overstretched Turkish law enforcement' priorities given the relatively small profile and the existence of a myriad of other more significant leftists and rightist groupings. The state was caught by surprise, and by the end of 1984, the PKK's proto-insurgency successfully evolved into a small-scale insurgency.

5.4.2 The PKK's Small Scale Insurgency (1984-1990)

While in 1984, the state was caught by surprise, in 1985 is deployed more military units, established pro-government Kurdish militias, and resorted to heavy-handed measures. In 1985, the PKK had only some 200 fighters in Turkey; out of that, 90 were killed that year (Marcus 2007). During the October 1986 3rd

Congress, Öcalan blamed PKK's senior military commanders for these shortcomings and introduced policies such as forced conscription, 'taxation' (i.e., extorting 'revolutionary tax' from civilians) (Emrence and Aydin 2015). The PKK also ramped up attacks against Kurds perceived as collaborators with the state, namely tribes and villages, which joined the new pro-government militias Village Guards (VG, officially known as Türkiye Güvenlik Köy Korucuları, or Security Village Guards of Turkey), established in 1985.

During the 1980s, a disturbing image of internal executions and assassinations within the PKK emerged, which bolstered Öcalan's indisputable dictatorial position within the PKK. Marcus (2007, 96) argues that *"As the PKK fought to establish itself inside Turkey, Öcalan continued to fight against real and potential critics inside the organization. To Öcalan, dissent was a danger to his authority and control over the PKK."* Only in 1983-85 at least 11 high-level PKK members were ordered to be murdered by Öcalan (ibid.). Until 1995, marking people as 'traitors' (meaning marking them for death), executions, sending 'disliked' PKK members and commanders on suicide missions or assassination were very common.

The PKK decided to send its non-combatant members ('milis') to covertly operate both in rural and urban areas across Turkey since 1986. They became firmly established there conducting propaganda, recruitment, and other activities (see Jongerden 2010). Consequently, in the late 1980s, the PKK experienced an inflow of student recruits from Turkey and Europe. The organisation was afraid of infiltration by the Turkish state and, secondly, had difficulty coping with the intelligentsia, sometimes intellectually challenging Öcalan's teachings and conditions in the PKK. This led to mass executions in PKK's training camp in Lebanon, only in 1989-90 of 50-200 people (Marcus 2007). The PKK remains an ideologically rigid organization that leaves no space for dissent in its indoctrination. As one former PKK member recalled, he was scolded for reading and discussing books from leftist authors that were not officially part of the canon of PKK's allowed literature consisting almost exclusively from Öcalan's writings (interview with a former PKK member, 2016-17).

During the 4th Congress held in May 1990, the organisation officially discarded widely unpopular policies such as forced conscription, targeting civilians, including Kurds who were perceived as collaborators with the state. On the contrary, the PKK started to flirt with providing state-like services to earn more trust in the contested population, such as organizing legal trials and solving disputes (Marcus 2007). Building parallel governance structures became an even more critical component of PKK's behaviour throughout the 1990s. While attacks against 'Turkish targets' such as teachers, bureaucrats, state workers, and engineers or in general infrastructure construction efforts prevailed throughout the 1990s, the PKK limited its coercion tactics against Kurdish civilians and even the Village Guards.

As White (2015) notes, during the PKK's 2nd Congress held in August 1982, its strategic path to victory was outlined by three phases. Firstly, it included strategic defence, secondly, strategic balance, and

finally, strategic attack to wage conventional war to remove the Turkish state from Turkish Kurdish areas. In general, PKK's strategic vision was essentially identical to Mao's Revolutionary People's War. Incidentally, the three-stage approach still featured in then PKK's top military commander Murat Karayılan's book 'Bir Savaşın Anatomisi: Kürdistan'da Askeri Çizgi' (Anatomy of War: Military Line in Kurdistan) circulated since 2011 (Bilgiç 2014) and printed by Aram Publications in 2014 (Karayılan 2014). The asymmetrical conflict it waged cost around 200-300 lives each year in 1989-91, reaching a point where its classification as large-scale insurgency will soon be imminent (UCDP 2020a).

In 1984-1990, the PKK's insurgency was in a small-scale phase. It was soon to evolve into a large-scale insurgency as the PKK managed to boost its activity and the number of fighters to up to 10,000 in 1992 (Criss 1995). Indeed the state started to feel their presence as the PKK was launching hit and run attacks, spreading its propaganda, and actively establishing its networks to spread its narrative in Western cities since 1986. Initial success in staging attack and letting the state feel its presence and the government's heavy-handed measures led to rising support and notoriety of the PKK among Turkish Kurds. The state's reaction, in turn, culminated in widespread violent protests and riots across Kurdish cities around Newroz celebrations in March 1990 called Serhildan, marking a shift of the PKK's insurgency to a large-scale phase.

5.4.3 The PKK's Large Scale Insurgency (1990-1999)

Throughout the 1990s, we experience the peak of PKK's violent campaign. We also witnessed (albeit so far embryonic) attempts of PKK insurgents to participate in legal and semi-legal politics, organize its civilian networks in settlements to increase its sway over the Kurdish population, and offer certain services, mainly dispute resolution. These efforts also emphasizing non-violent activities will become more and more signature stamps for PKK's coming transformation to an overarching grass-root social movement rather than just militants fighting in rugged mountains (Saeed 2017; Gurses 2018).

The PKK struggled to become a truly mass organisation that would eventually ignite the popular uprisings in the Turkish Kurdish areas. The 1990 4th Congress not only modified unpopular policies such as forced recruitment or blatant targeting Kurdish civilians viewed as 'collaborator.' It also went from labelling Islam 'a Trojan horse used by every invader in Kurdistan' in its 1978 Manifesto (Öcalan 1978) to "(...) *establish friendship with religious movements as they are truly against the institution state (...)*." (İsmet 1992, 1) Furthermore, İsmet (1992, 228) argues that "*To pull the Turkish popular masses and the left-wing forces into the struggle against the special warfare put into practice in Kurdistan and to propagate for the brotherhood of the two people in order to activate this.*" These highlights PKK's attempts to insert its movement into leftist legal politics through linked political parties starting with the HEP in 1990.

Apart from accent on participation in legal politics, the PKK also started to engage in the continuous building of loyal supporters' networks through increasing political groupings and various civil

society organisations working within the society. As Ismet (1992) asserts, apart from leadership embodied in Öcalan-led Central Committee, there was the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (in Kurdish, Eniye Rizgariye Navata Kurdistan, ERNK, a political front operating in settlements, mostly short of violence). Secondly, the PKK had the People Liberation Army of Kurdistan (in Kurdish, Artêşa Rizgariye Gêle Kurdistan, ARGK, the ‘army’ consisting of uniformed ‘guerrillas’ operating mainly in rural mountainous areas). Political and subversive activities started to be an integral component of the PKK’s insurgency.

However, Marcus (2007, 143) notes that on the onset of mass protests (Serhildan) sparked by the funeral of PKK fighters in Nusaybin in 1990, the insurgents were somewhat varied of the cities *“One reason was the difficulty of operating in an urban environment; the other was that rebels were somewhat disdainful of the cities. They had not placed any special emphasis on establishing themselves in urban centers, except in order to gather recruits to send to the mountains.”* Serhildan held in 1991-93 met with heavy-handed security response from the Turkish state, which regularly sent in the military, including tanks and APCs, and resorted to mass arrests. The fact that the mass protests were so widespread across different Kurdish-inhabited areas outside PKK’s traditional hotbeds such as Nusaybin, Cizre, or Diyarbakır showed *“The PKK failed to generate popular support among many Kurds yet politicized their consciousness.”* (Yavuz 2001, 12-13) The PKK’s hand in organizing and fuelling the protests, solidarity gatherings, general strikes, and various other forms of civil disobedience during the 1990s also became an integral part of PKK’s tactics to provoke heavy-handed state’s responses. Experience with the 1990 Serhildan prompted the PKK to be more active in urban spaces. After all, as Özcan (2006: 14) notes already early issues of PKK’s Serxwebun magazine presented ‘A Revolutionary Organizing Plan for Kurdistan’ with detail a plan of inciting mass protests. Marcus (2007, 143) concludes that *“This shift within the civilian population allowed the PKK to overcome some of its previous difficulties. The PKK was able to expand its contacts, get better intelligence information, set up stronger network of civilian milis activists (...).”*

By 1992, casualties sky-rocketed to almost 1,800 in 1992 and reached its peak of 4,431 killed in 1997 (see Graph 5.4.3 below for a breakdown of casualties in 1989-2000). In the 1990s, we can describe PKK’s campaign large scale insurgency. In short, in the 1990s, the PKK was blossoming. In 1992, Criss (1995) estimated it counted for 12,000 ARGK and ERNK members (i.e., full-time fighters and civilian supporters/local militias, called milis). Another estimated brings the number of fighters to 10,000 in 1992 as a result of boosted recruitment (Marcus 2007). In 1994-95, White (2015) asserts there was 10,000-30,000 thousand ARGK fighters up to 75,000 members of ‘milis,’ yet this number seems a bit far-fetched. Ismet (1992) offered similar numbers: 10,000 fighters and more than 50,000 of ‘milis.’

An important turning point showing the strength of PKK’s insurgency was the creation of parallel governance structures. *“In the areas where it was most powerful, it already had set up a parallel, if*

rudimentary, system of administration. PKK rebels not only collected taxes, but they were also an influential presence in many aspects of daily life.” (Marcus 2007, 175) The PKK also completely dominated Kurdish publishing, legal politics, and cultural events, in short, managed to “(...) *establish full dominance over Turkey’s Kurdish national movement.*” (ibid., 160)

Majority-Kurdish provinces in the southeast of Turkey came under the emergency rule of the Governorship of Region in State of Emergency (OHAL, Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği) in 1987-2002. This practice “(...) *alienated civilians, while winning hearts and minds remained an unattainable goal. The OHAL legislations suspended individual freedoms, giving security forces a de facto immunity in their dealings with civilians.*” (Aydın and Emrence 2016, 5) Paradoxically, OHAL was extended to 87 districts in 13 provinces despite 70% of PKK’s attacks taking part in three districts on the Iraqi border (ibid.).

Official figures speak about over 55.000 people detained during the OHAL period (Tanrıku and Yavuz 2005). State’s heavy-handed measures also included campaigns of mass forced displacement (known as köy boşaltma) from rural settlements intending to deny safe haven, support, recruits, and intelligence. Forced disappearances became a widespread phenomenon in Turkey’s southeast, with estimated 1,243 people disappeared in 1993-99 (Göral, Işık and Kaya 2015). Official numbers speak about over 3,400 villages and hamlets forcibly evacuated and often razed to the ground by the end of 1997 (ibid.). The total number of displaced is unknown; however, credible estimates speak about 560,000 forcibly evacuated people by 2000 (Turkish Parliamentary Commission provided a figure of around 401,000 people in June 1998) (Norwegian Refugee Council 2004). These policies provided the PKK with a recruitment pool harbouring strong grievances towards the state.

State’s policies in the 1990s led to massive displacement not only to major Kurdish cities and western centres such as Istanbul, Ankara, or Izmir. According to Kocher, the OHAL provinces saw an average 11.9% decrease in the rural population. In comparison, district centres’ population in the area increased by 45% in 1990-97. In turn, the rest of Turkey’s rural population declined only by 4% (Kocher 2002). By 1991, Turkey had also resorted to cross-border military operations and conducting sorties in the mountains of northern Iraq, which appear periodically until 2018 to dislodge the PKK from their bases and disrupt their logistics.

Throughout the 1990s, the PKK and Öcalan slowly began to change their mindset shifting from the uncompromising vision of inciting mass uprising and waging a revolutionary people’s war until it wrestles control over (Turkish) Kurdish areas to an openness to a political solution. As Çandar (2012) notes, as a result of mediation by Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK, who facilitated the first exchange of indirect talks for the PKK to lay down arms with the Turkish state, specifically between Öcalan and Turkish president Turgut Özal, the PKK announced its first ceasefire on March 16, 1993. Öcalan then hinted openness to a political solution and laying down arms, arguing that “*The Kurdish situation is, at heart,*

a Turkish-Kurdish situation. Our struggle has come to the point of the Turkish public accepting the Kurdish identity; it has seen it necessary to recognise Kurdish existence and solve the problem." (Uzun 2014, 16) The short-lived ceasefire was abruptly ended with Özal's death a month later. Later, there were indirect talks in 1996 with PM Necmettin Erbakan or various indirect contacts with the Turkish General Staff.

The 5th Congress, also dubbed 'The Congress for Change' or 'Victory Congress' held on January 8-17, 1995, brought significant changes in PKK's ideological and political discourse as well as behaviour towards the civilian population (Çandar 2012). On the other hand, Öcalan still insisted on waging armed struggle in guerrilla-style rural campaigns despite military setbacks strongly influenced by improving the government's counterinsurgency military capabilities. *"But Öcalan's inability to analyse honestly the PKK's military strengths and weaknesses was in marked contrast to his relatively strong grasp of the need for political changes, underscoring the very practical, ideological elasticity that had helped the PKK to survive and grow so successfully over the years."* (Marcus 2007, 244) The 1995 Congress further stipulated emancipatory approach towards women to increase their participation in the PKK insurgency (Novellis 2018). Hammer and sickle were also removed from the official PKK flag, even though it was still imperative to the PKK's discourse to promote classic statist Marxist-Leninist vision of its struggle (Yarkin 2015).

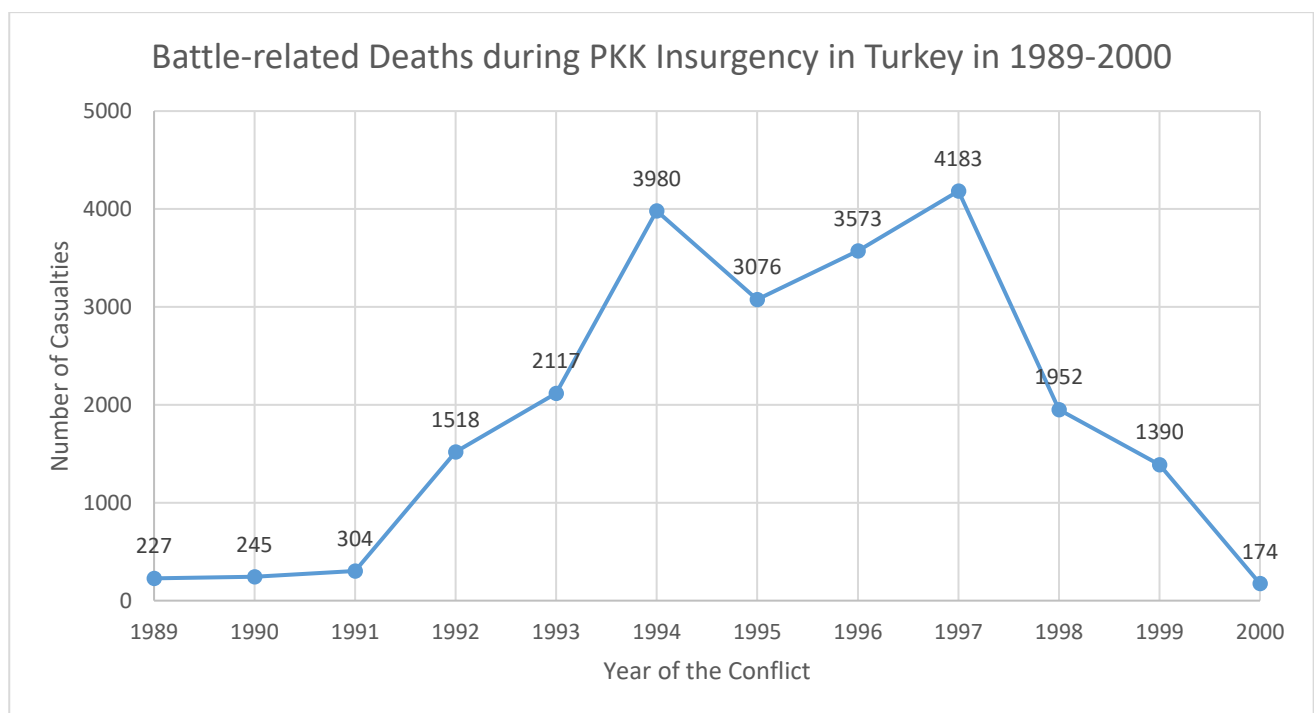
The 1995 Programme still insists that *"The people's war, the fundamental form of struggle against colonialism, must continue on the path to victory, and its base organizations and people's army must be further developed."* It also added that *"All attempts at "special regional status" or "autonomy" which do not aim to break the colonialism of the Turkish Republic, and which in fact are collaborations with colonialism, must be exposed and a decisive struggle must be waged against them."* (Öcalan 1995) However, the gradual change and moderation of PKK's discourse in reaction to both realities on the ground (military setbacks) and maintaining popular support paved the way to the PKK's post-1999 transformation. As the PKK commander Murat Karayılan noted in an interview for Çandar (2012, 31), *"What we had in 1995 was a Change Congress, where we switched from the goal of separation to the goal of a federation. With the 1995 process, a radical change of paradigm began."*

In the 1990s, the PKK insurgency grew and successfully employed a more comprehensive range of activities, including non-violent legal and illegal political efforts; it further politicized the Kurdish issue. However, from the military standpoint, it militarily lost its ground, as seen from fewer casualties towards the end of the 90s (see Graph 5.4.3 below). While waging a large-scale insurgency, the PKK was still by far short of reaching the fourth conventional (attack) phase of insurgency, or even the full balance phase as the PKK envisioned from 1982. Karayılan's (2014) book also asserts that only since the beginning of 1993, the PKK attempted to move to the strategic balance phase to establish liberated areas that, as he acknowledges, failed Turkish military actions and their increasing counterinsurgency capabilities.

At the peak of intensity of PKK's insurgency in 1997 with 4,183 battle-related deaths (UCDP 2020a), the PKK attempted to establish permanent areas under its control, counting on significant losses

of the state if it tries to enter but was not successful (Karayılan 2014). Arguably, Hakkâri and Şemdinli were the most suitable for this endeavour due to their rugged terrain, rural setting and proximity to the Iraqi border. Nevertheless, the PKK did not manage to establish open day-and-night long-term control over certain areas.

One can also argue that higher the reliance on creating covert and overt parallel governance structures, creating more complex civilian networks in urban spaces and attempts to participate in legal politics through political entities and parties under its influence in the Turkish Kurdish areas seen since the 2000s was in part a response to military losses in Turkey of the 1990s. Consequently, military loss, combined with organisations' ejection from Syria and Öcalan's capture in February 1999 in Kenya, left the PKK in disarray, plagued by confusion and internal bickering.



Graph 5.4.3: Battle-related Deaths during the PKK Insurgency in Turkey in 1989-2000 (prepared by the author, UCDP 2020a).

6. The PKK after 1999: Transformation, Reconstruction, Expansion

PKK leader Öcalan was captured by Turkish authorities on February 15, 1999, in Kenya after expulsion from Syria. During and after the subsequent trial in which he was sentenced to life imprisonment in İmralı island prison, the PKK experienced a period of shock and retreat and a subsequent period of impasse and reconstruction in 2000-04, according to the party line laid down by Öcalan himself (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011). Following military setbacks in the late 90s, denial of safe haven, loss of support from Hafiz Assad's regime in Syria in 1998, and Öcalan's capture by Turkish authorities, the organization went through series of organizational changes.

These developments, influenced by Öcalan's ideas forming up already in the 90s and further articulated in his court defences written in prison, also prompted broader political (and military) engagement in Kurdish-inhabited areas of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012). PKK's affiliates in neighbouring countries were established under the umbrella of the KCK. These country wings included the PYD established in Syria in 2003, or the PJAK established in Iran in 2004, or the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (in Kurdish, Partî Çareserî Dîmokratî Kurdistan, PÇDK) established in Iraq in 2002. Despite frequent claims of these organizations about their independence and a mere ideological inspiration by the PKK's ideology, they are subject to PKK's politico-military command in Qandil as integral parts of the 'new' KCK system.

Öcalan's remarks following his first court hearings were indeed a surprise, which some initially attributed to the fact he betrayed the cause or was intimidated by the Turkish authorities. He ordered a withdrawal from Turkish soil, ceasefire, and suddenly backpedaled on the goal of an independent Kurdish state. Instead, he proposed turning to political struggle, solution through democratization, and common cohabitation within the 'Democratic Republic' (Aydin and Emrence 2015). Öcalan further ordered the PKK to disband and replaced it with Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Council (KADEK) in April 2002, only to be renamed again in November 2003 to the People's Congress of Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel). Turbulent organisational changes and Öcalan's new ideas created friction within the organization and the leadership. In 2003-05, at least 1,500 militants left the organization (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011). By July 2003, the ruptures reached an irreconcilable extent that led to the 2004 fractionalization. Several senior commanders, including Öcalan's brother Osman (aka Ferhat), Nizamettin Taş (aka Botan), Kani Yılmaz (aka Faysal), and several others broke down from the organization (Çandar 2012). They argued the personal cult of Öcalan should be dropped out, armed struggle to be abandoned entirely, and that the PKK should organize only in Turkey. Finally, the PKK should establish a working relationship with the US (ibid.).

They were expelled and established their own party, the Patriotic Democratic Party (Partiya Welatparêzên Demokrat, PWD), in August 2004 (Bir Gün 2004). The PWD, however, became

marginalized, and its members were regularly assassinated by the PKK operatives, including senior leaders Kani Yılmaz and Sabri Torı, murdered in Sulaymaniyah in 2006 (Ekurd 2006). Öcalan later recalled that *“I was very angry with them, I criticized them strongly even insulted them. How could I accept it when they divided our body? But those Osman Botan group broke up and went away. Almost a thousand of our cadres melted away. I was not informed in time. There were some split-ups. In the end, they wanted to divide the organization.”* (Sendika 2011) Çandar (2012) further asserts that the resumption of war on June 1, 2004, effectively made an end to organisational arguments and consolidated the movement.

In 2004, Öcalan ordered the formation of the Preparatory Re-building Committee, which was supposed to implement his new vision and also re-establish the PKK as a distinct political party. This culminated in the PKK 9th Congress held on March 28-April 4, 2005, which re-founded the PKK (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011). In May 2005, at the Kongra-Gel’s 3rd Congress, the Koma Komalên Kurdistan (KKK) was also established as a precursor of what would be re-named during the 5th Kongra-Gel Congress in May 2007 to the KCK. Following the impasse and reconstruction, PKK’s core demands could be summed up as follows: *“(1) the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity, (2) a process of decentralization that would increase self-governance at local levels, (3) the integration of the insurgents into the political system including the liberation of Abdullah Öcalan, and (4) Kurdish language education in public schools.”* (Tezcür 2014, 182-3)

In 2005, the PKK adopted what would become later known as the KCK Agreement (KCK Sözleşmesi) (PKK 2005). The founding organisational document was later published in Arabic for the Syrian audience and in Persian for Iran as the Complete Text of the Social Contract of the Democratic and Free Society of the East (KODAR) (Posch 2016a). The KCK Agreement laid down the organisational structure of the KCK *“(...) as a multi-dimensional entity that has become the main actor of social movement in the Kurdish part of Turkey has become an umbrella entity for all political, cultural and social activities.”* (Saeed 2017, 158) Moreover, it laid down the KCK/PKK’s structure into four levels: pan-Kurdish, parts (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria), provincial or regional level and finally local communal level (Posch 2016a). Öcalan envisioned a new radical democratic model of bottom-up representation called Democratic Confederalism that does not necessitate breaking states and establishing independent Kurdistan. Democratic Confederalism should be *“(...) based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions.”* (Öcalan 2011, 33) The problem is that Democratic Confederalism and the Democratic Autonomy are somewhat unclear: *“What is important here is to ask who, where and what will be autonomous? None of these questions are clearly answered by the project.”* (Saeed 2017, 181) In practice, particularly, where this mode of governance was able to flourish (Syria), it merely resembles autonomous regions under the effective control of the PKK-linked actors.

The PKK itself then serves as more of a narrower ideological guardian of the whole system as “The KCK constitution states that the PKK should work like commissars throughout the Kurdish realm as the ideological power of the KCK system.” (International Crisis Groups 2011, 28) Saeed (2017, 111-12) further asserts that while the PKK has ideological tasks, the KCK system is “an umbrella for all cultural, social and political aspects of the movement,” consisting of “hundreds of small, medium and big organization across all parts of the Kurdistan.”

Jongerden (2019, 87) asserts that while the Kongra-Gel serves as a legislative body, the KCK also comprises of “a network of village, city, and regional councils, functioning as an organisation to provide an ideological orientation for structures and institutions (...).” However, as Jenkins (2011) notes, “In practice, the KCK has served as a theoretical organizational framework for the PKK, its branches, affiliates and sympathizers. No elections have been held in Kurdish communities – either overtly or clandestinely – for membership of the KCK’s constituent bodies, whose composition is decided by the PKK leadership. Although Kongra-Gel holds meetings in the mountains of northern Iraq, the assembly is exclusively composed of PKK supporters.” For more details, see Table 6 outlining the PKK-linked political and armed structures existing in Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Shingal district in Iraq.

The PKK-linked Political Structures				
Level	Syria	Turkey	Iran	Shingal
International	Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)/PKK (cadres also seconded to national level); Kongra-Gel as the legislature			
Country/unit	Democratic Autonomous Administration (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), including united front TEV-DEM dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD)	“Democratic Autonomy” declared in 2015 by the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) includes legal parties the Democratic People’s Party (HDP) for the national level and the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) for the municipal level	KODAR System dominated by the Party for the Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK)	The Self-Administration Council (Meclisa Avakera Şingalê) dominated by the Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy (PADÊ)

Regional and local level	Regional and local council, communes	Regional, local councils, communes overlap with the DBP municipal governance	Regional and local councils, communes	Local branches of the Meclis, communes
The PKK-linked Armed Structures				
Level	Syria	Turkey	Iran	Shingal
International	Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)/PKK (cadres also seconded to national level); the dominant role of the People's Defense Forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG)			
Country (military structures)	Syrian Democratic Forces, dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the female wing Women's Protection Units (YPJ)	People's Defense Forces (HPG) and the female wing Free Women's Units (YJA-Star)	East Kurdistan Forces (YRK) and the female wing Women's Defence Forces (HPJ)	Sinjar Protection Units (YBŞ) and the female wing Yazidi Women's Units (YJÊ)
Country (internal security structures, militias)	Asayish, including special units (e.g., counter-terrorism forces) militias on 'communal level' the Civilian Defense Forces (HPC), and regional militia Self-Defense Forces (HXP)	None reported, urban militia Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), later renamed to the Civil Protection Units (YPS) and women's wing YPS-Jin	None reported	Asayish Êzidxan, including special units (e.g., counter-terrorism forces)

Table 6: The PKK-linked Political and Armed Structures in Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq (prepared by the author).

The following section elaborates on the critical premise that the PKK's insurgencies in different countries under different 'banners' are led by one organization that opts for different behaviour based on the context in each insurgency. In the centrality of the PKK's discourse, there is presenting its insurgencies and respective organizations and political parties in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran as different and waging separate struggles. The main argument presented by KCK-linked organizations is that the only connection is adherence to Abdullah Öcalan's ideological premises.

The main argument revolves around PKK's totalitarian nature and the actual nature of institutions as they are laid by within Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism and in the KCK Agreement. The Agreement, published in 2005 in Turkish, constitutes the founding document of the 'new PKK' after 1999, which build its structure on a complex system of legal and illegal political parties, armed groups, and civil society organizations. As Posch (2016a) argues, the KCK Agreement is, despite some ideological changes, a continuation of PKK's Marxist-Leninist model. As stipulated in Article 36, the PKK "(...) is no classic party, pursuing power, but an ideological, moral, and organisational being"; it "is the ideological force within the KCK system." Moreover, the KCK Agreement notes that "everybody active within the KCK system must apply the PKK's ideological and moral standard" (PKK 2005). In other words, one must fully embrace ideological standards and accept the unquestionable authority of the KCK and Öcalan in order to be able to participate. The KCK structure is strictly top-down, ultimately crowned with Abdullah Öcalan, who "represents the people at every level." (PKK 2005) The KCK's Executive Council (Yürütme Konseyi) in Qandil embodying most senior commanders serves as the ultimate political and military command, which decides political and military strategies in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. As shown, the KCK/PKK is still faithful to its totalitarian legacy. The leadership in Qandil exercises strict top-down authority into respective 'parts of Kurdistan' (i.e., Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran).

Given the nature of KCK/PKK's ideology and structure, including top-down decision-making emanating from the design of the KCK, I argue that the PKK wages four insurgencies in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran which, despite a high level of transnationalisation, differ from each other. The 'one organization, different insurgencies' premise allows for an examination of why the PKK's insurgent behaviour differs in respective countries, although it constitutes a single organization, led by the same ideology and decisions of the same leadership. The PKK case and comparison of its four different insurgencies allow controlling the variables of leadership preferences and ideology that are constant. Evidence from observations on the ground and interviews also supported this claim with not a single knowledgeable respondent falsifying this assessment and showing little organizational autonomy of PKK's local franchises in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey.

7. The PYD Insurgency in Syria: From Sidelines to Mature Rebel Governance

Syria was a crucial safe haven for the PKK's leadership and training and logistics operations in 1979-98 while enjoying *carte blanche* and support from Hafiz Assad's regime. The tides turned after October 1998 when Ankara pressured Damascus to sign the so-called Adana Agreement stipulating that Syria would cease its support for the PKK and expel its leader Öcalan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 1998). Following Öcalan's capture by Turkish authorities on February 15, 1999, the PKK's covert and overt networks were in disarray due to a combination of selective repressive measures, organizational uncertainty, and Syrian Kurdish support for its cause was in decline.

In 2004-11, the PYD established already in 2003, kept a relatively low profile, especially following the 2004 Kurdish riots in Qamishli and a decisive crackdown on Kurdish political currents. The second period 2012-18, is marked by significant changes in the context of insurgency. With the Syrian war intensifying and the regime's grasp over the country weakening, the PYD managed to bolster its position. In June 2012, it assumed a dominant role in a part of the Syrian Kurdish areas. Since 2015, it gained prominence by gaining US-led coalition support in combating ISIS. Consequently, the DAA²³ (Democratic Autonomous Administration, *Rêveberiya Xweserîya Demokratî* in Kurdish) secured more (mainly Sunni Arab) areas in north-eastern Syria by the end of 2018, controlling more than 25% of Syrian territory, over 80% of oil fields (International Crisis Group 2018), farmland accounting for around 50% of pre-war wheat production (US Department of Agriculture 2012), and roughly 3 million people under its rule (OCHA 2019).

The DAA never called for the toppling of the Syrian regime or joined opposition projects while also asserting it does not work with the Syrian regime either. The PYD co-chair Asya Abdullah maintained in August 2016 that the PYD has a consistent position: *"The third line is an independent and open track, which does not support either regime or the opposition. (...) The third line is based on the organization of society and the formation of cultural, social, economic and political institutions in order to achieve the people's self-administration."* (Sary 2016, 9)

The PYD (2015), in its 'Rules of Procedure' (September 2015 version), argues that it seeks *"(...) a democratic and just solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria and Rojava within a democratic Syrian constitutional framework."* It adheres to Öcalan's ideas of Democratic Confederalism, naming him as *"(...) the author of democratic civilisation and democratic nation theory, as an inspiration to the Party."* (ibid.) The PYD supports *"(...) the democratic liberation struggle in all parts of Kurdistan in order to achieve and consolidate Kurdish national unity based upon the principle of democratic communal confederalism without compromising political borders,"* and works *"(...) towards a democratic confederate Middle Eastern union."* (ibid.) This indicates its revolutionary goals seeking the

²³ There were number of changes of the name of the administration which are described further in this chapter. However, for the purposes of clarity, the colloquial general term 'Democratic Autonomous Administration' is being used throughout the text to describe the PYD-led administration in Syria.

complete overhaul of Syrian and regional political systems. Furthermore, it considers the Movement for a Democratic Society (in Kurdish, Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, TEV-DEM) an integral part of PYD-linked political structures labeling it as “(...) *the democratic and communal organisation that represents it in Rojava.*” (ibid.) The PYD continuously asserts that Öcalan’s Democratic Confederalism should be a system that is spread in the whole of Syria and the broader Middle East (see Arslan 2017).

The PYD and its administration continue to have an organic relationship with the PKK, including organizational ties well beyond PYD’s acknowledged mere inspiration by Öcalan’s ideology. Since 2011, the PYD has actively attempted to spin its perception as solely focused on Turkey: “*We were under pressure: the street was intent on gaining Kurdish rights, and the other Kurdish parties were accusing us of operating (...) with a Turkey-centric agenda. So we decided to set up a self-administration and promote that as the foundation for future recognition of Kurdish rights.*” (International Crisis Group 2017, 8) Allsopp (2015, 84) summarizes the evidence to support the organic link between the PYD and the PKK on the onset of Syrian war as follows: “*The evidence to support such accusations included the following: the PYD party leader, Salih Muslim, exiled from Syria in 2010 and then encamped with the PKK in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, returned to Syria in 2011, reportedly with as many as 2,000 PKK guerrilla fighters, without intervention by the regime; initially the PYD did not explicitly call for the fall of the regime and remained open to dialogue with it; it openly established a number of Kurdish language schools without interference from Syrian authorities; it was accused of preventing and disrupting protests against the regime in Efrîn; it erected checkpoints and began policing Kurdish areas in the presence of regime security services and its takeover of Kurdish towns and regions was peaceful and swift, raising suspicions that they had an agreement with the Syrian authorities to secure the areas from the FSA (author’s note: Free Syrian Army) and to incite sectarian divisions within Syria.*”

While the PKK cadres, commanders, and fighters undoubtedly still play a prominent role and have key decision-making powers, not to mention the majority of PYD’s and YPG/SDF’s representatives are, in fact, PKK veterans, Qandil-trained officials, two opinion currents within the DAA gradually emerged. The first one, more pragmatic, represented for example by Salih Muslim PYD co-chair 2010-17, or Mazlum Abdi (Kobani), commander-in-chief of the SDF, views as a priority the struggle in Syria and is willing to at least to some extent distance the DAA from Qandil to be able to work with Turkey.²⁴ This opinion current was also championed by the US, investing since 2018 considerable energy into distancing the DAA and the SDF from the PKK (with only questionable results as of the end of 2018).

The second current follows the PKK’s prioritization of its struggle in Turkey and considers the Syrian conflict one of its regional theatres. KCK co-chair Cemil Bayik for example maintained that “*It is wrong not to mention Turkey when we speak about Syria, Iran and Iraq. Turkey is behind the crisis in those two countries. If you can’t fix the Kurdish issue in Turkey first, you can’t resolve it there either.*” (International Crisis Group 2017,

²⁴ Interview with a Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

4) This current is championed within the PYD and the DAA, for example, by Aldar Khalil, TEV-DEM co-chair, or Ilham Ahmed, co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) 2015-18.²⁵

These opinion differences create periodic frictions between the two camps; nevertheless, the PKK's grip over the DAA remains tight.²⁶ PKK commanders responsible for the Rojava area, such as Sabri Ok or Bahoz Erdal, sometimes express displeasure over Abdi's ties with the US and his rising prominence (Karar 2018). Mustafa Karasu, KCK Executive Council member, lamented in November 2018 that the US desires not a brotherhood of the people but instead incites fighting. Therefore it is hostile towards the PKK's goals and its struggle while referring to the US efforts to steer the DAA "*to its own line*," i.e., away from Qandil (Karasu 2018).

7.1 The Context of Insurgency

Syrian Kurds' national ambition was always kept in check due to several factors: scattered population in ethnically mixed areas, unfavorable flat terrain for an insurgency, artificially drawn border between Syria and Turkey that cut off tribes and clans in half, and the stability of Syrian authoritarian regime capable of continuously containing Kurdish political activities. Syrian Kurdish political life remained fragmented and was also influenced mainly by losses and gains of Kurdish political forces in the neighboring countries with close ties or directly sponsored Syrian Kurdish groups. Three main currents are linked to their respective sponsors: firstly, the PYD to the PKK originating in Turkey; secondly, the (KDP-S) and the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KDPPS) former tied to the Iraqi Kurdish KDP (Hevian 2013) while latter to the PUK (van Wilgenburg 2014).

In 2004-18, two significant developments were shaping the context of insurgency. Firstly, in 2003, the PYD was established as the Syrian franchise of the PKK. The PKK was no more used as a tool by Damascus against Turkey and to keep the Syrian Kurds in check by instructing the PKK to steer those willing to fight for the Kurdish cause against Turkey. Secondly, with the civil war intensifying, the regime struck an apparent marriage of convenience with the PYD. Regime's withdrawal from Kurdish-inhabited areas in the north in June 2012 enabled the PYD/YPG to fill the ensuing vacuum quickly, benefiting from its institutions' coherence and maturity as opposed to other (Kurdish and non-Kurdish) rebel groups (International Crisis Groups 2014, 7-8).

There are no precise numbers for the Kurdish population in Syria. Current estimates usually argue that there are some 1.9 million Kurds in Syria, around 9% of the Syrian population (estimated 10.6% in 2018 if we consider demographic shifts during the war; Izady 2019). Syrian Kurds are Kurmanjî speakers, using modified Arabic script, while in the northeast, close to Iraqi Kurds, its sub-dialect Badinî prevails.

²⁵ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

²⁶ Ibid.

Regardless, due to the lack of standardized education, local dialects vary and are influenced by Arabic and Kurdish accents spoken in Turkey and Syria.

The vast majority of Syrian Kurds are Sunni. There is a minority of Yazidis (15,000, Religious Literacy Project 2020b) living mainly in al-Jazira, across from the Iraqi border, and a small number of Alawite Kurds, living north-west of Aleppo (Tejel 2019). Many of them are, however, close to the so-called People's Islam (Sufism), especially the Qadiriya and the Naqshbandiya orders, and Islamism has never found fertile ground among Syrian Kurds (Pinto 2011), unlike in Turkey or Iraq. However, in general, Syrian Kurds can be viewed (and they view themselves as such²⁷) as less 'conservative' than Turkish or Iraqi Kurds, especially in the urban areas where the role of tribes and clans remains relatively strong. However, it is considered much weaker than Iraqi Kurdish areas where tribes and clans' roles are still overarching both in politics and social life. Some Syrian Kurds trace their origin to today's Turkey, many fleeing after the defeated Kurdish rebellion in the 1920s and migrating to suitable agricultural lands in al-Jazira from Turkey after 1945 (McDowall 2004). There are also strong tribal links among the Kurds living on the Syrian and Turkish side of the border. Many tribes and clans were cut in half when the border was delineated after World War I. For example, important tribal confederacy Millis is historically connected to Mardin and Diyarbakır in Turkey (Tejel 2009).

The ethnic mosaic in northern Syria is rather complex since even areas considered Kurdish 'heartland' are inhabited by a significant number of Sunni Arabs (Shammari confederation being among the most important in the area, Khaddour 2017), Turkmen, Christians, Yazidis or others, counting up to approximately 30-50% [such as in Ra's al-'Ayn (Serê Kaniyê), Kobani, al-Malikiya (Dêrik), or Qamishli].²⁸ The Syrian Kurdish 'heartland' is considered al-Jazira (Cizîre) which roughly copies the administrative border of al-Hasaka governorate and which is also the richest, most developed of Kurdish-inhabited areas. Two most important urban centers are located there – al-Hasaka and Qamishli, which is also considered a cultural center. Many Kurds, often Arabized, historically live in Damascus (up to 300,000) or Aleppo (McDowall 2004). The only homogenous Kurdish area is an isolated mountainous district of Afrin. This is an important difference compared to core Kurdish areas in Turkey or Iraq, where the Kurdish population is more homogenous. This not only invites ethnically-charged local disputes but has often been used by the government in Damascus to employ a divide-and-rule approach of pitting one group against the other (Khaddour 2017).

7.1.1 Horizontal Inequalities

In Syria, the Kurdish community faces high horizontal inequalities stemming partially from the general under-development of Kurdish-inhabited areas, but mainly from their overall status of second-tier

²⁷ Informal communications with Syrian Kurds in the KRI, 2016-17, 2018-19.

²⁸ For more detailed breakup of ethno-religious groups in northern Syria see Izady (2019b).

citizens. The state treated Kurds as potential ‘fifth-column’ due to the threat of their centrifugal tendencies. That puts them in an unfavorable position even compared to Sunni Arabs, especially in the northeastern border areas.

The Syrian government has been somewhat successful in partial economic reforms aiming at shifting from largely state-led to a market-oriented economy in the 1990s and 2000s, experiencing a 5% growth in 2005-10 (Achy 2011). However, one in three Syrians still lived under the poverty line, even though the GDP per capita grew from \$1,043 in 1999 to \$2,807 in 2010 (Countryeconomy 2020), and it is estimated that it remained at about the same level during the war, at least until 2015 (Central Intelligence Agency 2020).

Kurdish-inhabited areas, mainly Afrin district, north-eastern and north-western parts of al-Jazira, are traditionally relatively under-developed, lacking education, transportation, or industrial infrastructure compared to other parts of Syria (Hatahet 2019). However, thanks to extremely fertile lands (al-Jazira is considered a grain reservoir for the whole of Syria, providing 33% of the country’s wheat in 2005, US Department of Agriculture 2012), the overall economic situation is comparably better to peripheral arid Sunni Arab-inhabited areas of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and eastern parts of Homs governorate. Afrin and Kobanî areas are less developed compared to al-Jazira. The situation even worsened due to 2004-09 droughts that prompted the unemployment rate in al-Hasaka governorate to rise to 40%, subsequent migration affected at least 42% of families as of 2011, and farmers lost up to 90% of their income (Hatahet 2019). However, crop output also soared from 4.1 million tonnes of wheat pre-war to a meager 1.2 million in 2018 (lowest output since 1989) due to droughts, damaged infrastructure, and displacement (El Dahan 2018).

The main cause of horizontal inequality is that the Kurds have been treated as second-tier citizens having a much harder time securing public employment or obtaining a university education. While some Kurds climbed to higher echelons in the Syrian regime, the general rule was that “*Succeeding in the Syrian public sector usually meant to avoid being perceived as Kurd, even if people knew that one was Kurdish.*” (Catat 2015, 114) Under the authoritarian bargain, the regime often guaranteed employment of college graduates in the public sector (which employs 30% of the workforce, or 1.4 million people as of 2010, Khaddour 2015), lowering Kurds’ chances to secure middle-class jobs (Achy 2011). In Syria, the authoritarian social contract widely used patronage networks to co-opt ‘loyalist’ Kurds and, in turn, punish (often economically) those viewed as disloyal.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, out of approximately 1.9 million Kurds, 350,000 do not enjoy full citizen rights. That has dire implications for public employment prospects, business ventures, and even owning the property (for more, see Chapter 7.1.2). More horizontal inequalities stem from the regime’s long-standing ‘ethnic engineering’ in Kurdish-inhabited areas, including encouraging Arab

settlers to come in, favoring them in local administration and public employment, or offering more development in Arab areas. As Maisel (2017, 108) notes, “*Both Arabs and Kurds used the demographic argument of minority versus majority. The Arabs in the Jazīra felt that they were a minority in their own country, while the Kurds complained about drastic and violent Arabization practices.*” New Arab villages were built with the regime’s say-so and were favored by the state. “*Now for example, New-Tanuriya (Arab village) is located next to Tanuriya (Kurdish village). The school and other services were located in Arab village (...).*” (ibid.)

Since July 2012, when the regime left most Kurdish areas and paved a way for the PYD to establish both military and administrative control, one could argue that the Kurdish population’s situation grossly improved. Horizontal inequalities decreased, and contrary to the previous period, the Kurds were in fact ‘running the show’ not only in Kurdish core areas but to a large extent in Arab-majority areas such as Manbij, area of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, and most notably Raqqa and Deir Ezzor which were gradually coming under the DAA after being wrested from ISIS control. While Sunni Arabs and other minorities such as Christians and Turkmen were co-opted (in fact, this was the main propaganda argument of the PYD-led administration: multi-ethnic, multi-confessional governance system, ensuring the inclusion of all groups), in reality, the PYD-loyal and PKK-loyal figures were behind the scenes and dominating both military, political and administrative structures through officially appointed figures or people with decision-making powers behind the scenes.²⁹

7.1.2 State Policies

During the first period of 2004-2011, the Syrian regime continued its tradition of keeping Kurdish political mobilization in check. The regime used a mix of careful co-optation and repression while manipulating not only the Kurdish sentiments but also relations between Kurds, Arabs, and other minorities, especially in the Syrian Kurdish ‘heartland’ in Qamishli and al-Hasaka areas (al-Jazira).

Baathist regime under the auspices of Hafiz Assad, assuming power in 1970, himself hailing from the Alawite minority who were previously primarily considered as second-tier citizens before the 1960s both economically and by the perception of Arabs, further consolidated and successfully centralized his power (see Landis, Lesch, Tabler and Davidson 2016). Facing possible threats from the Sunni Arab majority, Assad’s regime relied on recruitment of bureaucrats and security forces from the Alawite sect (and his own tribe al-Kalbiyya in particular; Catar 2015) and other minorities such as Druzes or Christians. Kurds, however, were considered in parallel to Sunni Arabs as second class citizens. The regime’s policies towards the Kurds have never been as violent as in Saddam’s Iraq, “*However, jail, torture and at times death sentences for any opponent of the regime have been features of Baath rule in Syria. But the Kurds were the only ethnic group who was confronted with severe prohibitions of various forms of cultural expression.*” (ibid., 116)

²⁹ Interview with European humanitarian worker, Erbil, KRI, September 2016-March 2017.

Simultaneously, the regime continued to implement policies against the Kurdish minority to keep their nationalist ambitions in check. Politicization of Kurdish culture continued as well as the prohibition of Kurdish language education. The regime's stance has not improved during Bashar Assad's presidency since 2000 (see Tejel 2009, 104-5, 110). In the 1990s, Human Rights Watch (1996) identified the following restrictions: "(...) various bans on the use of the Kurdish language; refusal to register children with Kurdish names; replacement of Kurdish place names with new names in Arabic; prohibition of businesses that do not have Arabic names; not permitting Kurdish private schools; and the prohibition of books and other materials written in Kurdish."

Moreover, the government resorted to re-settlement policies, such as creating the Arab Belt of new villages alongside the border with Turkey, confiscating in total 750 km² of farmland in al-Hasaka in 1973. For example, 150 Arab families were settled in the al-Malikiya area in 2007, evicting tens of thousands of Kurds from the land (OHCHR 2011). Syrian regime engaged in careful ethnic engineering of Kurdish areas favoring Arabs over Kurds in local administration and vice versa to keep both in check and pitted against each other. The primary source of grievance of the wider Kurdish population is indeed the 1962 census in the al-Hasaka area (al-Jazira), where most Kurds lived, which resulted in around 120,000 Kurds losing their citizenship. The government argued that those Kurds were not 'Syrians' and categorized them as 'foreigners' (ajānib). Furthermore, a significant number of those 120,000 were considered 'hidden' (maktūmin) since they failed to register during the census, leaving them in an even worse position with no legal status in the Syrian state's eyes (Tejel 2009).

In 2011, it was estimated that since 'statelessness' is hereditary, there were almost 350,000 ajānib Kurds and around 170,000 maktūmin Kurds in Syria, out of an estimated total of 1.9 million (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2018). This policy imposed severe travel restrictions, property ownership, employment, education, and dealing with the state bureaucracy. It also prevented those Kurds from being elected to public office. The regime argued that these Kurds were not Syrian citizens since their origin was in Turkey. Nevertheless, as Kamaran Sadoun put it, "*This was an invalid argument because there were no borders between Syria and Turkey during the Ottoman Empire.*"³⁰ One could argue that this constitutes the most substantial source of grievance among the Syrian Kurds. On the contrary, paradoxical situations emerged when one sibling ended up with citizenship and the other without, or the father could have citizenship, but his children not (Human Rights Watch 1996).

After the death of Hafiz Assad in 2000, many were (falsely as it turned out) hoping for his Western-educated and young son Bashar to be a reformist that would gradually liberalize the regime (see Letsch 2013, chapters 1-3). In 2004-2011, he continued with a divide-and-rule approach towards the Kurds, applying on and off repressive measures to Kurdish political actors, including the PYD. However, the Kurds (compared to those in Turkey) could speak Kurdish in public, or for the most part, observe

³⁰ Interview with Kamiran Sadoun, Syrian Kurdish journalist and researcher, Erbil, KRI, February 29, 2020.

their festivities and traditions. Nonetheless, their language and cultural rights remained restricted (Tejel 2009, 30-31). There were periods of heightened repressive measures. For example, in 2007, Afrin men lamented that an official decree prohibited selling and owning traditional Kurdish musical instruments ahead of the upcoming Newroz celebration (Tejel 2009, 167). “(...) Kurds (both activists and average citizens) continue to be arrested on a variety of charges, ranging from accused membership in the Kongra Gel [author’s note: i.e., PYD/PKK] to possessing Kurdish cultural material.” (Public Library of US Diplomacy 2006) Linguistic rights also continued to be restricted, prohibiting both education of Kurdish and publications in the Kurdish language under the 1958 decree (International Crisis Group 2013).

Bashar Assad himself took an early interest in the north of the country when he traveled to al-Hasaka on August 18, 2002, listened to the situation of the Kurds and promised to act upon some of the grievances, namely the 1962 census issue (Human Rights Watch 2010). The breaking point highlighting the unchanged strategy of a divide-and-rule security-focused approach of the regime came during and after the Qamishli riots in March 2004. Riots were sparked by a football match between the Qamishli team and the Arab team from Deir Ezzor, during which Arab supporters displayed Saddam Hussein’s pictures. The Kurds, in turn, displayed Kurdish national symbols (KurdWatch 2009). The row between the fans sparked widespread riots over the city with anti-Syrian regime overtone prompting a violent response from local police. Similar events, including attacking public offices and police stations, occurred in Afrin, Kobanî, al-Malikiya, and Kurdish quarters of Aleppo (Sheikh Maqsud and al-Ashrafiya), culminating in tearing down Bashar Assad’s statue in Qamishli (ibid.). This prompted the regime to deploy the military to assume control of the situation. At least 30 people were killed, over 2,000 arrested, and hundreds fled to Iraqi Kurdistan in the aftermath (Human Rights Watch 2004).

This was a wake-up call for Bashar Assad that curbed any visions for a moderating stance towards the Kurds (assuming there were any genuine intentions on the regime’s side in the first place). Consequently, in 2004-11, the regime kept a finger on any attempts of the Kurds to mobilize. Significant resources were dedicated to curbing Kurdish activists as well as (dis-)organized political opposition, including the PYD, although the political parties were not instrumental in organizing the uprising. Some of them tried to hijack the uprising and capitalize on the political mobilization ex-post.³¹ It is indisputable that Damascus’ regime in 2004-11 remained strongly authoritarian and employed its confidence and experience in managing ethnoreligious groups and actors who could challenge them. Bashar Assad promised economic overhaul, but his efforts brought only piecemeal reforms aimed at promoting privatization of specific sectors as opposed to previous strongly statist approach (see Seifan 2011).

³¹ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

The first strategy was to promote intra-community grudges and periodically maneuvering their standing in the system. As Khaddour notes, the regime “(...) often exacerbated Arab-Kurdish divisions by overtly favouring Arab candidates to parliament over Kurdish ones, or by heightening Kurdish mistrust of Arabs.” (Khaddour 2017, 8) Pitting one community against the other occurred at leisure in ad hoc events as well: For example, in the aftermath of the Qamishli riots in June 2004, Sunni Arab residents were encouraged and protected by the security forces to loot Kurdish shops in Derik (al-Malikiyah) (KurdWatch 2009). Local administrative structures were crucial in “(...) stirring up communal rivalries, dispensing patronage, co-opting local elites, and preventing independent political action.” (Khaddour 2017, 9) Khaddour (ibid.) describes the situation in al-Jazira as follows: “Middle-class Arabs, Assyrians, and Syrians were appointed to key state institutions. By contrast, Kurdish notables, mostly co-opted through their professional associations, were rarely appointed to leadership positions in local government or state bodies, so as to limit their capacity to mobilize broader Kurdish solidarity against the Assad’s regime.”

The second strategy revolved around keeping Syrian Kurdish political parties divided by managing their fractionalization, co-optation, and selective punishments. Syrian Kurdish political landscape has traditionally been extremely fragmented and plagued with periodic splits and enmities. In 2011, there was an astounding number of 14 political parties, while the majority (11) of them have their origins in the KDPS, established in 1957 (KurdWatch 2011). A number of these parties have been influenced by the Iraqi Kurdish KDP and the PUK. Out of the remaining three parties, the PKK-linked PYD and the Future Movement, are influential. It is worth noting that programmatically (except for the PYD and its radical leftist vision of Democratic Confederalism), they do not differ much, and “None of the parties demand an independent Syrian-Kurdish state or the inclusion of the Syrian-Kurdish regions in a united Kurdistan. None of the parties - and here the Kurdish movement in Syria differs from the Kurdish parties in Iraq and Turkey - wants to claim the rights of the Kurdish population by force of arms nor have they ever propagated this.” (KurdWatch 2011, 15) The regime has traditionally fuelled extreme fragmentation (even for Kurdish political landscape standards we see in Iran). Both infiltrations by state agents and systematic attempts to create rifts between Kurdish political actors have certainly played a role. Catar (2015, 118) notes that “higher ranking Kurdish party activists stood a better chance to be less often imprisoned than their low ranking peers - another subtle wedge between Kurds.”

Another source of friction was that the PKK-linked actors had more or less a green light to operate among the Kurds until the late 1990s. In contrast, the KDPS-origin parties were prohibited and at odds with the PKK, which was perceived as working with the state, focusing on the campaign in Turkey and not keeping Syrian Kurdish interests in mind. Khaddour (2017, 8) also notes that co-optation appears to be crucial in the regime’s divide-and-rule strategy: “The Assad regime could also contain the Kurdish national movement by co-opting party members through the Syrian state professional associations. The regime capitalized on its sway

over syndicates for lawyers, teachers, and engineers so as to promote a Kurdish middle class that was either loyal or that Damascus could at least influence.”

Another aspect of the state’s policy focused on co-opting and controlling influential Kurdish religious figures who are required to promote ‘official state Islam,’ especially figures promoting moderate Sufi Islam (often Naqshbandiyya order) hostile towards Alawites (Tejel 2009, 65-66). For example, popular Kurdish Sufi cleric Sheikh Mashuq Khaznawi began to speak out against the regime and maintain communications with representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood from abroad (a clear ‘red line’ for the regime). He was kidnapped and killed in May 2005, and it was widely believed the regime’s intelligence was behind the murder (Brandon 2007).

Generally speaking, the core Kurdish areas (al-Jazira) are also of strategic importance due to their fertile lands, water reservoirs, natural resources, and a border with Turkey and Iraq. Khaddour notes that security agencies took a close interest even in everyday administrative or business decisions, such as preventing farmers from cultivating other agricultural products than grain maintaining its dependence on Damascus (Khaddour 2017). Similarly, Law no. 41 from 2004 prevents procurement, development, and leasing properties in Syria ‘border areas’ without security apparatus’ permission (Parliament of Syria 2004). Law no. 41 was further amended by Decree no. 49 from 2008, which was widely explicitly read targeting the Kurdish minority and their ability to control real-estate markets, especially in the Qamishli area (KurdWatch 2010).

To conclude, the state policies in 2004-11 followed a well-placed and functional divide-and-rule suit preventing effective Kurdish political mobilization. Simultaneously, certain restrictions on expressing Kurdish culture, treating the Kurds as second-class citizens, and the continuation of denying full citizen rights to an estimated 350,000 Kurds were still in place (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2018).

State policies towards the Kurdish-inhabited areas in the north and northwest Syria began to change dramatically at the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011-12. At first, the Kurdish political parties, including the PYD, were reluctant to join the protests against the regime and discouraged people from joining the streets for two main reasons: it was asserted primarily ‘Arab matter,’ and there were fears of violent retributions similar to Qamishli 2004 (Savelsberg 2014). Only youth groups disconnected from traditional political parties were holding solidarity protests and called for toppling the regime. Only later on, established parties ‘Kurdified’ the protests and steered them under their control (ibid.). Essentially, only the small Future Movement led by Mash’al Tammo (assassinated by suspected government operatives on October 7, 2011, in his home in Qamishli) joined the mainly Arab Syrian National Council (SNC) and openly called for overthrowing the regime (BBC News 2011). Parties’ mission for more control over Kurdish political landscape and ensuing protests also led to the establishment of the Kurdish National Council (in Kurdish, Encûmena Nîştîmanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, ENKS) on October 26, 2011, a

coalition of non-PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish parties (Carnegie 2020). In turn, the PYD asserted more control over Amuda and Qamishli, where the PKK has traditionally lacked widespread support. In an attempt to hijack the popular protests, “(...) *the PYD suppressed anti-regime protests; its own demonstrations were more pro-PYD than anti-regime. Once it was established in late October 2011, the KNC (i.e., ENKS, author’s note) followed suit, staging demonstrations to boost its standing rather than to oppose the regime.*” (International Crisis Group 2013, 11)

There were a few regime steps to placate the Kurds. The issue of ‘stateless Kurds’ was partially alleviated by presidential Decree no. 49 issued on April 7, 2011, which resulted in the naturalization of several ajānib and a significant number of maktūmin (ibid.). However, many Kurds refrained from registering simply because this would enable the Syrian regime to draft them for military service and subject them to a criminal prosecution would they choose not to heed the call.³² During the formation of the ‘marriage of convenience’ between the regime and the PYD, several political prisoners were released in late 2011 (International Crisis Group 2013).

After several months of decreasing presence (Human Rights Watch 2013), on July 19-24, 2012, the regime armed forces concluded withdrawal from Afrin and most of the al-Jazira and Kobanî area (Schmidinger 2019), effectively leaving military installments for the PYD and its armed wing - the YPG. The event was a result of a bargain. The PYD agreed to not openly fight or call for the toppling of Bashar Assad’s regime. In turn, it asserted full control over predominantly Kurdish areas in the north, preventing other rebel groups from prevailing there. Regime forces remained in small garrisons in Qamishli and al-Hasaka with clear-cut divided areas of control. Public employees also largely remained in place, some operating government’s office, others gradually joining the PYD-administration. They continued to receive salaries (Hatahet 2019; Khalaf 2016) or pensions from the government (Balanche 2017). This tacit marriage of convenience remained in place until the end of 2018 and onwards. The regime and the PYD never engaged in serious armed confrontations.³³ The YPG reportedly received weapons and ammunition from the regime during the conflict (Frentzel 2017). At times, both entities even stood side by side on frontlines while combating other groups, mainly ISIS, such as securing al-Hasaka city vicinity in May-August 2015 (for more see Kaválek and Mareš 2018; ARA News 2016).

Utilizing Staniland’s (2012) typology of wartime orders, one could argue that there were active cooperation and communication between the PYD and the Syrian government, and their territorial

³² Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

³³ There were several only episodes of short-term localised violence between various armed groups tied to the government and the PYD/YPG. Only once such confrontation induced Syrian army and air force to hit YPG’s positions in al-Hasaka in August 18-20, 2016, before the situation quickly calmed down (see al-Jazeera 2016).

control was clear-cut and segmented, resulting in a ‘shared sovereignty’ type of wartime order. The relationship between the PYD and the Syrian regime is a pragmatic one based on overlapping interests rather than a genuine alliance. The regime could divert its forces where needed more (to suppress Sunni Arab uprising), and the PYD, in turn, could assert its dominance over Kurdish-inhabited areas.

7.1.3 Incumbent’s Power

In 2004-11, Syria was a well-established and stable authoritarian regime that faced only a few challenges to its authority even in the previous period. As Picconne (2017) argues, stable authoritarian regimes or established democracies are at lower risk of armed conflict compared to only partially democratic systems. With Bashar Assad coming to power in July 2000, the regime continued to keep a tight grip over its citizens. The Kurds were more closely observed after the March 2004 Qamishli uprising, and perhaps in fear that gains of Iraqi Kurds would inspire Syrian Kurds.³⁴ *“Under Bashar al-Assad the net became especially tight in the Kurdish areas from 2004 onwards. Surveillance was so intensive that public sources outside Syria offered estimations of the number of informers and of the number of people one intelligence officer was assigned to monitor.”* (Catat 2015, 116) Regime’s grip and experience in managing ethnic and religious groups was apparent and translated into mature localized policies overseen by various security agencies, including in Kurdish-inhabited areas.

Tides for the Syrian regime began to turn by March 2011, when protests following the suit of Arab revolts across the region spread to the country. In his breakthrough speech in the parliament on March 30, 2011, President Assad opted for a harsh stance instead of concessions (see Landis, Lesch, Tabler and Davidson 2016). By early 2012, the protests turned into a full-fledged violent armed conflict between the regime and rebel forces – mostly hailing from the Sunni Arab population. The formative moment that led to a significant decrease of the regime’s power in the Kurdish areas was the decision to withdraw armed forces on July 17-24, 2012, and downgrade its presence in the northeast (al-Jazira), Kobanî vicinity, and northwest (Afrin area) (Schmidinger 2019). This allowed the Syrian government to relocate its forces elsewhere. By the end of 2012, it was apparent that the overstretched regime gave up on any attempts at counterinsurgency efforts to control the countryside and focused primarily on the major population centers, i.e., provincial capitals (Holliday 2013).

The apparent agreement with the PYD/YPG allowed for outstretched Syrian regime forces to divert its interests into more pressing battles over Syria. In exchange, neither the ENKS nor the PYD initiated an open fight with the regime or called for the toppling of Bashar Assad. On the contrary, since the second half of 2012, the YPG was regularly fighting against other rebels, mainly with radical Islamist

³⁴ Autonomous region of Kurds in Iraq was becoming more and more institutionalized since the fall of Saddam’s regime in April 2003 and due to the US backing.

groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (notably in Kobanî since November 2012), Ahrar al-Sham, and later ISIS, but also with elements of the so-called Free Syrian Army.

In 2012, the Syrian regime strategically decided to prioritize crushing Sunni insurgents and withdraw from Kurdish areas. However, in the upcoming years, the regime was facing fatigue, losing ground not only to various rebels groups but to ISIS as well, controlling less than half of the territory in mid-2015 (Khaddour 2015). On the other hand, the regime showed remarkable resilience with “(...) *its ability to claim that the Syrian state, under Assad, has remained the irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that are outside the regime’s control.*” (ibid., 3) The regime’s situation vastly improved with increased Russian engagement on the ground since September 2015 and likewise with the increased deployment of Iranian troops, various Iran-backed militias, and Lebanese Hezbollah since half of 2014 (Kozak 2015). Although the regime was effectively militarily winning the conflict in late 2018, with Greater Idlib province being the only remaining rebel foothold, it remained weak and unable to dedicate resources into renewing its administrative or security presence east of Euphrates, now under the SDF control. In the meantime, the DAA became more mature and entrenched; the SDF counts up to 100,000 fighters as of 2019 (Seligman 2019), including 50-70% of Arabs (Holmes 2019), and most importantly, the US maintained its political backing and boots on the ground in the area.

Turkey, directly intervening with its military forces and Syrian Arab and Turkmen proxies, can be considered another incumbent power in the PYD’s insurgency. In 2013-15, several meetings were held between the then-PYD co-chair Salih Muslim and Turkish officials (Hürriyet 2013; Middle East Eye 2016) against the background of the ongoing ceasefire and the so-called İmralı Peace Process entailing indirect talks with the PKK. Muslim tried to convince Ankara the PYD does not pose a threat to Turkey nor wishes to attain independence for Kurdish parts. However, the situation changed drastically by August 2015 when the negotiations collapsed, and conflict resumed (for more see Chapter 8). Turkey considers the PYD and its insurgency a significant threat to its national security, fearing it will again be used for the PKK as a launching pad for operations against Turkey as before 1999. Similarly, Ankara opposes any Kurdish autonomous state-like entity in the region, especially under the PKK’s auspices.

The situation prompted Ankara to intervene in northern Syria three times militarily. Firstly, on August 24, 2016, in Operation Euphrates Shield to secure border areas from ISIS and prevent the creation of an imminent land connection between Euphrates and Afrin under the SDF control, further strengthening its insurgency (International Crisis Group 2017). Secondly, on January 20, 2018, with Operation Olive Branch, which conquered the Afrin area. The operation received a de facto Russian green light from Russia that withdrew its forces from Afrin (al-Hilu 2019) and allowed Turks to use the airspace (Haid 2018). Turkish military controlled the skies and inflicted heavy casualties on the YPG (over 1,500; UCDP 2020b), and seized Afrin’s control within two months. While the YPG reacted by launching

an insurgency against Turkey, it proved to be of a low-level intensity (see Chapter 7.2.1). Thirdly, Turkey entered the stage with Operation Peace Spring on October 9, 2019, invading the Arab-majority belt between Tal Abyad and Ra's al-'Ayn under the SDF control.

7.1.4 Presence of Active Rivalry

Kurdish political landscape is fragmented and consists of fourteen political parties as of 2011. The major factor behind this fragmentation were the Syrian government's divide-and-rule policies (thoroughly discussed in Chapter 7.1.2). We could argue that there are three groups of political parties: those originating in the KDPS, already established in 1957, those originating in the PKK, and finally, those that can be considered relatively distant from both traditions (KurdWatch 2011). Programmatically, the parties hardly differ and have relatively moderate demands – solution of Kurdish question through democratization with respect to Syrian territorial integrity, ensuring there is a certain level of self-administration (ibid.; Koontz 2019). Splits within the Kurdish political landscape often occur simply due to personal power issues and struggles among the leaders, leaving Syrian Kurdish political parties' overall ability to take joint action or assume a common stance at low.

The PKK was traditionally viewed as an 'alien' competitor for Syrian Kurdish hearts and minds by other Kurdish political parties. It was also viewed as an agent of the Syrian regime, focused on fighting in Turkey, ensuring the Kurds in Syria do not mobilize against the government.³⁵ However, this has started to change after Öcalan expulsion in 1998, and after the PKK decided to establish franchises specifically for furthering their insurgency in Kurdish-inhabited countries (as a part of this shift, the PYD was established in 2003, as discussed in Chapter 6). Brandon (2007) noted that *"Despite Syrian success in co-opting the PKK, the last few years have provided evidence that Syria's formerly placid Kurds are becoming increasingly angry with the Syrian government – and increasingly determined to take action against it."* The PYD's increased Syria-focused activities and attempts to muster more support in 2004-11 put it at even bigger odds with other Syrian Kurdish political parties, competing for the same constituency.³⁶ In 2005-2011, we could see a distinction between more 'active' and more 'passive' Syrian Kurdish parties, while more active (and ultimately most targeted by the regime's repressive actions) were Yekitî, Azadî, the PYD, and the Future Movement (KurdWatch 2009, 19-23).

There were various efforts to increase coordination if not unity or merger among non-PYD parties. On December 30, 2009, the Political Council was formed among nine Kurdish parties, excluding the PYD and several others (Allsopp 2015). At the onset of Syrian protests in May 2011, the Political

³⁵ Informal communication with Syrian Kurds in the KRI, 2016-17, 2018-19.

³⁶ Afrin is an example: the PKK sanctioned by the regime driven out tradition Syrian Kurdish parties out of the region in the 80s (Schmidinger 2019). Any attempts by the ENKS member entities to threaten political monopoly in Afrin after 2011-12 met with strongly repressive, even violent reaction from the PYD (see Human Rights Watch 2014).

Council joined the 1994 Democratic Alliance (consisting of Democratic Yekîtî and Progressive Party) and the PYD to establish the Kurdish Patriotic Movement (KurdWatch 2011). The grouping soon fractured. It was unable to adopt a common position towards the dealings with the regime or to call for autonomy. *“Thus the existence of the various associations can hardly hide the fact that the parties’ ability to outwardly represent common positions is limited.”* (ibid., 21) In this episode, one could see the PYD’s staunch opposition towards any fragmentation of its movement. The PYD prevented the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Reconciliation party (Rekêftin), led by Fawzi Aziz Ibrahim, which split from the PYD in 2004, from joining the Alliance. (ibid.)

By 2011, the PYD had become an undisputed part of the Syrian Kurdish political landscape. Unlike the ‘PKK of the old’ that focused its activities in Syria solely to maintain the Syrian regime’s support and further its struggle against Turkey, the PYD appeared to work for the Kurdish cause in Syria as well. Up until 2011, there were no indicators of the PYD’s efforts to violently suppress or let alone systematically politically marginalize competing political parties. In a fractured political landscape, the PYD quietly built up its presence and popular support in certain areas, mostly where the PKK was traditionally stronger: in the Derik area (al-Malikiya), Kobanî, and Afrin. One of the reasons for the PYD’s success was that the traditional parties focused on the urban middle class (see Catar 2015), overlooking rural and less educated peasantry and poor workers in Afrin and Kobanî.

Furthermore, since the 1980s, the PKK got freehand from the Syrian government and actively dislodged successor parties of the KDPS from Afrin (Schmidinger 2019, 40). Efforts were made to attract young supporters from Qamishli and, to some extent, in al-Hasaka, where traditional parties prevailed and had a stronger imprint on Kurdish middle-class, intellectuals, and professionals compared to the PKK. However, they were successful just partially. For example, only 15% of Syria born martyrs of the PKK (HPG) in 2001-15 were born in Qamishli or al-Hasaka while over half in Kobanî and Afrin (Ferris and Self 2015).

In the second examined period from 2012, the PYD gradually managed to assume almost unchallenged armed and political monopoly at the expense of its Syrian Kurdish political rivals that established on October 26, 2011, the Kurdish National Council (in Kurdish Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, ENKS). At the beginning of protests erupting across Syria, established Kurdish political actors, including the PYD, were reluctant to join. The Arab opposition projects such as Syrian National Council were alien to Kurdish demands for federalism (its chair Burhan Ghalioun labeled such demands as “delusion”) (Carnegie 2020). Widespread protests in Kurdish urban centers emerged throughout 2011 and were organized by local coordination councils. They consisted mainly of the new generation of politically un-affiliated young activists. By March 2012, they started to articulate Kurdish-specific demands (KurdWatch 2011). Both the ENKS and the PYD tried to marginalize these actors and hijack

the protests and their discourse to keep their fingers on any opposition projects. The PYD, having more repressive capacities, was especially harsh in Afrin and al-Malikiya (Derik), its traditional strongholds, *“Here the PYD allowed the newly established youth groups no room to develop. Young people who wanted to organize themselves and carry out dissident demonstrations have been intimidated, threatened, kidnapped, and killed.”* (ibid., 6-7)

The creation of the ENKS was mediated and sponsored by the then KRI president Massoud Barzani and was strongly influenced by the KDP (Hevian 2013). Ultimately, the ENKS was supposed to unite Syrian Kurdish opposition parties to become an equally strong rival to the PYD in controlling northeast Syria. The PYD had a considerably better starting position, having more experienced cadres from the PKK and trained and armed fighters who had been relocating to Syria since 2011 (reportedly up to 2,000 fighters crossed the border from the KRI, including Salih Muslim, the PYD co-chair, previously exiled in Iraq) (Allsopp 2015). The ENKS, on the other hand, lacked weapons, fighters, experience, and enough manpower and continued to be fractured. The ENKS’ connection to the Iraqi Kurdish KDP added to the rivalry since relations between the KDP and the PKK are problematic.

By July 2012, Syrian forces withdrew from most Kurdish areas and consequently gave the green light to the PYD to assume both military and administrative control. The PYD minimized its rivals - new independent youth groups. The competition with the ENKS intensified. Initially, there were attempts to negotiate a fifty-fifty division of power between the ENKS and the PYD. A deal between the two was struck under auspices of the KDP’s Massoud Barzani in Erbil on June 11, 2012, forming a joint governing body called the Kurdish Supreme Council (Desteya Bilinda Kurd, DBK) (Ibrahim 2020). Expecting a division of power based on parity was, however, unrealistic for several reasons. Firstly, the ENKS, still standing relatively fractured, simply did not have enough manpower and fighters to fill in the required positions. Secondly, the PYD was already much stronger and held decision-making powers on the ground, gradually strengthening its grip. Thirdly, the PYD continued with repressive measures towards the ENKS activists and members in its quest for monopoly.

There were other attempts to mediate a power-sharing agreement between the PYD and the ENKS (again in Erbil on December 24, 2013, and Dohuk on October 22, 2014; Arafat 2016). All the attempts failed. The ENKS was violently cracked down on by the PYD, its offices closed, its members intimidated and arrested. It was altogether banned from operating in areas under the PYD control by March 2017 (for more, see Chapter 7.2.3) (Arta FM 2017). The ENKS, given its ties to the KDP, found refuge in the KRI, where also the ENKS-tied Rojava Peshmerga consisting of 3,000 (ARA News 2017) to 7,000 men (STRATFOR 2017) were trained by the KDP Peshmerga within the KDP’s Zerevani forces of the KRG’s interior ministry (Kaválek 2017). Until 2018, there were further attempts to reconcile the two and ensure the return of Rojava Peshmerga and the ENKS to Syria. All attempts failed since this would threaten the PYD’s undisputed monopoly over the Syrian Kurdish population (the PYD enjoyed

a position of power compared to the KDP and Turkey-backed ENKS since it secured US support). The ENKS further eroded on February 14, 2016, with the establishment of the Kurdish National Alliance in Syria (Hevbendiya Nîştimanî a Kurdî li Sûriyê, HNKS) consisting of five parties, previous members of the ENKS (Enabbaladi 2016). The HNKS members effectively agreed to be co-opted by the PYD and were thus expelled from the ENKS due to their collaboration with the PYD (Sayyid 2016).

Islamist rebel groups in Syria, including ISIS, never managed to attract a significant number of Kurds. Therefore, the existing rivalry was much lower than in Turkey, where political Islam resonates more strongly among the Kurds. The reason is two-fold. Firstly, it was the rejection of Kurdish ambition for autonomy and rights by Islamist opposition, both Muslim Brotherhood inspired and more radical currents (e.g., Jabhat al-Nusra, later Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and various Turkey-backed Islamist rebel groups within the Syrian National Army³⁷). For example, the leader of the Islamic Front Hassan Abbud noted in December 2013 that “self-administration project” is a desire of a minority clique of the Kurds (i.e., the PYD) adding that while Kurds suffered under the Assad’s rule, it “(...) *cannot be a reason to declare independence from the rest of the brothers, in cantons (...)*.” (Youtube 2013) Secondly, it was the fact that Islamism, in general, never found as fertile ground among Syrian Kurds as among their Turkish or Iraqi brethren (see Sulaiman 2016; or Stein 2016). However, some Syrian Kurds were reported fighting for ISIS; for example, up to 450 killed during the battle of Kobanî (Qalaji 2014). Few others joined Islamist rebel groups, forming small marginal brigades, such as the Kurdish Islamic Front (Al-Bawaba 2015). There are also several small Syrian Kurdish units within Turkey-backed rebel groups, notably the 600-strong (400 should be Kurds) Kurdish Falcon Brigade within the Hamza Division) (Sharma 2018). Nonetheless, most Syrian Kurds refrained from joining predominantly Arab Islamist rebels.

As Sary notes, the PYD “(...) *had kept discreet lines open with regime officials in the capital, Damascus, and focused its efforts on combating ISIS and establishing a form of localized government.*” (Sary 2016, 3) Since the Syrian regime’s withdrawal from Kurdish areas in the north in July 2012, the government kept a limited administrative presence in secluded areas in Qamihslî and al-Hasaka. As established in Chapter 7.1.2, there was active cooperation and communication between the PYD and the Syrian government. The territorial control was clear-cut and thus segmented, resulting in Staniland’s (2012) ‘shared sovereignty’ wartime order. Consequently, there was no rivalry or competition between the PYD and the regime since it did not interfere in local affairs or challenge the PYD’s authority.

One of the presented hallmarks of the administrative model in northeast Syria is its insistence on a multi-community and multi-ethnic nature, resulting in non-Kurdish groups’ inclusion. This principle is embodied in its constituting document from December 29, 2016, the Social Contract of the

³⁷ Syrian National Army, established in December 30, 2017, is an umbrella for Turkey-backed rebel groups operating in Syria northern Syria (for more see Global Security 2020).

Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria. The document recognizes Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis as peoples of Rojava (vanwilgenburg.blogspot.org 2017). It also maintains that *“It takes ethnic and religious differences into consideration according to the characteristics of each group based on the principles of mutual coexistence and peoples’ fraternity.”* (ibid.) The PYD and its administration went a long way into co-opting existing minority political parties and established ‘loyal’ minority political parties, including their military units. This is especially the case of small ethnic and religious minorities who do not pose a significant challenge for Kurdish dominance, such as denominations of Christian faith, Yazidis, Turkmen, or Circassians. The PYD worked on getting only ‘loyal’ political and armed actors from these ethnic and religious minority groups under their full control. However, in certain instances, the Syrian government was a rival in winning allegiances of minorities – the regime worked to co-opt especially Christians and even established Christian militias Sootoro in Qamihsli.³⁸

With successes on the battlefield against ISIS since 2014, the YPG started to expand their campaign to more Arab-majority areas, which required co-optation and inclusion of local Sunni Arabs. The YPG-Arab cooperation appeared on a limited level already in 2013 in the al-Hasaka area, where the YPG worked with the Sanadid Force, tribal militias of Arab Sunni Shammari tribe with whom Syrian Kurds traditionally have good relations (Barfi 2016). The YPG cooperated with moderate Sunni Arab Free Syrian Army remnants defeated by ISIS in Euphrates Volcano Operations Room since September 2014 in Kobani area. Later, on October 10, 2015, the SDF was created as the principal multi-ethnic military force to combat ISIS, and ultimately, it became the official armed force of the DAA. Subsequently, as more pre-dominantly Sunni Arab areas such as Manbij (August 2016) or Raqqa (October 2017) were captured, local Civilian or Military Councils consisting of local Sunni Arab notables and tribal leaders were established by the SDF and its local allies.

However, as one source put it, the SDF is dominated by the YPG and the Kurds, and ultimately, the vast majority of senior commanders are ‘Qandilians,’ the PKK’s cadres often not even hailing from Syria.³⁹ When it comes to governance, a humanitarian worker noted that ‘kadros’ (meaning Qandilians), some widely known with significant public positions and some ‘behind the scenes,’ are the real decision-makers when it comes to decisions on strategic affairs.⁴⁰ Even local Arab Civilian Councils not only consist of carefully picked YPG-co-opted Arabs but ultimately, Kurds wield the real power (see Tsurkov and al-Hassan 2019). The YPG’s cooperation with Sunni Arab tribes increased extensively with the strategic decision to partake in re-taking Raqqa. *“Later, the SDF itself widened the coalition to include the tribes*

³⁸ Similarly, the PYD worked to co-opt Christians and established a YPG-linked militia Sotoro in early 2014 (see Drott 2014).

³⁹ Interview with European humanitarian worker, Erbil, KRI, September 2016-March 2017.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

of Ar-Raqqa in order to liberate the city and governorate. Once Ar-Raqqa was taken over by the SDF, a series of meetings with tribal sheikhs led to the creation of an administrative body called the Raqqa Civilian Council.” (Dukhan 2019)

In turn, ISIS, the Syrian regime, and external actors (Saudi Arabia, or even Iran in the Deir Ezzor area) worked diligently on winning allegiances of Sunni Arab tribes in al-Hasaka, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor (see MENA Forum 2019; Azizi 2020). Sunni Arab tribes represent around 20% of Syrian society (Dukhan 2019b). The majority is located in the eastern parts of the country (ibid.). Baathist regime has a long history of co-optation of Sunni Arab tribes. As Dukhan notes that continued even after Bashar Assad assumed power, “*The regime continued to co-opt large numbers of tribal members, particularly from Deir Ezzour and Hauran, into party leadership, government institutions and popular organisations such as the peasants’ union.*” (Dukhan 2019) However, Bashar Assad’s economic reforms effectively favored urban populations and somewhat neglected the rural population. As a result, workers and peasants’ unions, the backbone of co-opted tribals, lost part of their funding. Tribal leaders partaking in this network were thus gradually alienated from the constituency, especially youth labeled by derogatory term *Awlad al-Sulta* (‘progenies of the authority’) (ibid.). Since ISIS was on the verge of defeat with the fall of Raqqa (October 2017) and Deir Ezzor (November 2017), the Syrian regime apparently “*(...) instigates tribes to pressure the SDF to hand over the Raqqa governorate to the regime.*” (ibid.) However, it appears that even as of early 2020, such efforts yielded only mixed results mainly due to continuous US backing of the SDF.⁴¹

ISIS, in turn, heavily relied on the co-optation of tribal leaders, including the younger generation. They were granted more authority over local affairs, bribery, and raised status as crucial decision-makers over their constituency in exchange for their pledge of allegiance.⁴² These ISIS’ strategies towards tribal leaders and management style of rural areas were already employed in Iraq, post-2007, when its organizational predecessors learned the bitter lesson of losing the support of Sunni tribes who joined forces with the Iraqi government and the US forces instead (Kaválek 2015). With losing the last territory in March 2019, ISIS lost attractiveness for the bulk of Syrian tribes and their notables (as one source noted, most Sunni tribesmen in Raqqa or Deir Ezzor joined ISIS for material gains at the moment, rather than because of genuine conviction⁴³).

7.1.5 Other Variables: Safe Haven, Geography, External Support

Geographically speaking, the terrain in Kurdish areas in northeast Syria is not favorable for insurgency – it is mostly flat and lacks forests making it difficult for insurgents to establish any bases or hideouts. Core Kurdish areas in al-Jazira are quite densely populated agriculturally cultivated. Moreover, the most important Kurdish settlements in northeast Syria (al-Jazira, Kurd Dagh, or Afrin, and Kobani) are

⁴¹ See excellent report detailing shifting allegiances of northeastern Syria Arab tribes by the Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (2019).

⁴² See for example case study of Deir Ezzor by al-Baalbaky and Mhidi (2018).

⁴³ Interview with Kamiran Sadoun, Syrian Kurdish journalist and researcher, Erbil, KRI, February 29, 2020.

geographically separated. There was safe haven within Syrian borders lacking the government's control. Only Afrin district in the very northwest of Syria has a more rugged mountainous terrain with worse infrastructure. However, other factors, such as the incumbent government's power and well-established repressive policies, played a more critical role.

The non-existence of safe haven was partially alleviated by the relative proximity to the PKK's safe havens in the KRI's mountainous areas. Even before 2004, the PKK operatives were traversing the porous border with Iraq in Shingal, through Dohuk province to the mountains serving as an essential lifeline for the PKK when it was no longer welcomed to operate in Syria after 1999. This lifeline enabled smuggling, movement of fighters and operatives, and at times also provided refuge for the PYD-linked figures in the KRI (e.g., PYD co-chair Salih Muslim was exiled there after being briefly imprisoned in Syria in 2010 and subsequently allowed to return to Syria by the regime in April 2011; Gunter 2014). This land connection to the PKK's main safe havens was crucial for the organization's survival in Syria. It also allowed the PYD and its armed wing YPG to quickly seize the momentum with additional well-trained, well-equipped manpower when the regime's power decreased and ultimately withdrew from northeast Syria in July 2012.

This lifeline served as strong external support on the onset of insurgency, providing the PYD and its armed forces with a better starting position than the ENKS. Up to 2,000 PKK operatives returned to Syria at the onset of the conflict, along with weaponry and know-how (Allsopp 2015). After all, the PKK had enough Syrian Kurds in their ranks. It was estimated that in 2007 Syrian Kurds comprised 20% of PKK's cadres (Brandon 2007). Another turning point in external support was US-led coalition support for the YPG in their fight against ISIS since the siege of Kobanî from September 2014. The US and several other countries continuously supported the insurgents with boots on the ground and aerial support. In 2015-19, the US spent over \$2 billion on the train and equip program. The vast majority went to the SDF. 2,000 US troops were deployed in Syria as of December 2017 (Humud, Blanchard and Nikitin 2018). The US maintains that the only reason for its engagement with the SDF is to ensure the defeat of ISIS (hence the push for the SDF also to conquer mainly Sunni Arab areas in the eastern Euphrates river valley).

Regardless of the US motivations, the support not only boosted the SDF's capabilities and resources but also provided an instrumental security guarantee against other actors in Syria: deterring Turkey, Iranian proxies, Russia, and the regime from expanding uncontrollably east of Euphrates at the expense of the SDF. The gross impact of the absence of external (mainly the US) support on the viability of the PYD's insurgency was manifested by the Turkish invasion of Afrin in January 2018. The invasion led to taking this rugged area in two months, inflicting heavy losses on insurgents (up to 1,500 fighters; UCDP 2020b), arguably due to the ability to conduct aerial operations upon agreement with Russia.

7.2 Insurgent Behaviour

7.2.1 Armed Conflict Intensity

The PYD insurgency is an integral part of the multi-layered, multi-actor, transnationalized Syrian war that erupted in 2011. Given the complexity of the conflict, the YPG/SDF engaged in several armed conflicts of varying intensity with both violent non-state actors and states sometimes simultaneously: with the Syrian (Arab) rebel groups (2012-16), ISIS (2014-18), Syrian government (2012-18), and also with Turkey and its local proxies (2018). These dyads simultaneously fought with each other waging ‘conflicts within conflicts’ (ISIS and other Syrian rebel groups, the Syrian government, and rebels, including ISIS, Turkey against ISIS).

The YPG/SDF significantly grew in numbers over the years of conflict and got more territory under their control. In 2013, it was estimated that the PYD had 10,000-20 000 fighters at their disposal (Savelsberg 2014, 99). The YPG’s initial fighting force was at thousands by late 2011, 2,000 fighters relocated from the KRI and constituted the most important addition to its initial capabilities. On the eve of the Raqqa operation in November 2016, the SDF had allegedly about 20,000 YPG fighters and 10,000 Arabs in their ranks (Economist 2016). In March 2017, the YPG spokesman Redur Khalil announced the goal of attaining 100,000 fighters in the second half of 2017, having 60,000 warriors at the end of 2016 (Perry 2017). Since 2012, the YPG was facing manpower shortages. Consequently, it opened local recruitment and training centers. *“It loosened strict PKK recruitment criteria and offered a diluted version of political principles deriving from Öcalan’s thoughts. Facing growing manpower shortages and having extended its military reach to mixed and predominantly Arab areas, the YPG also had to start a massive recruitment drive among non-Kurds, placing them under the SDF umbrella.”* (International Crisis Group 2017b, 10)

By 2019, US officials estimated that the number of fighters was around 100,000 (Seligman 2019). While the PKK fighters (within YPG/SDF ranks), as a general rule, do not receive regular soldier’s pay, the local YPG fighters receive monthly salaries. As two journalists recounted, the more zealous Qandil-trained fighters were always easy to distinguish from the Syrian YPG fighters, who received salaries, were permitted to have families, and were not recruited to stay within ranks indefinitely. The numbers are mere estimates due to the fuzzy lines between the YPG/SDF and Asayish (internal security force). The total number of both combined on payroll was estimated at 100,000 in 2019 (Hatahet 2019). The YPG/SDF is thus a relatively well-organized and experienced fighting force. This significant player in Syria controlled almost 30% of its territory as of the end of 2018 (International Crisis Group 2018).

The intensity of armed conflicts waged by the PYD significantly differed. With (Islamist) Syrian rebel groups in 2012-2016, the conflict was systematic, albeit low to medium intensity, continuous struggle since late 2012 over certain limited territories with particular groups. However, it was far from the war with ISIS - systematic conventional symmetric armed struggle with clear-cut frontlines conducted

by large military units in hundreds, including aerial support from the US-led coalition. In contrast, in Afrin since January 2018, the YPG engaged in a short-lived asymmetric conventional fight to be defeated and to the small-scale insurgency. Nevertheless, another matter is occasional clashes between the YPG/SDF and the Syrian regime, which stemmed from localized disputes and could not be considered a systematic conflict between two adversaries.

An important factor of the conflict dynamics is that the core Kurdish areas of al-Jazira (in al-Hasaka governorate), including al-Hasaka city itself, and Qamishli were spared major combat operations and destruction. As Khalaf notes, this is largely appreciated as a success of the PYD by wider, even (non-)Kurdish, population not necessarily supportive of the PYD's policies, ideology, or governance projects (Khalafa 2016). The situation is diametrically different from the Kobanî area under siege of ISIS in September 2014-March 2015. The town itself, including the ethnically mixed area in the north of Raqqa governorate, was grossly damaged in waves of fighting with ISIS. Afrin district in the northwest was also largely spared violence and destruction engaging in limited skirmishes (with Arab rebel and Turkmen rebel groups on its borders with Idlib, Aleppo vicinity, or notably since the second half of 2015 in the rebel-held Azaz corridor connecting Turkey to Aleppo city) (Balanche 2015). This changed in January 2018, with the full-fledged Turkish invasion of Afrin. This led to the expulsion of the PYD/YPG and engineered ethnic changes resulting in the 'de-Kurdification' of the area (Al-Hilu 2019).

Since autumn of 2012, the YPG was engaged in clashes with (Arab) rebel groups. The bulk of the fighting occurred since October 2012 in the Kobanî area, and in July 2013 in Ra's al-'Ayn. The YPG offensive drove out rebels from the Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn itself and in upcoming months along the Nahr al-Khabur river southeast towards al-Hasaka (Tal Tamr). By the end of 2013, the PYD manage to drive mainly the Jabhat al-Nusra fighters from the Arab belt between Tal Abyad and Ra's al-'Ayn during Sere Kaniya Martyr's Offensive, creating a strategic uninterrupted land connection between Kobanî and al-Jazira (Bernstein 2013). The conflict dynamics were on and off accompanied by short-lived ceasefires and talks throughout 2012 with rebel groups operating in the area (van Wilgenburg 2012). However, moderate groups within the FSA's local military council were gradually sidelined at the expense of radical Islamist actors, namely Jabhat al-Nusra (precursor of ISIS in Syria). Additional fighting episodically occurred in the Aleppo vicinity on the borders of Afrin district. In 2012 and 2013, the YPG was engaged in a low-intensity conflict with other rebel groups costing 59 battle-related deaths in 2012 and 246 a year later (UCDP 2020b). The conflict primarily stemmed from incompatibilities regarding territorial control, the YPG's desire to assume full control of these areas, and ultimately connect al-Jazira with so far isolated Kurdish-majority town of Kobanî. Control over districts of al-Hasaka city was also a significant apple of discord. A by then low-level but sustained insurgency of ISIS (then coined as Jabhat al-Nusra) was becoming a major issue in areas northeast of al-Hasaka in rural areas towards the Iraqi border.

Upon Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the ISIS Caliphate on June 29, 2014, and subsequent re-branding of the bulk of Jabhat al-Nusra as ISIS, the group became by far the strongest in Raqqa and al-Hasaka governorates engaging in a high-intensity armed conflict with the YPG. The siege of Kobanî since September 2014 was the first major ISIS' offensive against the YPG. This essentially marked the cessation of armed conflict between other Arab rebel groups as they were sidelined from the area by ISIS (in 2014, only 39 casualties were reported as a result of fighting between the YPG and the FSA elements; *ibid.*). After January 2014, when the FSA started to clash with ISIS and lost ground significantly in Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa governorates, the FSA elements started cooperating with the YPG. The cooperation was most notably marked by the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room, established on September 10, 2014 (Civiroglu and van Wilgenburg 2014). The exception was the rebel stronghold Aleppo, where ISIS never managed to gain a prominent position. Therefore, since October 2012, occasional clashes between the YPG and rebels continued until the city of Aleppo was retaken by the Syrian government supported by Russia in June-December 2016 offensive.

Nonetheless, patterns of occasional cooperation, including providing shelter to the FSA during the regime's attacks, also occurred (Allsopp 2015). During the Aleppo offensive, the YPG coordinated operations with the regime forces to cut the Azaz supply route north of Aleppo (Tabler 2016). Armed conflict with a myriad of Syrian rebel groups in Aleppo city to continue controlling Kurdish neighborhoods al-Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsud continued in 2015 and 2016, costing 77 and 291 lives, respectively (UCDP 2020b).

The conflict between the YPG and other Syrian (Arab) rebel groups stemmed mostly from the fact that the PYD had never joined the Syrian opposition (Syrian National Coalition) calling for the toppling of the Assad's regime. It was viewed as a collaborator with Damascus (Tabler 2016). Anti-Kurdish sentiments among Arabs opposition due to perceived Kurdish centrifugal tendencies were also a significant factor. In turn, the PYD wished to remain unopposed even in mixed areas and dominantly Arab areas (e.g., belt between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn), a fundamental interest to connect territory between al-Jazira and Kobanî.

In 2014-15, Jabhat al-Nusra was officially re-branded as ISIS and launched major offensives against the YPG's positions. In this period, ISIS asserted dominance over large swathes of territory at the expense of other rebel groups and the Syrian government in Syria, including east of the Euphrates, where it was clashing with the YPG. In the previous years, the YPG was engaged in lower-level intensity conflicts with (Arab) rebel groups. The conflict became of high intensity with ISIS, accompanied by major offensives, conventional warfare, and urban fighting. ISIS managed to effectively cut off the PYD-controlled Kurdish city of Kobanî in September 2014, laying down siege. Since March 2014, the YPG was losing ground in Kobanî district. By September 2014, the city was encircled, and over 400,000 people

fled to Turkey due to intense fighting. The battle for Kobanî became an important symbol of the YPG's fight against ISIS and earned it public attention across the world. When the city's fall was imminent, the US decided to intervene with airstrikes in late September 2014 and closely support the YPG, including parachuting weapons and ammunition (BBC News 2014). By January 2015, Kobanî city was secured, and the YPG launched a series of offensives, supported by US airstrikes, to re-gain lost territory.

Simultaneously by June 2015, ISIS launched a combat operation to wrestle al-Hasaka city from the YPG and the Syrian regime. The ISIS offensive failed and was driven out of the city's vicinity by the end of August 2015. Kurdish core areas, namely Derik (al-Malikiya), were also threatened by ISIS advances in rural areas on the Tal Hamis-Tal Brak-Yarubiyah line. The fighting brought immense destruction to Kobanî city itself and prompted waves of displacement in hundreds of thousands only in Raqqa and al-Hasaka governorates.⁴⁴ For example, due to the ISIS offensive in al-Hasaka city vicinity in June 2015, 120,000 were displaced (Westall 2017). In Kobanî, 90% of the population (over 50,000 people) fled to Turkey (Handicap International 2015). In 2014, the conflict cost 2,337 lives. In 2015, the situation stabilized, and ISIS was pushed back, and thus the conflict, albeit still of high intensity, cost 1,384 lives (see Table 7.2.1a below).

Throughout 2015, the tides of the battle between the SDF and ISIS started to turn. The SDF went from defense to major offensives culminating with operations towards re-taking majority Arab areas east of Euphrates. Between April and June 2015, the SDF, receiving substantial material and aerial support from the US-led coalition, managed to capture Tal Abyad and re-connect Kobanî with al-Jazira, including controlling strategic parts of the M4 highway connecting Aleppo to Mosul in Iraq (BBC News 2015). The SDF further secured its frontlines. In December 2015, the SDF took Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates, a major strategic asset providing up to 630 MW; almost half of the estimated 1585 MW reportedly needed to satisfy the electricity demand in SDF-held territories (Youssef 2017). Furthermore, it secured a perimeter on the western bank of the river, paving the way to April-August 2016 offensive to control majority-Arab Manbij (Gol 2016). These gains secured Kurdish 'heartland,' bolstered territorial connection between al-Jazira and Kobanî, and provided much needed strategic depth against possible ISIS counterattacks from vast rural frontlines.

In 2014-15, the conflict was indeed high-intensity with 3,721 battle-related deaths (see Table 7.2.1a). Before the full-fledged US-led coalition support of the SDF's advances, ISIS and the YPG/SDF were equal dyads, employing large military units with similar weaponry (small and medium arms, mounted heavy machine guns but for the most part almost completely lacking heavier equipment, e.g., APCs). ISIS captured and used an estimated 200 tanks and 70 APCs captured from the Syrian military (Mitzer 2017).

⁴⁴ By the end of 2014, 28% of al-Hasaka province (over 500,000) and 11% of Raqqa province (170,000) were displaced due to the conflict and ISIS ascendancy (see Strategic Needs Analysis Project 2014).

It was heavier equipment than the lightly-armed YPG forces, heavily relying on makeshift armored carriers in the conflict (Mitzer 2019). The YPG never received heavy armor from the US-led Coalition. However, this ISIS' advantage soon diminished since most vehicles were destroyed before even reaching YPG/SDF positions by the Coalition airstrikes (ibid.).

The level of destruction was significant. Up to 80% of the majority-Kurdish city of Kobanî with 60,000 inhabitants pre-war (90% of that was displaced during the battle) was destroyed by January 2015 when ISIS was driven out (Handicap International 2015). Subsequent fighting was taking place mostly in villages and small towns. However, a significant level of destruction occurred even in such settlements on the top of ISIS' habit of heavily mining areas it was retreating from. The SDF's advances in Arab-majority Tal Abyad-Ra's al-'Ayn belt (Tal Abyad district had 120,000 inhabitants, 70% Arabs, and only 25% Kurds) also prompted numerous Sunni Arabs to flee since many of local notables and tribes were cooperating with ISIS, or at least staunchly opposing the YPG (Balanche 2018). Furthermore, the SDF was blamed by Amnesty International in October 2015 for ethnic cleansing in Tal Abyad district, including forced displacement, demolition of homes, and seizure of properties (Amnesty International 2015), later also for imposing strict conscription of the Arab population to discourage people from returning (Balanche 2018).

In 2016-18, external support played a major role in tipping the scales in the SDF's favor. The US-led coalition's aerial superiority effectively continued to prevent any ISIS' attempts to launch large-scale counterattacks and supported all the SDF's advances. The SDF continued to advance deep into core Sunni Arab areas east of the Euphrates. The first operations aimed at capturing Raqqa, ISIS' symbolic capital. On November 6, 2016, the SDF announced operation 'Wrath of Euphrates', a three-phase campaign to capture the city of Raqqa, which was finally wrestled from ISIS in October 2017.

Consequently, while in 2016, the bulk of fighting between the SDF and ISIS occurred in Aleppo governorate (mainly Kobanî district) with 2,287 casualties, in 2017 majority of deaths (6,786) occurred in Raqqa governorate (see Table 7.2.1a). On September 9, 2017, the al-Jazira Tempest operation was announced, aiming at capturing parts of Deir Ezzor governorate east of the Euphrates (Kurdistan24 2017), except for the city itself. The city was retaken by Syrian regime forces backed by Russian and Iranian allies on the ground in November 2017.⁴⁵ The campaign became a prolonged struggle plagued by urban fighting in densely populated settlements alongside the eastern Euphrates river bank. Finally, by the end of 2018, only a small pocket under ISIS control remained in Hajin. Finally, ISIS took its last stand in Baghouz, a town on the Iraq-Syria border.

⁴⁵ See detailed account regarding the re-capture of Deir Ezzor city by the government forces and how was the regime re-establishing its authority by Awad (2019).

The military defeat of ISIS was officially announced in March 2019. Baghuz, the last ISIS territorial stronghold, was captured after a prolonged campaign. Consequently, in 2018, the bulk of the fighting occurred in Deir Ezzor province, with 3,394 deaths. Simultaneously, the intensity of armed conflict was decreasing as ISIS’s ability to stand ground was dropping. It was losing territory en masse. In 2016-18 the conflict was clearly of high intensity (for detailed casualties breakdown, see Table 7.2.1a below), inflicting extreme levels of destruction on Sunni Arab settlements. For example, the city of Raqqa, populated by up to 300,000 people pre-war, was so damaged that the UNHCR described it as exceeding “*anything they had ever seen before,*” (Khalaf 2018) and by January 2018, only 75,000 people returned (World Food Programme 2018). In SDF-controlled Arab territories in Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor governorates, ISIS was unable to maintain the gravity of its insurgency and kept only a low-key presence, being able to conduct only small-level hit & run attacks, maintain sleeper cells. Casualty count also supports this argument in Table 7.2.1a, indicating that where ISIS lost territorial control, only very few casualties occurred (e.g., in Aleppo, only 53 and 7 in 2017 and 2018, in Raqqa only 56 in 2018).

Governorate	Casualty Type	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2014-15	2016-18
Aleppo	ISIS	1,453	793	1,214	19	0	2,246	2,347
	SDF			502	32	2		
	Civilian			485	0	5		
	Unknown			86	2	0		
al-Hasaka	ISIS	774	429	330	82	84	1,203	1,529
	SDF			305	121	10		
	Civilian			177	231	103		
	Unknown			52	29	5		
Raqqa	ISIS	110	162	426	1925	5	272	7,704
	SDF			229	992	20		
	Civilian			118	3,623	24		
	Unknown			89	246	7		
Deir Ezzor	ISIS	0	0	29	434	1,549	0	4,908
	SDF			13	224	774		
	Civilian			6	591	970		
	Unknown			6	211	101		
Totals		2,337	1,384	3,980	8,762	3,734	3,721	16,476

Table 7.2.1a: Casualties in SDF-ISIS Conflict 2014-18 (data from UCDP 2020b; prepared by the author).

The YPG or the SDF never engaged in systematic fighting with the Syrian government's forces. On the contrary, their co-existence was in 2012-18 peaceful for the most part, and violence only episodically erupted. On occasions, clashes appeared, especially in al-Hasaka city, but were motivated by ad hoc local disputes. For example, in January 2015 and August 2016 (Lund 2015; 2016), clashes were ignited by disputes between Asayish and local pro-government militias National Defense Forces (NDF) (mostly Sunni Arab) over control of checkpoints in the city (i.e., including over revenues) and the rising profile of new Arab pro-government militias. The respective sides then called their military forces to intervene. On August 18-20, 2016, it was the only time when the Syrian government used its air force to target the YPG's positions (Al-Jazeera 2016). Subsequently, the YPG and Syrian soldiers garrisoned in the city engaged in tit-for-tat shelling of each other's positions. However, in such instances of tensions, both sides refrained from fuelling the fighting, and the situation calmed down in a matter of days. Similar episodic violent incidents also occurred in Qamishli, which contains a relatively large government's garrison, including an international airport. On April 20-22, 2016, clashes erupted between Asayish and the NDF units, including Christian Sootoro fighters in Qamishli, resulting in almost 50 deaths (Reuters 2016).

At times, tactical cooperation occurred under the premise of 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' – especially throughout 2015. Regime soldiers and the YPG coordinated and fought side by side to drive ISIS and other Sunni Arab rebels from al-Hasaka's vicinity. Earlier, other arrangements between Damascus and the YPG were in place, for example, the protection of oil fields in the Rumayla area on behalf of the regime (KurdWatch 2013). Moreover, "*During the bloody battle for Aleppo in the second half of 2016, Kurdish neighbourhoods [Ashrafiyah and Shaikh Maqsoud] under PYD control were largely excluded from fighting and the Kurds did not evacuate their forces unlike other rebels.*" (Kaválek and Mareš 2018, 109)

The UCDP data suggest that in 2012-2018, there were 383 battle-related deaths in total in clashes between the YPG/SDF and the Syrian government's forces. The bulk occurred in hotspots of al-Hasaka and Qamishli (157 and 105 respectively), where both sides co-exist in tacit agreement (UCDP 2020b). Looking at the timeline, clashes almost exclusively occurred in clusters, heightened periods of episodic violence over local affairs, which provoked a tit-for-tat response and in days calmed down as quickly as they appeared. That points towards continuous modus vivendi between the two sides who remain committed not to engage in full-scale fighting. Consequently, we see that the conflict was of very low intensity (in 2012-13, 2015, and 2017 even below 25 deaths; *ibid.*) and not conducted systematically.

On January 20, 2018, the Turkish military, heavily relying on its Syrian proxy groups, invaded Afrin district during operation Olive Branch (in Turkish, Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı). The PYD, lacking the US

support in cantons of Afrin and Shabha (Tal Rifaat vicinity), relied on co-operation with Russia to deter Turkish incursions – Russian military police units were deployed in Afrin at least since March 2017 (Al-Jazeera 2017). The PYD, with Russian mediation, tried to strike a deal to re-deploy Syrian government units alongside the border. However, the regime insisted the PYD hand over also the administration of the area. The PYD refused.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Russian forces withdrew and, most importantly, gave a green light for the Turkish Air Force to operate in Afrin. The YPG commander Sipan Hemo accused Russia of betraying the agreement in place with the YPG and said *“They have clearly sold us out.”* (MacDonald 2018)

Consequently, despite the YPG and the YPJ being well-entrenched and prepared in the area, there was no match for the Turkish military and its proxies that were enjoying aerial support in conventional warfare. The YPG and the YPJ had undoubtedly well-trained and relatively well-equipped fighters in Afrin (although lacking modern heavy weapons, such as artillery, tanks, or advanced APCs, which were never provided by the US for the SDF). The mountainous, rugged terrain of Afrin district was favorable for insurgents facing superior Turkish military and its proxies. However, as one source noted, the Turkish complete aerial superiority could not be matched with the YPG/YPJ being prepared for positional trench warfare, counting that Russia would enforce a no-fly zone over the area of Olive Branch Operation.⁴⁷

Between January 20 and March 24, when major combat operations ended with decisive Turkish victory, according to the UCDP,⁴⁸ 1,507 YPG/YPJ fighters and 515 fighters on the Turkish side, including 52 Turkish soldiers, were killed (Hürriyet 2018). Additionally, 221 civilians were reported killed during the combat operations (UCDP 2020b). The Afrin Canton was almost entirely Kurdish, and the PYD enjoyed a strong presence there. Therefore, most of the Kurdish population fled the area, fearing repression from the undisciplined Turkey-backed proxies consisting mainly of Arabs and Turkmen who regularly engaged in coercing the civilian population, criminal activities, and stealing properties (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2019). Engineered demographic changes occurred in the district at the expense of the Kurds. The common practice was that families of Turkey-backed proxies, alien to the area, were assigned land and properties from themselves and their families in Afrin (Al-Hilu 2019). As of May 2019, these amounted to over 85,000 people, mainly Turkey-backed fighters and their families relocated permanently to Afrin district, the bulk coming from Aleppo governorate (51%) and Ghouta (20%) (ibid.). More than 150,000 people fled the area (OCHA 2019), and as of January 2019, almost none returned, initially stranded in the Tal Rifaat area. The Syrian regime forces prevented displaced persons from continuing to Aleppo city, the YPG prevented them from returning to Afrin, and Turkey-

⁴⁶ Interview with a journalist, March 2018.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The UCDP (2020b) data is being utilized here since both Turkey and YPG offer excessively high and unverifiable number of killed combatants, almost triple the given number.

backed factions did not allow their return, extorting bribes for letting them pass (Al-Hilu 2019).⁴⁹ The UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner published a report in June 2018, documenting abuses against civilians, Kurds in particular, ranging from violating property rights, suppressing freedom of speech, intimidating journalists, and widespread abuses and lawlessness which also stemmed from fighting between various Turkish proxies and the fact that the “(...) *number of members of armed opposition groups operating in the area are former well-known local criminals, smugglers, or drug dealers.*” (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2018, 5)

After losing the conventional battle, the PYD-linked groups started an insurgency campaign throughout 2018 under the auspices of the YPG and the YPJ. Later since November 2018, with newly established franchise Afrin Liberation Forces (Hêzên Rizgariya Efrînê, HPE) (Twitter 2020), they engaged in ambushes and bombings primarily of the Turkey-backed proxies in Afrin. Additionally, two more groups surfaced – Afrin Falcons (June 2018) (Rudaw 2016), the Wrath of Olive Operations Room (August 2018) conducting several spectacular bombings, hurting civilians in Afrin city, and explicitly carrying out assassination campaigns against Turkey-backed Syrian proxies (van Wilgenburg 2018a). The SDF or the YPG, for that matter, denied any involvement with such groups, but it is highly likely that there are close ties, if not full dependency (van Wilgenburg 2018b). This connection is, however, concealed (perhaps in parallel to the TAK in Turkey discussed in chapter 8.2.2) since, as Heras noted, the YPG “*is under pressure from the United States to disassociate itself from the most controversial assassinations in Afrin. (...) Put bluntly, the US does not want to give the appearance that its closest partner in Syria is running death squads.*” (van Wilgeburg 2018c)

Nevertheless, the YPG and the YPJ managed to start a small scale insurgency campaign in Afrin by mid-2018 despite Turkish and its proxies’ counterinsurgency efforts. Instead of using the SDF ‘franchise’, it exclusively utilized the YPG/YPJ trademark, most likely due to the US pressure since Washington backs the SDF east of the Euphrates (although it continued to be dominated by the YPG/YPJ commanders). Already on March 18, 2018, the YPG commander Othman Sheikh Issa announced that “*Our forces are present all over Afrin’s geography. These forces will strike the positions of the Turkish enemy and its mercenaries at every opportunity.*” (Al-Jazeera 2018) Insurgency operations on the onset took place mostly in rural areas, the hallmark being various employments of ambushes and IEDs rather than engaging in ‘conventional’ clashes. Then, by May 2018, the YPG also shifted to targeted assassination campaigns of Turkey-back proxies’ commanders and rebels in the area, specifically “*targeting those resettled in Afrin by the Turkish-led coalition.*” (YPG Rojava 2018)

The YPG conducted over 50 operations between March 24, 2018, and the end of the year, resulting in the deaths of 84 Turkish soldiers and their proxies and 20 casualties on the side of the YPG

⁴⁹ Interview with a journalist, March 2018.

(UCDP 2020b). However, this did not shift the gravity to large-scale insurgency leading to renewing administrative or area control within the Afrin district. The intensity of the YPG's operations remained similar also in 2019 (ibid.). It is highly unlikely that the YPG would strengthen its insurgency or renew it in the Afrin district. This is mainly due to strong Turkish incumbent power with boots on the ground, relying on Syrian proxies, and also due to demographic changes that are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon and pose only a low-level threat. Turkey maintains a firm grip over the area not only militarily but also when it comes to governance and providing public services, including reconstruction, religious services, education, and healthcare, and effectively administering the area through the provincial office in adjacent Hatay province.⁵⁰

The following table, utilizing the framework for the conceptualization of armed conflict intensity constructed in Chapter 4.3.1, provides an overview of how conflict consequences and conflict means varied in the examined period of 2004-18. Only the period of 2012-18 of the PYD's insurgency is considered. In 2004-11 there was no ongoing armed conflict.

Armed Conflict Intensity of PYD Insurgency in Syria (2012-18)						
Armed Conflict/Dyads and Period	Intensity	Conflict Consequences			Conflict Means of Insurgent	
		Battle-related deaths (BRD)	IDPs and Refugees	Level of Destruction	Weapons Used	Level of Deployments
PYD-ISIS 2014-2015	High	3,721	Hundreds of thousands	High	Small to medium arms, aerial support from allies	Thousand deployed, clear frontlines, conventional warfare
PYD-ISIS 2016-2018	High	16,476	Hundreds of thousands	High	Small to medium arms, aerial support from allies	Thousand deployed, clear frontlines, conventional warfare
PYD-other rebels 2012-2016	Low	712	Thousands (citation needed)	Medium level of destruction	Small arms	Tens to hundreds during offensives, on and off fighting
PYD-Syrian government 2012-2018	Low (isolated incidents)	383 (2012-13, 2015,	none	None to very low	Small arms, sporadic	Small units, militias, internal

⁵⁰ For more details on how Turkey administers and ensures not only military but long-term administrative presence in areas of Olive Branch, Euphrates Shield and Peace Spring operation see van Leeuwen and van Veen 2019.

		2017 below 25 battle- related deaths)			shelling	security forces, rather than military
PYD-Turkey in Afrin Jan. 2018-Mar. 2018	High	2,333	Over 150,000	Significant destruction to housing, economy, culture, and infrastructure due to the aerial campaign	Small t arms prevail, but the usage of machine guns, explosives	Thousands deployed, clear frontlines
PYD-Turkey in Afrin Apr. 2018-Dec. 2018	Low	84	No significa nt number (but few IDPs returned)	No significant destruction	IEDs, small arms	Small units, ad hoc, hit & run attacks

Table 7.2.1b: Armed Conflict Intensity during PYD Insurgency in Syria in 2012-18 (prepared by the author).

7.2.2 Use of Terrorism

During the PYD insurgency in Syria in 2004-2018, terrorism tactics were not utilized. Before 2011, staging terrorist attacks would lead to harsh measures from the Syrian government with which the PKK still maintained contact and was somehow able to function on its soil. While engaged in armed conflicts with other rebel groups, ISIS or Turkey in Afrin in 2018, the fighting was mostly conventional. In the armed struggle between various Syrian rebel groups and ISIS, the campaigns resembled conventional warfare with full-blown military operations, deployment of large organized military units with clear-cut frontlines. Thus, the PYD had no reason to engage in terrorist operations as it would seriously tarnish its favourable international reputation.

When terrorism tactics were employed, the only instance was by its offshoots such as Afrin Falcons or the Wrath of Olives Operations Room since mid-2018. Both engaged in urban bombings in Afrin city, an unusual modus operandi for the YPG/YPJ during its insurgency. While these are highly likely connected to the YPG/YPJ, the latter denies any connection to protect its reputation (van Wilgenburg 2018c). These incidents occurred when the YPG/YPJ insurgency was very weak in Afrin after losing the territory to Turkey and its Syrian proxy groups.

7.2.3. Violence towards the Contested Population

Facing active rivalry from opposition Kurdish political parties within the ENKS and youth activist groups organizing themselves rather spontaneously in 2012-14, the PYD opted for coercive behavior towards

the civilian population and dissent towards its rule. Especially since attempts to reach a power-sharing agreement between the ENKS and the PYD failed in late 2012, the PYD worked systematically at snuffing out any opposition, particularly among the Kurdish constituency, to ensure its de facto monopoly. These efforts were, in turn, accompanied by extensive attempts at co-optation, creating mass political structures. Savelsberg notes that while at the onset of the Syrian conflict, independent Kurdish youth groups were a crucial driving force, soon “(...) *traditional political parties and powers like the Kurdish National Council and the PYD/PKK became again dominant. While the Kurdish National Council has successfully assimilated and marginalized the majority of the youth groups, the PYD and its militia, the YPG, dominate all other Kurdish parties. Both have been acting as obstacles, not as driving forces for democratization.*” (Savelsberg 2014, 101-2)

Often mentioned instance of the PYD’s coercive behavior were events in Amuda, a town of 30,000, unfolding in June 2013. Protestors demanded the release of activists detained by the YPG earlier that month and blamed it for collaborating with the regime (being ‘Shabbiha,’ a derogatory term for regime loyalists) on June 27-28 (Glioti 2013). Relatively low-key protests occurred regularly in Amuda, but this time, its gravity prompted the YPG to fire into the crowds killing at least eight. The subsequent YPG’s steps included raids and arbitrary detentions, curfew, vandalizing opposition party office (Yekitî), beating and arresting some of its members, and confiscating the property (Savelsberg 2014). Consequently, “*The attack in Amuda not only put an end to the cautious attempts to denounce PYD politics at demonstrations and protest against them with a hunger strike, but the PYD was also able to end the political activities of others for several months.*” (Savelsberg 2014, 100) The target was not only the Kurdish opposition but also various FSA’s youth committees altogether threatening to erode the PYD’s dominance over the area. The events in Amuda became a crucial, highly visible show-force and message for any actors not to oppose the PYD rule. Even years later, it is still often mentioned as a symbol of PYD’s coercive approach.

Regardless, such spectacular publicized violent crackdowns were not common under the PYD rule. Instead, it seems that the strategy revolves mainly around careful, often concealed, and denied campaigns of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and forced ejection into exile (often to the KRI) to eliminate any open dissent to its rule. PYD-established local communes are also instrumental in monitoring the population and ensuring its obedience since “*Communes’ security committees sometimes include PYD loyalists who act as the party’s “eyes in the neighborhoods,” according to the second journalist. They gather information such as: “Who lives in the neighborhood? Anything strange going on? Politically, who do people support?”* (Wilkofsky 2018) Scores of such cases were documented by analysts (Koontz 2019) and human rights organizations, such as in Human Rights Watch (2014) report or Amnesty International (2017). By 2017, most of the ENKS parties were effectively ejected from the areas under the PYD, its members intimidated (Yekiti Media 2019), and ultimately, by the administration’s official decision, most of their offices closed down in March 2017 (Arta FM 2017). Most abuses occurred in 2012-14 since by then, the dissent was mostly suppressed. Moreover,

the threat of ISIS shifted the focus elsewhere and earned a great deal of legitimacy for the YPG. The DFNS keeps a tight grip over the media landscape, utilizing PKK-linked local and Europe-based outlets, such as Hawar News, Ronahi, Med Nuce, or Sterk TV.

One could also distinguish between Afrin, Derik, and a symbol of the revolution - Kobani, where the PYD's rule was much more encompassing and authoritarian compared to more careful management of dissent in Qamishli and al-Hasaka. In Amuda, an activist summed up the PYD's approach: *"under their rule there is no space for anyone but them; they have left us with two options – either shutting up and staying or becoming exiled."* (Khalaf 2016, 13) In Qamishli and al-Hasaka, where the PKK never had significant support and where the middle-class-oriented ENKS tradition parties prevailed, the PYD's rule appears to be less uncompromising when it comes to allowing certain space for controlled and limited dissent, especially in al-Hasaka.⁵¹ Moreover, encouraging participation in PYD-linked political structures, unions, or cultural associations is less 'live-and-let-live' than, for example, Kobani. On occasions, periodic oppressive campaigns against opposition politicians and activists continued even in 2014-18 but were less frequent (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2017; Arafat 2017). Actors critical of the PYD were already significantly weakened. These strategies fall under the usual PKK's sensitivity towards any opposition or organized alternative targeting the same constituency – the Kurdish population.

In Arab-majority areas, the SDF lacked a natural constituency since it is still perceived as primarily Kurdish-dominated 'venture'. Moreover, Sunni tribal leaders were exposed to the influence of ISIS and the regime, which tries to convince tribesmen of Raqqa to join regime ranks with their fighters and eject the SDF from the area. The SDF *"(...)* has sought to incorporate tribal figures into its ranks in order to demonstrate buy-in among Arab constituencies; it also relies on such individuals to manage communities' frustrations at the local level."⁵² (Synaps Network 2020) Opposition to the SDF in Arab areas is relatively strong due to several intertwined factors: the SDF's alien ideology incompatible with traditional tribal Sunni Arab societies perceived Kurdish dominance and continuous ISIS' low-key presence. While the local councils, for example in Raqqa or Manbij, always include influential local Arab notables, there are also Kurds (alien to the areas for the most part) within the administration, commanding the Asayish forces, or the SDF's units deployed in the area, effectively still maintaining decisive influence on the ground.⁵²

Synaps Network provides a case of the Afadla tribe in Raqqa illustrating the plight of the Arab tribes to diversify their allegiances during the conflict: *"The tribe's foremost family, the Huwaidi, is said to have deliberately divided itself to maximize access to and protection from warring parties. While Muhammad Faisal Huwaidi*

⁵¹ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

⁵² This assessment was given throughout several informal communications as well as in interviews, for example in Interview with Kamiran Sadoun, Syrian Kurdish journalist and researcher, Erbil, KRI, February 29, 2020.

today resides in Damascus as a former member of parliament, his brother Bashir stayed in Raqqa throughout the conflict. The latter gained unusual respect for his ability to deal pragmatically with both ISIS and the SDF – without ever being co-opted by them. That relative independence, however, came at a grave cost: Sheikh Bashir was assassinated in late 2018, in an attack that observers have varyingly attributed to ISIS, the SDF, or the regime.” (Synaps Network 2020)

Moreover, the administration itself is comparably more strongly securitized than most of the al-Jazira region. It is due to continuous ISIS presence and troubled relationship between Arab tribes and the SDF, with tribes often linked to the Syrian government, the SDF, or Turkey-backed rebels (Centre for Operational Analysis and Research 2019). At times, various demonstrations occurred, mostly expressing dissatisfaction with the level of public services, the SDF’s (Kurdish) dominance, mass arrests and curfew across cities and towns (Enabbaladi 2018a), forced conscription (Al-Khateb 2019), financial hardship, and limited reconstruction of areas (Enabbaladi 2018b). For example, in Raqqa city, such protests occurred in several waves throughout 2018 (Syria Call 2018; Middle East Monitor 2018) and were suppressed by the SDF and Asayish, usually citing security reasons (ISIS threat) (Reuters 2018). The trouble was brewing in Deir Ezzor countryside as well, with tribes voicing their opposition to the SDF rule and staging waves of protests since April 2019 (Hassan 2019). It appears that as the SDF has trouble facing active rivalry in Arab areas, the threat of ISIS, and tribesmen shifting their allegiance to the regime (see Hassan 2020), it opts for comparably more coercive behavior compared to other Kurdish or even Arab areas in al-Jazira.

In Fırat Region, the mainly Arab-populated belt between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn was subjected to tight control after it was wrestled from ISIS by the YPG in May-June 2015. While most of the Kurds (in the minority there) fled from the area in mid-2013, fearing ISIS advance, many Arabs and Turkmen remained. The YPG was subsequently blamed for staging systematic ethnic cleansing, destroying Arab and Turkmen houses, preventing their return, or forcing them to flee the area, including by declaring them ‘security zones’ (Amnesty International 2015). KurdWatch asserts that rather than Arab or Turkmen-targeted ethnic cleansing, these fell under “(...) *mechanisms of repression that they already successfully used in the Kurdish areas.*” (KurdWatch 2016) These include kidnappings of opponents and critics, prevention of the return of critics, filling important positions with PYD-loyal actors only, maintaining all decision-making in the hands of the PYD/YPG, and (this argument is often used in other Arab Region such as Raqqa) accusation of cooperation with ISIS as a justification for oppressive measures (ibid.). Regardless, there is a great deal of effort on the YPG/SDF side to co-opt certain local non-Kurdish notables to win the population’s hearts and minds.

To conclude, the PYD tries to craft an image of running a democratic regime that allows for political plurality. However, when facing any threat to its monopoly, it immediately suppresses even violently any opposition. This comes especially for the dissent among the Kurdish constituency.

Suppressive measures are mostly implemented quietly, and there is considerable focus on co-opting willing actors. As Savelsberg asserts, “*Democratic autonomy*” has turned into something else in “*Rojava*,” in a system that is reminiscent of the older and well-known model of “*people’s Democracy*,” a political concept familiar in former socialist countries. There is one ruling party, and all other groups must subordinate themselves to this main party.” (Savelsberg 2019, 359)

7.2.4 Building Political Structures

Before 1999, the PKK had a strong presence in Syria, given the regime’s support of the organization ranging from facilitating its training, material support, and hosting its high-level cadres, including Öcalan, in their facilities in Damascus and the countryside. Moreover, unlike other Syrian Kurdish political parties with the KDPS tradition, the PKK was allowed to operate among Syrian Kurds, often used as a tool to suppress other Kurdish opposition parties and dissent, including levying ‘revolutionary tax’ from the population.⁵³ As per the modus vivendi with the regime, the PKK’s political activities were prohibited from inciting the Kurds against the regime. Instead, it was actively used to channel the Kurds willing to join the PKK ranks to fight against Turkey (in 2007, 20% of the PKK members were of Syrian origin; Brandon 2007). This modus vivendi changed with Öcalan’s expulsion in 1999 and general cessation of a high level of tolerance of the PKK’s operations in Syria.

On September 20, 2003, the PYD was established as a Syrian branch of the PKK (PYD Rojava 2019). However, it was based mainly in the KRI. The PYD’s party program (at least until 2013, when it was altered to deny connection to the PKK) stipulates that it follows principles of Democratic Confederalism and considers the PKK’s umbrella structure in Qandil, the KCK “*its leader*,” and Kongra-Gel “*supreme legislative authority*.” (PYD Rojava 2011) Simultaneously, a set of ‘usual’ complementary organizations was also established – namely for women (Yekitîya Star, Star Union) set up in 2005⁵⁴ and for youth (Revolutionary Youth Movement of Western Kurdistan, Ciwanen Soresger) (International Crisis Group 2017).

Initially, the PYD’s presence in Syria was limited and did not enjoy much traction. In the aftermath of the March 2004 Qamishli uprising, the PYD tried to assume a more pro-active stance to show that the PKK is now indeed concerned about the Syrian Kurds rather than merely focusing on Turkey. However, as part of the regime’s ‘zero-tolerance’ for Kurdish political gatherings and activities after 2004, the PYD maintained a lower profile (KurdWatch 2009). Regardless, its members and linked activists were subjected to harassment from security apparatus and jailed (640 PYD-linked political prisoners were

⁵³ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

⁵⁴ Following the suite of PYD increasingly creating illusions of political plurality, consisting of more organizations and parties, in 2016, Yekitîya Star was re-named since “(...) *the organisation has grown to include more and more women of all ethnicities and religions. To reflect this increasingly inclusive reality, we decided in 2016 to change our name to Kongreya Star (Star Congress)*.” (Kurdish Solidarity Network 2016)

reportedly released from government jails in 2011; Balout 2012). The PYD's profile in 2004-10 was low-key, unable to attract supporters en masse.⁵⁵ Syrian Kurds were still permitted to join the PKK ranks in the KRI and fight in other theatres – mainly in Turkey and partially in Iran.

Since 2011, we experience a rising profile of PKK-linked political structures in Syria, as well as their swelling in numbers (of both organizations and members). On December 16, 2011, the TEV-DEM was established by the PYD (ANHA 2018), coinciding with the founding of the PCWK – a precursor for the PYD's administration (see Chapter 7.2.5). Initially, TEV-DEM was a coalition consisting of the PYD and several more PKK-linked organizations: Organization of Martyrs' Families, youth organization Ciwanen Soresger, a coalition of women organizations Yekitîya Star (Koontz 2019), and several more professional and cultural unions (Sary 2016). The TEV-DEM was the primary political vehicle for the PYD's governance, increasing the illusion of plurality over time by creating more political parties and organizations. As one KDPS notable from Kobanî noted: *“The PKK created many fictional parties and associations to give the appearance of a popular movement.”* (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017, 169-70)

In an attempt to include political structures specifically designed at winning hearts and minds of the non-Kurdish population, various minority actors were also co-opted into the administration (Wahab 2016) and PYD-led political fronts, such as Syriac Union Party (Drott 2014). After all, the cornerstone of the PYD's vision for its administration is to create multi-ethnic, multi-confessional governance. The TEV-DEM serves according to the PYD's representative in Britain Alan Semo as *“(...) ‘an umbrella organization (...) for all ethnic-religious communities’ including political parties, such as PYD, and civic societies, municipalities, public services and trade unions in Rojava and northern Syria.”* (Khalaf 2016, 11) Ultimately, the TEV-DEM crystallized as an overarching political front of the PYD organizing *“(...) civil society, supporting, coordinating and ensuring that the voice of civil society is fed into the political and administrative aspects of the system. It acts as a kind of ‘counter-power’ to the Autonomous Administration and organizes on a federal basis from the local to the inter-regional level.”* (Rojava Information Center 2019, 18) In other words, the TEV-DEM remains instrumental in exerting social and political control.

The PYD/YPG is a dominant force maintaining its monopoly. There is very limited ‘controlled’ pluralism allowed only to show a façade of democratic processes.⁵⁶ One also sees that the most visible figures in the administration hail from the PYD/PKK (e.g., Salih Muslim, Mazlum Kobanî, Asya Abdullah, Aldar Khalil, or Redur Khalil). In turn, representatives of other member organizations of TEV-DEM have a low profile. The situation is slightly different in Sunni Arab areas, such as Raqqa, Manbij, or parts of Deir Ezzor, where the PYD/YPG relies on the co-optation of local Arab tribal

⁵⁵ Various informal communications with Syrian Kurds always recalled that the PYD was considered a minor actor with low-key presence at that time.

⁵⁶ Interview with a journalist, March 2018.

leaders and other notables who form their own local councils – Manbij Military Council, Raqqa Civilian Council, Tabqa Civilian Council, Deir Ezzor Civilian Council. However, as Kamiran Sadoun pointed out, despite the higher level of Arab co-optation and participation, the PYD/YPG always ensures that the governance structures are under their control (a Kurd is always behind the scenes/behind them).⁵⁷

Furthermore, the International Crisis Group (2017, 6) notes that the PYD, the YPG and linked organizations “(...) *had members or even nominal leaders with little or no link to Qandil, only PKK-trained fighters held decision-making powers.*” The report further asserts that “*Regional branches may have had their own identity and leaders, a distinct name and members who did not receive training in Qandil, and may have enjoyed some decision-making autonomy in recruitment, establishment of local offices, dealing with local authorities and coordinating military operations and militant activities. Yet, strategic decision-making remained the exclusive domain of fighters schooled in the Qandil-based institutions.*” (ibid.) This template applies to numerous visible and prominent representatives of the PYD, its administration (e.g., Ilham Ahmed, Aldar Khalil, Hediya Yousif, Salih Muslim) and the YPG/SDF (Mazlum Kobani, Polat Can, Xebat Derik) who are actually the PKK operatives for many years (Orton 2017).

The situation hardly changed as the International Crisis Group (2017b, 2), “*Qandil-trained and battle-hardened PKK cadres with years – in some cases decades – of experience in the organisation’s struggle against Turkey hold the most influential positions within the YPG and, by extension, within the SDF’s chain of command; within the PYD-run civil governing bodies that administer YPG-held areas; and within the security forces, such as the Asayesh (security police), which are the backbone of that governance. While most of these cadres are Syrian Kurds (though notable roles are also played by Kurds from Turkey and Iran), loyalty to the PKK’s internal hierarchy appears to override relations to local society.*”

Following the previous suite of creating a façade of political plurality and encouraging broad popular participation, at the onset of the September and December 2017 elections, the Democratic Nation List (Listiya Nishtimaniya Demokratik, LND; Koontz 2019) was established and began campaigning. The list consisted of TEV-DEM parties, dominated by the PYD and a myriad of at least 17 other small political parties and organizations (Reddit 2017). The other competing lists included the Kurdish National Alliance, a coalition of five political parties, established in October 2016 and consisting mainly of actors formerly affiliated with the ENKS but choosing to be co-opted by the PYD later on (ibid.). The LND was a dominant force dominated by the PYD, winning the overwhelming majority of seats – 4,600 out of some 6,000. For example, in Afrin, the LND list consisted almost exclusively of the PYD candidates (Schmidinger 2019). In the al-Jazira region, several minority parties were also significant, namely the Syriac Union Party and Assyrian Democratic Party (ibid.).

⁵⁷ Interview with Kamiran Sadoun, Syrian Kurdish journalist and researcher, Erbil, KRI, February 29, 2020.

The PYD went a long way to create a wide range of political parties, structures, and organizations and strongly encouraged the population's political participation. The PYD remains a dominant, most influential political party, despite attempts to create a façade of political plurality. Overarching mass political structures are also accompanied by mature and encompassing organizations such as youth groups, professional and business unions, quasi-NGO organizations, all of these intensely politicized with the PKK's ideological onsets.

7.2.5 Building Governance Structures & Producing Legitimacy

Before 2011, there were no efforts on the side of the PYD or other PKK-linked actors to engage in building governance structures. The PYD kept a low profile, a limited presence, and focused only on a few political activities to maintain its covert presence. The Syrian government, especially since 2004, maintained an extremely tight grip over Kurdish-inhabited areas, suppressing all political activities of Syrian Kurdish parties.

On December 16, 2011, the PCWK, a precursor for PYD's governance visions, was established in Derik (al-Malikiya). The PCWK included PKK-linked organizations, including the PYD's front TEV-DEM (established around the same time), Yekitiya Star women's organization, the Union of Families of Martyrs, the Education and Language Institution, and the Revolutionary Youth Movement of Rojava (Allsopp 2015). The PCWK formulated its programmatic vision for the Syrian conflict supporting Kurdish unity and *"the peaceful, democratic popular movement aimed at making a radical change in the infrastructure and institutions of the political system."* (ibid., 181) While it mentioned *"the principle of self-defence"* (ibid., 181) for Kurdish people and called for the establishment of elected local councils, it did not request the regime's fall nor openly champion ideas of Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism (internally Democratic Confederalism was a part of its program). The PCWK itself seemed a similar precursor for attempts to implement the 'Democratic Confederalist' vision of governance on the local level as an umbrella for PKK-linked actors as in October 2007 established Democratic Society Congress (DTK) in Turkey (see Chapter 8.2.5). Ideas of the Democratic Confederalism as a primary mode of management of PYD-controlled areas were gradually becoming the main overarching vision in the PYD's leaders' speech acts throughout 2012. For example, its co-chair Asya Abdulla noted that *"(...) the democratic autonomy project as both a new form of self-government and a philosophy of life, transferred to the population through educational academies."* (ibid., 183)

Already in late 2011 and the first half of 2012, the PYD was creating a modicum of organizations and institutions ranging from education, precursors for the local council. It increased its armed presence in Kurdish-inhabited areas (mainly Afrin, Derik, Qamishli, and al-Hasaka). While the Syrian regime forces tolerated this at the time, it became more systematic and overarching with the regime's withdrawal from these areas by July 2012. As a result, the PYD got a free hand to further its governance efforts. The PYD

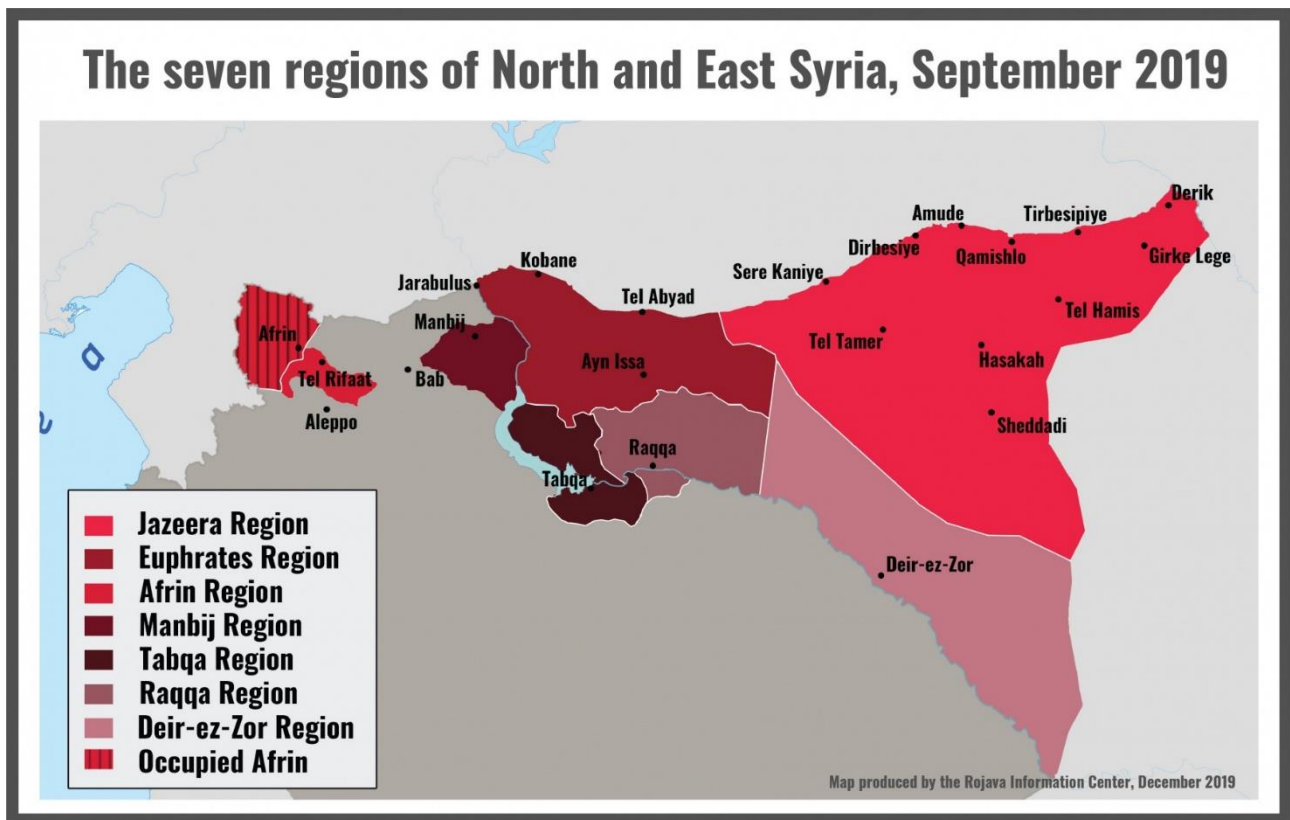
had a jumping start compared to the other Kurdish political parties within the ENKS – it had experienced cadres at their disposal and, most importantly, fighters. The PYD co-chair Salih Muslim “(...) returned to Syria in 2011, reportedly with as many as 2,000 PKK guerrilla fighters, without intervention by the regime.” (ibid., 184) The relationship between the ENKS and the PYD continued to soar. The ENKS blamed the PYD for monopolizing power, refusing to share decision-making, and repressive actions. The ENKS, in turn, lacked unity, a sufficient number of political cadres, and mainly fighters. The KDP’s Massoud Barzani mediated a power-sharing agreement between the ENKS and the PYD on June 11, 2012, including parity distribution of posts (Ibrahim 2020). However, the established Kurdish Supreme Council (in Kurdish, Desteya Bilinda Kurd, DBK) failed. The PYD continued their quest for monopoly over Syrian Kurdish areas under its control (for more details on subsequent ejection of the ENKS from northeast Syria see Chapter 7.2.3).

The final DBK’s failure was marked by the PYD’s unilateral declaration of the Interim Joint Administration in the Kurdish region of Syria on November 12, 2013, in Qamishli (PYD Rojava 2013). Its establishment, dubbed as a meeting including Kurds, Arabs, Chechens, and Christians, laid down a vision for creating three autonomous regions (cantons) with their administrations in Afrin, al-Jazira, and Kobanî (Rojhelat.info 2013). In reality, the whole initiative was entirely dominated by the PYD and its front organizations. The vision followed Öcalan’s ‘bottom-up’ approach with cantons, having their assemblies, and sending representatives to the ‘General Council’ for the whole of Rojava level (see Chapter 6). Executive Body of the Rojava Constituent Assembly had 13 members, while nine were hailing from al-Jazira and two each from Afrin and Kobanî (ibid.). At that time, the term ‘Democratic Autonomous Administration’ (DAA) was commonly used to label the PYD’s governance project.

The three cantons were officially declared in January 2014, and in March, the constitutional document Charter of the Social Contract was officially adopted (International Crisis Group 2014). It is worth mentioning that none of these enacted decisions came from a body with popular legitimacy (e.g., from elections, or at least later approved by elected bodies). The Charter of the Social Contract was a comprehensive, relatively liberal constitutional document stipulating division of power, the establishment of elected DAA’s cantonal and local executive and legislative institutions following ideas of ‘Democratic Confederalism’ transcending the notion of nation-states. However, there are certain problematic passages, namely Article 24 stating that freedom of opinion is permitted if it does not “*exceed the ethical community structure and does not endanger civil peace and do not aim at exclusion and hegemony*” (Human Rights Watch 2014, 58) – i.e., what is ethical and what may damage a civil peace is determined by the PKK’s ideology. Furthermore, it established the YPG as the sole armed force of the administration, in theory, subjected to civilian oversight (ibid.).

On March 17, 2016, another overhaul of the governance system occurred: the Democratic Federation of Rojava-Northern Syria was established in Rumaylan (Al-Jazeera 2016b). Rather than a genuine change in the administrative system, it was a cosmetic change somewhat the notion that the administration is closely interlinked with the PKK's ideas of Democratic Confederalism, stressing that the administration represents a federal region within Syria. This goes in line with establishing the SDF on October 10, 2015, and the SDC, a governing body which is "*the political reference and umbrella for self-administrations, civil councils, and the SDF*" on December 8-9, 2015 (Syrian Democratic Council 2020). The motivation was two-fold. Firstly, to dispel the notion of the YPG as the Kurdish and PKK-linked armed forces to incorporate Arabs as the armed campaign against ISIS was advancing to Sunni Arab areas east of the Euphrates. Secondly, to dispel the notion of Kurdish (PYD) dominance over administrative structures. Subsequently, a slightly modified Social Contract was adopted in July 2016. However, it still "*(...) regulates the institutional side of democratic confederalism: the organization of the democratic participation of people, from the local communities to the Northern Syria Federation. Participation to the democratic process is guaranteed by a multi-level representation system.*" (Marinelli 2016)

Another cosmetic change occurred in December 2016, when the project was re-branded to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria to remove 'Rojava' from the name with more Arab areas getting under the DAA control (Perry 2016). Administrative divisions were clarified on July 27, 2017, adding the level of regions above cantons (Arafat 2017b). From then on, the federation was divided into three regions (iqlim): Afrin, al-Jazira, Firat (Euphrates), and these into cantons (kanton) and areas (herem) (see Twitter 2017; Map 7.2.5). For each of these units, elections were to be held. These administrative units have their executive with different portfolios such as security, social affairs, economy, planning, or women affairs. On September 6, 2018, yet another overhaul was enacted, and the name changed to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, while also officially adding new Arab regions: Manbij, Raqqa, Tabqa, and Deir Ezzor with their Civilian Councils as "*semi-independent administrations.*" (van Wilgenburg 2018d)



Map 7.2.5: Regions of the DAA (Rojava Information Center 2019).⁵⁸

Effectively, this overhaul and practice further diverted from Öcalan’s original bottom-up ideas of Democratic Confederalism, which should be “(...) based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions.” (Öcalan 2011, 33) Khalaf asserts that these ideological concepts “(...) reject the hierarchical and patriarchal nation state, challenging its hegemony via grassroots radical democracy and self-governance, gender equality, an ecological society, and a cooperative economy. Alternative to patriarchal nation state, to ba’athist regime – but in reality – all centralized in hands of PYD.” (Khalaf 2016, 10) As one source noted, whereas the administration had always been strongly centralized, it maintained a façade of decentralization and units’ self-management. This façade ceased to be cautiously maintained and gave way to centralization since 2016/2017.⁵⁹

The Executive Council of the DAA serves with some minor changes as a quasi-government of the administration with two co-presidents and several Offices and Bodies acting like ‘ministries’ with different portfolios. Apart from this highest executive body, there should be elected parliament in theory, as per the Charter of the Social Contract, ‘Legislative Assembly’ (Human Rights Watch 2014). However,

⁵⁸ Note that Afrin Region was previously divided into two cantons, Afrin and Shahba.

⁵⁹ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

the establishment of an elected parliamentary body never properly materialized. Instead, the system's significant overhauls were as a rule approved by ad hoc meetings of vaguely hand-picked representatives ensuring the PYD's dominance. The (un-elected) General Council of the DAA consists of two co-chairs, seven representatives from each of seven regions, and 21 'specialists,' which "*Coordinates legislative matters and unifies laws between regions.*" (Rojava Information Center 2019, 20) The Justice Council of the DAA has 16 members and "*Administrates tribunals and coordinates the justice systems and guideline sentences between regions.*" (ibid.) On all administration levels, the division of executive, judicial, and legislative powers are essentially unclear, distorted, and overlapping. Although, in theory, according to the 2014 Charter of the Social Contract, the division of powers should exist. However, this state of affairs arguably comes from the ideological preferences since, as Posch (2016a) notes, "*(...) Öcalan's concept of a people's or grassroots democracy must be regarded as communist in the widest sense, and therefore as undemocratic. This explains the absence of terms such as the separation of powers and rule of law, i.e. essential principles for a functioning democracy.*"

Looking at the size of the territory under the PYD's control as of 2018 (almost 30% of Syria; International Crisis Group 2017b) and a high level of development of governance structures in Syria, we could say that out of the PKK's governance efforts across the examined cases, the instance of northern Syria in 2012-18 is indeed the most mature and developed. This was allowed for by changes of the context of insurgency: primarily, significantly decreased incumbent's power losing sway over the area due to changed state's policies. Secondary factors that helped engage in somewhat effective governance include external support (the US-led coalition) and partially the PYD's ability to snuff out any dissent and guard its increasing monopoly since 2012.

Policing the Population

The DAA maintained two distinctive security forces: internal policing force Asayish and the military force the YPG, in 2015 re-branded as the SDF. Asayish (officially established on July 25, 2013) is an internal security force designed to police the civilian population (Sarya and Jindar 2016). It is an overarching security structure including, organized crime, intelligence gathering, or specialized counter-terrorism units (in Kurdish, Hezên Antî Teror, HAT) (ibid.). Asayish keeps tight social control over the population, curbing any political dissent against the PYD rule. Moreover, Sary maintains that most of the regime's government buildings and facilities were overtaken by the Asayish, which in a way assumed a similar style of Syrian regime's security apparatus' oversight even over bureaucratic decisions or issuing permits and licenses (Sary 2016). Therefore, there is no clear line between civilian administration responsibilities and the 'policing' role of Asayish. The precise number of Asayish personnel is unknown. However, it is estimated that by January 2017, it grew to "*10,000 personnel in Jazzeera, 3,000 in Afrin and 2,000 in Kobani canton*" (in al-Jazira, half of the manpower is supposed to be of Arab descent) (Tastekin 2017).

Asayish is the sole internal security force⁶⁰ in the PYD-controlled areas since the regime has withdrawn its military forces and closed down and handed police and various security agencies facilities to the PYD/YPG. Its personnel ceased to police the population. The regime maintains a limited presence in al-Hasaka and Qamishli. In Qamishli, it maintains Political Security Directorate offices, which do not interfere in policing the civilian population. In Christian areas, quasi-police forces Sutoro (do not confuse with Damascus-linked militia Sootoro) tied to Asayish operate, namely in al-Malikiya, al-Hasaka, Qamishli or the Nattoreh forces in Khabur valley (Rojava Information Center 2020). The pro-PKK media maintain that under ‘Democratic Confederalism,’ the ultimate goal is to dissolve Asayish since people should be policing each other once gained ‘citizen training’ since people’s defense is *“so important that it can’t be delegated.”* (Peace in Kurdistan 2014) However, this is only a dreamy part of the revolutionary PKK’s and Öcalan’s vision of an educated ‘new man,’ who has love *“(...) for the revolution, freedom, country, and socialism, a love that is as solid as a rock. Applying scientific socialism to the reality of our country creates the new man.”* (Özcan 2006, 111)

Secondly, there is the YPG/SDF, a military force of the DAA with up to 100,000 fighters by 2019 (Seligman 2019). The Charter of the Social Contract stipulates that the YPG/SDF is the DAA army and thus should not be used for maintaining internal security and that responsibilities over policing the population should lie with the Asayish. Nevertheless, interference of YPG/SDF commanders both in running internal security affairs and in governance is indisputable, especially in Arab-majority areas. Ciwan Ibrahim, chief of Rojava Asayish confirmed in June 2016 that *“(...) YPG forces support Asayish when there is such a need in urban areas, and Asayish forces support the YPG when there is such a need on the frontlines,”* and *“(...) the Asayish and YPG had shared cultures, perspectives, duties and responsibilities, and support one another when collaboration is needed.”* (Sarya and Jindar 2016) However, the YPG/SDF commanders usually ‘run the show’ by keeping their grip on strategic decisions in the given sector or settlement. There were also numerous instances when the YPG/SDF was used as a muscle to support Asayish (e.g., during Kurdish opposition protests in Amuda in 2013) (Savelsberg 2014).

When it comes to Arab-majority areas, there is comparably higher securitized administration and policing of the population. That is due to possible dissent and regular criminality and due to imminent ‘hard security’ threat of ISIS attacks and hostile environment in which it is hard to distinguish friends and foes among the Arab population. Consequently, the YPG/SDF prevail in assuming both roles internal security force policing the population and military, although Asayish branches were also

⁶⁰ The DAA experimented with establishing unpaid volunteer militia on ‘communal level’ the Civilian (or Society) Defense Forces (in Kurdish, Hêza Parastina Cewherî, HPC) and regional militia Self-Defense Forces (HXP) as an auxiliary forces to be mobilized when needed in 2015. But these force have little to no traction and its deployment is unknown. I would be sceptical that they would have serious security and policing roles diverting such responsibilities from Asayish except for perhaps maintaining more surveillance over the population as was propagated purpose for its establishment in Raqqa in 2017 (see Roj 2019; Caksu 2019).

established in ex-ISIS areas such as Raqqa, using the name Internal Security Force (in Arabic, Quwwāt al-‘Amn ad-Dāḳilī) (ANF 2018). It appears that in safe and stable areas, the YPG/SDF stays out of day-to-day policing of the population in favor of Asayish - that is mostly the case in Kurdish-inhabited core areas, such as Qamishli, al-Hasaka, Afrin, Kobanî, or al-Malikiya. Despite certain ‘fuzziness’ stemming from the Asayish assuming administrative tasks and the YPG/SDF having their hands in internal security, the DAA indeed established, institutionalized, and regularly paid internal security forces (in 2017, receiving an average of \$120 as a monthly salary; to compare Syrian civil servant would get \$80-100) (Tastekin 2017).

Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

The pro-PYD sources maintain that its justice system originates in the tradition of covert dispute resolution mechanisms within the Peace and Consensus Committees, operating in Syria since the 1990s but much less in the 2000s (Ayboğa 2014). Each commune should have a Peace and Consensus Committee, while its members are hand-picked by the local council itself. Such Committees deal with minor criminal matters and misdemeanours and cases of social injustice (ibid.). *“They deal largely with minor social and legal issues like divorce, unpaid debts, and land disputes, while more serious criminal cases are referred to the people’s courts.”* (Drott 2014b) Parallel women’s justice system is also in place, in which women’s communes (Women’s Houses, in Kurdish, Mala Jin) and female PYD-linked organizations. These include Yekitiya Star (since 2016, Kongreya Star) and Asayish Jin (Women’s Asayish), which are instrumental in resolving issues of domestic violence, marital disputes, or forced marriages (Kakaee 2020). The DAA’s approach to justice is inspired by Öcalan’s (who in turn takes it from Murray Bookchin) *“(...) notion that justice is only a bad replacement for freedom (...)”* and the belief that the people *“(...) created justice and peace committees to act on behalf of neighbourhood assemblies - that is, the commune - to deliver ‘social justice’.”* (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016) The whole system of Peace and Consensus Committees aims at reconciliation between the disputing parties (Duman 2017).

Kakaee (2020) also notes that if consensus is not reached through mediation on the communal level, the issue may be forwarded to the neighbourhood level Peace and Consensus Committees. There are People’s Courts (or Tribunals) that decide on more serious criminal offenses in larger towns and cities or should the local Peace Committee fail to reach a consensus between parties. The Peace Committees themselves cannot authorize imprisonment of people (Duman 2017).

On the cantonal (regional) level, there are Justice Councils, which *“engaged judges, lawyers, prosecutors, jurists, and others who had broken with the ruling system. (...) These justice councils have since been crucial for the construction of a new justice system.”* (Ayboğa 2014) *“The tribunals, composed of PYD-selected personnel, administer justice across the Rojava, conducting investigations and issuing arrest warrants under a hybrid penal code. They have been heavily criticised by rival Kurdish factions, activists and human rights organisations; the PYD itself is often accused of*

human rights violations, targeting political foes and arresting as well as imprisoning civilians without evidence of wrongdoing.” (International Crisis Group 2014) Each canton also has a court of appeals where people can contest rulings of People’s Tribunals. For serious criminal acts, typically related to the war with ISIS, the DFNS established the People’s Defence Courts in 2015, consisting of three judges’ tribunals (AP News 2018).

The official PYD line stipulates that the Syrian justice system was ‘obsolete,’ and there is a need for a ‘new justice system.’ In turn, the Syrian regime does not recognize the court system, and *“Rojavian jurists are accused by the government of Syria of setting up and creating an illegal judiciary. Judges and staff face arrest warrants from Syria, lack passports, and are frequently subjected to death threats.”* (Krause 2019) Moreover, a major limitation to the DAA’s court system is simply lack of trained judicial profession since very few Kurds could get such a position pre-war (Drott 2014b). There is only a partial parallel court system running in the DAA. Criminal matters are solely in the hands of the DAA’s courts, and the Syrian government’s judicial structure does not take upon any criminal acts. In turn, when it comes to matters of private law, there remain government’s courts operating in the area, such as in Qamishli and al-Hasaka, where *“(…) civilians simultaneously abide by two parallel judicial systems, the Government of Syria’s Justice Palace and its Self-Administration counterpart, the People’s Court.”* (Center for Operational Analysis and Research 2019b, 12) However, in practice, most people resort to the DAA structures for dispute resolution mechanisms, according to Duman, especially to the local Peace and Consensus Committees in the first instance (Duman 2017). To sum up, the DAA put in place an institutionalized and overarching system of dispute resolution mechanisms.

Provision of Public Goods

One single most important service that the DAA provides at a satisfactory level is security. Khalaf also notes that the YPG/SDF is, in general, more popular in Kurdish areas compared to the PYD since it is viewed as the main provider of security, underscoring the importance and gratitude of the population for securing the area from ISIS and sparing most of Kurdish areas destruction (Khalaf 2016). This notion has been growing more robust, especially since 2013 *“Among those who live in areas under its control, there is widespread appreciation for the YPG’s ability to provide protection, particularly as attacks by jihadis grow in number and intensity.”* (International Crisis Group 2014, 16) The YPG managed to assume and maintain a monopoly over violence and counter the ISIS threat. Even critics and opponents of the PYD acknowledge the YPG’s ability to deliver ‘hard security’ (Khalaf 2016). In Arab-majority areas, including Manbij or Raqqa, the YPG/SDF’s position is more complex. Nevertheless, Arab populations at least initially mostly considered the Kurdish-dominated SDF as the lesser evil compared to ISIS rule (van Wilgenburg 2016). The relationship became more complicated later as more fragmented tribes (in Raqqa, 90% of the

population is tribal) started to demand more power and agency in their areas or lamented over lack of services (see Nassar and Al Maleh 2018).

As the PYD/YPG took over administration in the northeast and northwest Syria, its primary focus was “(...) *to replace the security structure of the Assad regime while guaranteeing the basic services provided to citizens within Rojava.*” (Sary 2016, 12) Tight security and social control proved to be problematic. As Sary further asserts, the Syrian government’s buildings were converted into YPG or Asayish facilities, effectively engaging Asayish in “(...) *the most mundane of administrative activities, such as building permits, trade and transportation.*” (ibid.)

There is a strong effort to show that the DAA can provide state-like services. However, despite the DAA’s extensive efforts, the provision of electricity and water supplies became less reliable than the pre-war period and more expensive as the administration levied more fees for such services. The situation comparably improved as the YPG/SDF attracted international assistance to improve water supplies and, most importantly, captured the Tishrin Dam in December 2015, which provides the bulk of electricity for the DAA areas (Youssef 2017). The DAA also covered people’s daily needs, such as providing and regulating prices of wheat, bread, and other foodstuffs, supplying cooking gas cylinders, i.e., trying to regulate the war economy with mixed success (see paragraphs on control over economic sector below). Large-scale projects on infrastructure development, transportation, or systematic DAA’s funded or procured reconstruction efforts are scarce, which is understandable in war-time conditions. The DAA also provides administrative services by creating an extensive and overarching governance system. However, as Khalaf (2016) notes, many public services come at considerable cost or are provided because of the taxation, and people lament that the level of services provided does not match the high amount of levies extracted.

Indeed there is “*To a certain degree, a blended governance or administrative model (...)*” between the DAA and Syrian state’s institutions as “*Government of Syria ministries already coordinate with their Self Administration counterparts when a project is implemented on the city level; this is especially true for electricity and basic services.*” (Center for Operational Analysis and Research 2019b, 11) In Qamishli, Khalaf mentioned that the PYD and the regime officials share premises, each having their budget but coordinating and planning their efforts. The regime pays, and the PYD realizes the project (Khalaf 2016) “*Meanwhile, if a project solely belongs to the PYD (especially if it taxes and/or charges for it), the PYD takes full control. Such projects often relate to construction of roads, electricity generation, clinics, cleaning, etc.*” (ibid., 19)

The DAA also engages in the healthcare and education sectors. Concerning healthcare, there are still regime hospitals providing healthcare free of charge, chiefly in Qamishli. The education sector gained much attention from the DAA. To illustrate, in August 2014, in the al-Jazira region, there were 670 schools with 49,000 students. By 2019, the number rose to over 3,000 schools with 300,000 pupils (Espinosa

2019). The curricula differ for Kurds, Arabs, and other minorities, with separate schools and classes. The DAA's education for Kurds is provided in Kurdish but utilizes Latin script, which is not used in Syria. Since 2016, when the DAA's curricula were imposed, the Syrian regime schools were closed, and its teachers were prohibited from teaching in the DAA's schools (Drwish 2017). The primary and secondary education is strongly ideologically charged, accenting teachings of Öcalan in an apparent attempt to indoctrinate the students. As Espinosa notes, it strives to craft a "(...) *'new mentality'*", one based on the values of a *'democratic nation'*. These are embedded in class discussions with topics that include *"how different nations can live together"* and *"how we can bring peace to our society and all nations in our area."* (Espinosa 2019) It resembles the Syrian regime's focus on spreading its ideology through its education system. The primary issue is that these DAA-run schools are not accredited by the Syrian ministry of education, rendering high-school diplomas useless in Syrian and abroad. Consequently, some parents choose to send their children to government-run schools since some operate in parallel in the DAA areas, including the Euphrates University in al-Hasaka being the only government's functioning university in the DAA area.

The DAA also opened a number of its 'academies,' including solely for women teaching Öcalan's 'jineology' such as Yekitiya Star Academy in Rumaylan founded in 2012 (Biehl 2015), passing them as institutions of higher education. However, such academies provide ideological training rather than a standard education (Rojava Report 2014). Biehl (2015) notes that while focusing on history and sociology, the Mesopotamian Academy "(...) *takes a critical stance towards 20th-century positivism and instead seeks to develop a new, alternative social science for the 21st century - what Abdullah Öcalan (...) calls 'sociology of freedom'.*" In June 2016, the DAA established the Rojava University based in Qamishli, offering a wide range of study programs providing regular tertiary learning (Soguel 2019). Later on, also small branches in Kobani and Afrin were also established (ANF 2019; Drwish 2016).

As one source noted, there is still a duality of bureaucracy, and in many instances, people apply for the same documents through both administrations. In Qamishli, people continue to visit the government's civil registry, land and property registry, as well as other legal offices (Center for Operational Analysis and Research 2019b). The vast majority of people go through both administrative channels. Interactions with the Syrian government's bureaucracy are limited only in specific cases by those who need to live in the PYD-run 'bubble' and must avoid the government, such as those avoiding military service or those being known critics of the regime.⁶¹ Even for most basic documents, this administrative duality exists (and is tolerated by the DAA) mainly because people are unsure of how long the DAA will keep de facto power on the ground.⁶² The DAA's and the Syrian government's documents are not mutually recognized. If one wants to apply for a Syrian ID or a passport, they must go through the Syrian

⁶¹ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

⁶² Ibid.

government's bureaucracy. Also, as of 2016, there was still a certain level of coordination between government agencies and the DAA, especially in al-Hasaka, where the regime maintained a more substantial presence.

Furthermore, all (humanitarian) NGOs must acquire licenses through the DAA to operate; otherwise, they are considered illegal. The main aim is to create a perception that aid is coming from the DAA itself.⁶³ Communes were also instrumental in delivering humanitarian aid to their constituencies. That is despite “(...) *the aid delivered through the commune system is not provided exclusively by the DAA but mostly by local NGOs, which are obliged to go through the commune system (or other DAA institutions) to be able to work in these regions.*” (Aldarwish 2016, 18)

Feedback Mechanisms for Civilian Participation

The PYD, in general, goes a long way into fostering civilian participation in governance. Since 2011 and mainly since July 2012, it has been trying to co-opt local notables, recruits, political party members, establish youth and women's organizations, professional and business unions, civil rights organizations, and another modicum of institutions to create a complex web of parties, organizations, and institutions. These efforts go beyond simple organizing town meetings, conferences with the population, and even constructing local administrative structures, which, as Mampilly (2015) described, are typical for effective rebel governance. It aims at establishing mass organizations by various incentives ranging from PYD-controlled unions granting professional licenses to simple patronage or semi-obligatory participation such as youth groups, obligatory professional unions, PYD-linked NGOs, and similar organizations. A particular accent is put into encouraging female political participation – the PYD creates various female organizations, including law enforcement (Asayish Jin), and stipulates at least 40% female quota in political and administrative structures (Human Rights Watch 2014).

This appears to go in line with Öcalan's ideas of Democratic Confederalism and the PKK's pre-2000 tradition. The aim is to bring a new radical participative democratic leftist system which not only renders the nation-state as an enemy but aims at creating a 'new man' by liberating him from the existing nation-state capitalist system (see Grojean 2014). The practical side of the DAA's governance appears to be less prosaic on the ground. It aims to ensure that the PYD's monopoly, often through TEV-DEM's local branches People's Houses, continues at least among the Kurds, and no opposing political force can emerge. Moreover, the majority of the Kurdish population is indifferent or even in quiet opposition to such ideology (especially in cities like al-Hasaka and Qamishli).⁶⁴ Regardless of these shortcomings and, at times, even authoritarian tendencies, the PYD created a system of governance that, for the first time

⁶³ Various informal communications with humanitarian workers in Erbil, KRI, 2016-17, 2018-19.

⁶⁴ Interview with Syrian Kurdish humanitarian worker and researcher, KRI, April-June 2018; several on-line follow-up interviews online in December 2019-May 2020.

in modern Syrian history, offers certain, albeit very limited, discretion for communities to decide on their affairs. The Kurds may participate in political life (although the influence of the PKK's operatives often of non-Syrian origin on strategic decisions is undisputable), despite the need to follow or at least respect the PYD's line.

The Charter of the Social Contract stipulates that elections should be held both for higher and lower administration levels (Human Rights Watch 2014). This only partially materialized in 2015. On March 13, 2015, the first limited elections for the cantonal council of Afrin, al-Jazira, and Kobanî reportedly occurred, during which 565 candidates competed over seats in 12 councils (Koontz 2019). A more comprehensive electoral process for various levels of administration occurred in 2017. On September 22, 2017, communal elections were held to determine co-chairs (man and women) for each of some 3,700 communes with over 12,000 candidates running for the post in Kurdish core areas (ANF 2017a) – Afrin, Firat, and al-Jazira areas with 70% turnout (ANHA 2017). This vote picked two co-chairs (male and female) for each of the recognized communes (Perry 2017b). Communes range anywhere from few to 400 households, typically a neighbourhood in a town, a village, a cluster, or small settlements (Jongerden 2018). For example, in the city of Qamishli, there are 18 communes, each containing up to 300 households (Singh and Tabibzadeh 2017). Communes, as the basic and lowest level of the administration and societal organization, form their executive – local councils (or joint presidency), which in larger communes break down into different committees and commissions – such as peace and self-defense, economics, politics, or ideology (Jongerden 2018). By analysing the 2014 document, the Internal System of the Communes in Rojava, al-Tamini notes that “*Concepts of ideological education, training and ‘enlightenment’ are a key aspect of the functioning of the commune.*” (Al-Tamini 2018) TEV-DEM, as PYD-dominated front, plays an instrumental role in the communal system since the commune's presidency reports about its activities “*(...) to the council of the (...) TEV-DEM in the neighbourhood or line.*” (ibid.)

Before the September 2017 elections and for council and committees also after, members are hand-picked on the local level, in practice favouring PYD-linked individuals from the community itself. On the communal level, there is a significant level of discretion of the said communes' representation when responding to the needs and demands of the people. However, more important policies and decisions are strongly centralized and remain in the hands of higher levels of PYD-dominated administration (Wilkofsky 2018), typically on the cantonal level. As one teacher noted, “*The real decisions belong to The People's House [the area's TEV-DEM office]—the People's House will use the commune as a cover [for its decisions].*” (ibid.)

Communal elections were followed by local elections choosing representatives of regions, cantons, areas, and districts on December 1, 2017, with 4,500 councils' seats allocated to almost 6,000 candidates running (ANF 2017b). However, the problematic point was that only 60% of seats were filled

by a popular vote according to Article 50 of the Charter of Social Contract, “40% are elected by the components, groups, and social segments. This shall be regulated by a special law according to consensual democracy.” (vanwilgenburg.blogspot.org 2017) In practice, this remained unclear until the last minute when 40% of seats were allocated to the winning list only, instead of being equally distributed (Qasim 2017). The LND won by a landslide securing over 4,600 seats (ANF 2017b). The LND is PYD-dominated despite boasting of 18 member parties, which are, for the most part, ranging from marginal satellites or empty shells rather than actors with genuine constituency (Reddit 2017) (except for the PYD-linked minority parties, e.g., Christian Syriac Union Party). The other competing list of Kurdish National Alliance in Syria comprised of few former ENKS member parties, which decided to be co-opted by the PYD in February 2016. There was also a minor list called the Syrian National Democratic Alliance consisting mainly of Arab opposition actors allied with the PYD (Koontz 2019). The PYD runs a tight ship to ensure its continuous dominance. One NGO worker noted that “PYD conducts elections where they force local organizations to either campaign for them or seize their existence.” (Singh and Tabibzadeh 2017, 25)

The DAA also planned to finally hold parliamentary elections for the whole administration to create a legislative body effectively replacing the provisional un-elected ‘parliament’ - the Legislative Council of the SDC with Northern Syrian Peoples’ Congress. Parliamentary elections initially to be held in January 2018 were postponed indefinitely (Ibrahim and Edwards 2018). Consequently, the DAA lacks a critical feedback mechanism for civilian participation – elections. The 2017 communal and local voting has partially alleviated this. However, as noted above, the genuine competition during this vote is, at best, highly questionable. Effectively, the PYD continues to dominate the political landscape and prevents any dissent or political competition from emerging. Instead, it bets on creating broader coalitions (such as under the TEV-DEM brand in the past or the LND for the December 2017 elections), which are a façade of marginal, physically almost non-existent, or outright satellite political parties openly fully adhering to the PYD’s ideology.⁶⁵

Genuine opposition among Kurdish parties to the PYD, the ENKS, was boycotting the elections (not to mention it was still prohibited from conducting any political activities by the PYD). In general, any serious political dissent and opposition projects are largely suppressed. Freedom of speech is at times stifled (see detailed discussion in Chapter 11.2.3). This essentially follows the authoritarian nature of the PKK’s rule, visions, ideology, and practice of Democratic Confederalism described in Chapters 5.4 and 6. As Posch analyses the KCK Agreement, one must “(...) *participate in an organised manner in political life. In political reality, this means belonging to one of the branches of the KCK system, the most important principles of which, pursuant to Article 44c are “democratic participation, initiative, and collectivism”.*” (Posch 2016a) In other words, one can and must politically participate only within the PKK-designed institutions, such as in TEV-DEM,

⁶⁵ Interview with a journalist, March 2018.

which in this manner organizes and encompasses all the ‘civil society.’ When it comes to administering Arab-majority areas such as Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, or Manbij, the DAA co-opts local Arab notables to the SDF ranks, and its administration relying on patrimonial tribal networks. However, as Kamiran Sadoun put it, although Arabs get co-opted and are visible in administration, there are always Kurdish figures sometimes invisible behind the scenes holding sway over strategic decisions.⁶⁶

To conclude, the PYD administration allows only limited political participation, co-opts local figures among Kurds, and is receptive to the civilian population’s practical needs, especially on the local communal level. The lower the level, the more receptive to civilians’ demands and the more discretion on decisions for its constituency the administration has (that is especially for communal level). In turn, on higher levels of administration, democratic processes and the importance of elections are rather a façade, and the DAA remains strongly centralized, PYD-dominated with the decisive influence of people that stand outside the official administration’s posts, such as PKK commanders overseeing strategic decisions and administration in most of the areas.

Although the Charter of the Social Contract stipulates that the YPG/SDF are subdued to civilian control and respond to civilian administration, including that of regions, cantons, and areas, this has never materialized. Instead, as it was disclosed in several interviews, there is no clear division between civilian administration and the military sector (with the YPG/SDF commanders arguably very often ‘running the show’ at the expense of civilian officials).⁶⁷ Similarly, internal security forces Asayish appear to be in charge of many of the civilian bureaucratic services, further adding to the confusion. Asayish offices have a strong hand in decision-making on civilian affairs that should be reserved for the local (communal), area, district and cantonal councils themselves.

Influence over Economic Sector

In 2012-January 2014, the PYD’s sway over the economic affairs in areas under its control appeared less mature and overarching. For example, Hatahet (2019, 2) argues that initially “(...) *Damascus resisted handing over the management of natural resources to the newly established administration.*” The situation further significantly changed after the March 2016 declaration of the Democratic Federation of Rojava-Northern Syria. This went hand in hand with successes against ISIS, resulting in taking more (Arab) territory and US-led support. Thus “(...) *the PYD administration grew more assertive in governing the economy of the regions it controls.*” (ibid.) The DAA managed to create a considerable bureaucratic apparatus to levy financial resources from the population under its control ranging from issuing building permits, professional licenses, business licenses, and imposing regulations on the economic sector.

⁶⁶ Interview with Kamiran Sadoun, Syrian Kurdish journalist and researcher, Erbil, KRI, February 29, 2020.

⁶⁷ Interview with a journalist, March 2018. Interview with European humanitarian worker, Erbil, KRI, September 2016-March 2017.

Its sway over the economy and its regulation goes beyond typical economic activities of the rebels – such as control of natural resources, ad hoc, or unsystematic extortion of money. Although, on the onset of war, the YPG also engaged in extorting lump sums in ad hoc protection money from businesses, perhaps the best-documented case being the issue of Swiss-French Lafarge Cement factory, some 50 km southeast of Kobanî (Lund 2018). The factory’s management paid sums to deal with various rebels in the area ranging from the YPG, through elements of the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in 2011-14. The YPG ensured its protection before it was taken by ISIS, and *“Local YPG officials would occasionally drop in with demands for support, or find other ways to siphon resources from the factory. On one occasion, things got out of hand and ended in an armed heist, with doors kicked in and guns pointed at employees.”* (ibid., 13) It is said that up to \$15.3 million was paid in total *“(…) to insurgent middlemen, suppliers, or armed groups during the company’s time in Syria.”* (ibid.)

The DAA’s Executive Council, established in January 2014, with certain changes of portfolios and focus, remains a quasi-government with ten Bodies and eight Offices (Rojava Information Center 2019). Three Bodies and three Councils engage in managing economic affairs: Body of Finance, Economy and Agriculture and Social Affairs and Labour and Offices of Oil and Natural Resources, Development and Planning, and Humanitarian Affairs (Hatahet 2019). Executive Council is further tasked with the unification of localized policies (i.e., centralization) concerning *“(…) custom duties, fuel prices, travel permits and travel between cities of north and east Syria, labour laws and judicial amendments.”* (ibid., 4)

Communes have the right to decide on local economic affairs and actually organize *“(…) all components of society culturally, socially, and economically to meet all their needs and their shared life on natural societal foundations.”* (Al-Tamini 2018) Furthermore, the Internal System of the Communes in Rojava stipulates that they should *“Develop jointly participative and cooperative economic consciousness among members of society.”* (ibid.) As opposed to the Syrian government’s centralized division of economy, the DAA claimed to tackle monocultural agriculture, especially in al-Jazira, focusing mainly on wheat and cotton and diversified to other products (Ali 2016). Moreover, it boasted of establishing collective farms and businesses called ‘cooperatives’ (mostly agricultural) as a backbone of its economy and ideological visions aimed at dissolving the nation-state and capitalist economy (see Azeez 2017; Cooperation in Mesopotamia 2016). This is in line with the Democratic Confederalist economic theory outlined by Öcalan, encouraging participative and collective economic projects.

In reality, Schmidinger (2019) asserts that such agricultural and women’s cooperatives were a mere ideological window case, and there is no evidence to support such ventures had any real impact on the DAA’s economy. Hatahet (2019) concurs as their number decreased over time: while in 2013, few dozens were established, the first conference of cooperatives with 185 representatives was organized in October 2017, but in 2018, the number of cooperatives decreased by at least 60.

The DAA's political economy remains 'capitalist' and private entrepreneurship-oriented. The KCK Agreement laid down in 2005 allowed for private economic activity and property. However, as Posch (2016a) argues, there was a significant limitation as "(...)it is not based on exploitation or results in "status differences" (*statü eşitsizliği*). Article 4a and, similarly, Article 35b of the Agreement formulate "the safeguarding of the transition from a metastasising economy, geared towards profit, to a communal (*komiünal*) economy, geared towards practical value and participation", as a further purpose of the KCK system." In contrast, the DAA's Charter of the Social Contract remains more realistic, asserting in Article 41 that "Everyone has the right to own property and private possession is protected, and nobody is deprived one dealing with it except in accordance with the law and it is not eviscerated except for the public benefit requirement but under the condition of compensation, fair compensation if he leaves his property." (Human Rights Watch 2014)

Essentially, as Hatahet (2019, 8) notes, the DAA "(...) enshrines private property, which is portrayed as being complementary to the public sector and serving to sustain communities. In reality, [the DFNS] (...) remains dependent on landowners, businessman and cronies to bootstrap and manage its economy." Especially strategic sectors, such as oil and gas, water, electricity, and agriculture, remain firmly centralized either directly in the hands of the DAA's commissions and offices or firmly under the PYD associates' thumbs (*ibid.*). Sary (2016, 13) notes that while wheat provision is closely monitored by the DAA, "(...) merchants and importers as well as those benefiting from the war economy and the monopoly of goods, became the decisive power in the market." This is consistent with reports focusing on the agricultural sector noting that "Traders are highly influential and can put pressure on producers to lower prices. The latter are particularly vulnerable due to their limited financial capacity, which is exacerbated by the high cost of agricultural inputs, equipment and fuel, unfavourable weather conditions, and the devaluation of the Syrian pound." (Syria Independent Monitoring 2018) Nevertheless, the DAA officials, such as Afrin's economic co-minister Ahmed Yousef, boast about the successes the 'new economy,' even maintaining that no taxes are levied since "the commons are robust enough economically," or that "(...) three-quarters of traditional private property is being used as commons and one quarter is still being owned by use of individuals." (Tangled Wilderness 2015, 26)

Syrian government continued to pay salaries to its employees during the war (including in other rebel-held areas and ISIS territory), although some stopped their work and some continued to serve under the DAA administration (Leezenberg 2016) (estimates go to as high as 23,000 on the payroll only in al-Jazira; Hatahet 2019). As Lund (2018, 29) noted, "Even under overall YPG control, state employees continue to administer public services, salaries, and pensions, and they and other loyalist actors have a hand in the Kurdish region's educational sector, health care, air travel, financial services, and oil and gas extraction - the YPG's lifeblood." Regardless, the DAA became the single largest employer having 200,000-230,000 people on the payroll, including up to 100,000 SDF fighters and Asayish (Hatahet 2019). Civil servants earn on average \$100 per month, fighters up to \$150 (*ibid.*). Thus, the DAA spends up to \$28 million on salaries per month.

The DAA' administrative structures and its local councils are responsible for administrative fees and (income) tax collection. Their amounts significantly differ across areas and local administrations, apparently leaving some space for discretion of each administration. Various businesses and ventures have to pay for their licenses or fees to operate. For example owners of public transportation buses pay up to \$23 a month, street vendors are required to pay \$15-40 each month (ibid.). Professionals have to obtain their licenses and often operate within PYD-linked professional unions, which oblige them to add to their coffers. Furthermore, direct income taxes are imposed on various categories of employees, business owners based on progressive taxation principle ranging from 1% to the maximum of 25% of income from those whose monthly income reaches \$13,000 (ibid.).

Yet another significant regulation of the economic sector and also a major source of income for the DAA are custom fees while these “(...) seem to be more regulated due to the existence of networks of monopolies on foreign trade.” (ibid., 12) These are imposed systematically on goods coming both from Syrian-government-held areas (up to 5%) and crossing borders from the KRI (2-7% depending on the goods). Trade outside the DFNS is subjected to licensing from the DFNS. Although it allows for some space for independent merchants, their “(...) cost of importing essential commodities is considerably higher than for PYD associates, who enjoy less scrutiny.” (ibid.)

In 2013, oil and gas fields in the northeast, especially around Rumeylan were secured by the YPG while the regime continued to operate oil extraction facilities, including pipelines (KurdWatch 2013). By mid-2015, cooperation between the regime and the DAA continued with Damascus providing know-how, workers and spare parts, while the DAA was overseeing resumed oil extraction (at 15,000 b/d compared to 165,000 b/d from Rumeylan pre-war) (The National 2015). Additionally, the number of makeshift refineries grew across the YPG-controlled territory since ISIS presence and continuous sabotage damaged pipelines to the country's only refinery complex in Baniyas (ibid.). As the DAA was taking more territory, by the end of 2018, it was controlling all major oil extraction facilities east of the Euphrates, i.e., 70% of the country's operating oil and gas infrastructure (BBC News 2019). While in 2018, it was estimated that Syria produces 24,000 b/d (British Petroleum 2018), the DAA's production should be around 17,000 b/d, bringing significant income to its coffers (considering a barrel crude may be sold for \$15-25, i.e. \$255,000-425,000⁶⁸). Some of the crude oil is also sold to the KRI either by trucks or makeshift refineries (estimated 6,000-8,000 b/d) (McKeever 2019). A portion of crude is also sold through Syrian-regime tied companies, such as Qatarji Group, to the Syrian government in exchange for refined fuel (Asharq al-Awsat 2019). The DAA, granting licenses to extract, refine and sell oil, also keeps

⁶⁸ Note that these are estimates and the prices may fluctuate. This is just to illustrate that even relatively low oil production may bring significant amount the DAA's coffers every day.

a close eye on private production in makeshift wells and subsequent smuggling of crude to regime-held territories across the Euphrates (Wilkofsky 2019).

While the DFNS failed to deliver on its ideologically charged vision of the communal economy, it managed to create an overarching economic regulation system that provides it with considerable revenues. This goes well beyond simple rebel's extraction of natural resources. The DFNS managed to create a systematic way to levy money from the population on the local level imposing administrative fees (various permits, company registrations, and professional licenses), income taxation, and trade customs resembling state bureaucratic apparatus despite some irregularities.

Utilizing Arjona's (2016) typology of insurgent engagement with the population under their control, the PYD with its administration the DAA, formed a mature and entrenched rebelocracy. This process has accelerated since July 2012, with the regime's handing over of major areas in northwest and northeast Syria. Creating overarching governance structures striking a social contract with the population, predictability in interaction by intervening and shaping social order goes well beyond merely exercising a monopoly on violence. The PYD's rebelocracy is institutionalized and forms state-like administration and a myriad of political structures especially in Afrin, Fırat and al-Jazira regions. In rural and urban Arab areas such as Manbij, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor it seems to be comparably less institutionalized, more securitized focusing mainly on maintaining monopoly on violence and relying heavily on local tribal Arab notables in governing the area. Also, the level of intervention into people's everyday lives, including rather private matters, differs. Tight social control is executed especially in rural, less developed Kurdish-inhabited areas, where the PKK had a strong hand even before the 2000s – that is chiefly al-Malikiya (Derik), Kobanî and Afrin.

Examining legitimacy utilizing Schlichte and Schneckener's (2016) claims of legitimacy for rebel groups, we see that the PYD and its administration (since 2012) enjoy symbolic but mostly performance-centered legitimacy. In the first examined period of 2004-2011, the PYD was lacking both types of legitimacy. The PKK was widely considered as being focused on Turkey rather than advancing Kurdish rights in Syria. Moreover, it was considered an agent of the Syrian regime. This slightly changed after the foundation of the Syria-focused branch and in the aftermath of the 2004 Qamishli riots when the PYD tried to assume a role of a more pro-active Syrian Kurdish opposition actor as opposed to other parties. The PKK's ideology was not resonant among the Syrian Kurds, that is in particular middle-class, urban dwellers in Qamishli or al-Hasaka where traditional Kurdish parties stemming from the KDPS currents prevailed. The PYD's primary pool of supporters was less educated, poorer, mainly rural Kurdish population in Afrin, al-Malikiya and Kobanî – arguably claiming at least socio-political aspirations of local communities. Nonetheless, the PYD in parallel to other Syrian Kurdish parties, never openly

subscribed to secessionist goals, offering somewhat abstract ‘Democratic Confederalism’. Up until the civil war outbreak, the PYD could hardly claim symbolic legitimacy stemming from countering established ‘enemies’, in this period primarily the Syrian regime. The PYD’s activity was rather low-key, not challenging the regime and still largely perceived as Turkey-focused. The PYD continued to channel youth to the PKK ranks to fight mainly against Turkey, as Ferris and Self note examining martyr data of the HPG (the PKK’s armed wing in Turkey), 13% of martyrs were born in Syria in 2001-15 (Ferris and Self 2015).

In 2004-11, the PYD had trouble to attain performance-centred claims of legitimacy. Öcalan was jailed in 1999 and remained a symbolic leader. PKK’s primary focus remained on Turkish theatre, partially on Iran with PJAK insurgency ongoing in 2004-2011. Schlichte and Schneckener (2016) argue that legitimacy can be earned through sacrifice but that was hardly the case since the PYD was not waging insurgency against Damascus. Its covert and overt political activities were also low-key, snuffed by extremely coercive regime’s behavior after the Qamishli riots in 2004.

The PYD’s ability to craft legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurdish population drastically increased since 2012. Symbolic claims mainly derived from outside threats – primarily ISIS, partially also Turkey directly engaging in the Syrian conflict, threatening the core Kurdish areas since the August 2016 invasion of al-Jarabulus and Azaz areas and the attack on Afrin in January 2018. Furthermore, it could claim it administers the region with more receptiveness towards the demands of the population and support of civilian participation. As noted in Chapter 7.2.3 and 7.2.4, this had its limitations. The PYD maintained its monopoly at any cost and was suppressing any kind of political dissent exerting tight social control. Despite these shortcomings, for the first time, there was a certain level of autonomy and localization of administration compared to the extremely centralized Syrian government.

Arguably most of the PYD’s legitimacy stems from its performance in delivering security and stability. Firstly, it has high credibility through sacrifice due to its fight against ISIS. This has dramatically increased since the siege of Kobanî in September 2014. The YPG/SDF was successful in driving ISIS out from the proximity of Kurdish core areas. This relates to service provisions. The key source of legitimacy is maintaining a high level of security in an otherwise war-torn country, creating a relatively peaceful, stable and predictable environment. This brings support for the SDF (more than for the PYD) that is widely acknowledged even among people opposing the PYD’s ideology and at times coercive monopolizing behavior. Provision of other public services, such as education, healthcare, water and electricity, transportation infrastructure, etc. remained rather poor with little significant systemic improvements, relying on the Syrian government’s resources. However, the DAA itself is a major employer with estimated 200,000-230,000 people on the payroll, including up to 100,000 SDF fighters and Asayish (Hatahet 2019). Moreover, the DAA provides opportunities for political participation, it

organized several elections. Despite its policy of suppressing any political dissent, there is much more space for meaningful political participation compared to the pre-2011 period.

Yet another matter is the PYD's and its administration's legitimacy deficits among Arabs and other ethnoreligious groups in Manbij, Raqqa, or Deir Ezzor since it is still widely viewed as Kurdish-dominated. For tribal conservative Sunni Arabs, the PYD's ideology is indeed alien. Arabs also fear continuous Kurdish dominance over their affairs. The administration in Arab-majority areas provides much less space for political participation. It is claimed that it is Kurdish-dominated and highly securitized due to the continuous ISIS threat and because many Sunni Arabs were working with ISIS, including tribal leaders. The DAA, however, went a long way in co-opting local tribal leaders and notables, trying to tap on strongly existing patrimonial loyalties.

8. The PKK Insurgency in Turkey: Between Struggling and Thriving

Turkey remains arguably the most important battlefield for the PKK despite it also focused on instigating insurgencies in neighbouring countries, chiefly Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The PKK underwent painful organizational and ideological shifts induced by its leader Abdullah Öcalan, captured by Turkish authorities on February 15, 1999, in Kenya. The transformation after the period of shock and Öcalan-ordered retreat of militants from Turkish soil was finalized by 2005 (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011). Contrary to Turkish policy-makers' popular opinion about the PKK's defeat, the organization was able to resume its armed struggle on Turkish soil on June 1, 2004, after calling off a ceasefire in place since September 1, 1999.

Since then, it managed to increase the intensity of armed conflict gradually and, more importantly, to create networks of legal political parties, associations, parallel governance structures, charities, and other non-governmental organizations under the KCK umbrella arguably became a grass-roots social movement (Gurses 2018). Since mid-2015, the PKK experimented with urban warfare and attempted to seize the momentum to spark a popular uprising to declare autonomy over majority-Kurdish areas. These efforts failed and met with a decisive security-driven response from the state. The insurgency once again remains in a stalemate with no prospect of political settlement.

8.1 The Context of Insurgency

The modern Turkish state was always varied of Kurdish centrifugal tendencies and, unlike Iran, viewed even purely cultural expressions of Kurdish identity as a threat to national security. The post-Ottoman Turkey was built on the strongly Turkish nationalist discourse, secularism, and modernization embodied in the state ideology proposed by its founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Moreover, the rising modern Turkish state pursuing centralization was facing a number of Kurdish rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s. Traditional local tribal and religious leaders first and foremost fought to maintain the level of autonomy they enjoyed during the Ottoman Empire.

The Turkish government even wholly denied the existence of Kurdish identity, sponsoring 'academic' discourses such as that Kurds are, in fact, only 'Mountain Turks' (see Sagnic 2010). Security concerns subsequently even increasingly drove counterinsurgency policies against the PKK insurgents since the 1980s. Despite the advancement of Kurdish rights in the 1990s and even more since the 2000s, the Kurdish issue remains a highly security-driven concern in Turkish politics and extremely sensitive policy for any government (especially when it comes to introducing favourable policies towards the Kurds).

There are no precise numbers for Turkey's Kurdish population, yet estimates usually vary between 15-25%, approximately 15-20 million people (see Chapter 5.1). Exact figures are even more complex to grasp as many Kurds do not actively subscribe to their Kurdish identity and do not speak Kurdish due to

decades of assimilationist state policies. The Kurdish population is mainly concentrated in the southeast of the country. However, due to urbanization and migration, many Kurds also live in Turkish cities such as Ankara, Izmir, or Istanbul, coined as the biggest Kurdish city with up to 3 million Kurds living there; Institut Kurde de Paris 2020).

8.1.1 Horizontal Inequalities

Heper (2007) argues that Turkish citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin, have an equitable chance to attain power positions within the public sector and in politics. This possibility is, however, strongly conditioned by one's adherence to the Turkish nationalist ideology. In other words, one has to subscribe to official state ideology. Arguably, since the pro-Islamist AKP's inception to power in 2002, one's pious nature, as opposed to previously secular qualities, is also crucial (see also van Bruinessen 2018). Before 2000, openly observing Muslims faced discriminatory policies in public employment, including the Kurds, which are among the most conservative society segments.

PM Erdoğan's and the AKP's ultimate goal was to raise a new 'pious generation' as stated for the first time in 2012 (Tisdall 2012). However, one still should not and cannot openly subscribe to the Kurdish national/ethnic identity under the AKP despite the party itself welcomes Kurds in its ranks but polls well in Kurdish-majority provinces. Tezcur and Gurses (2014) disagree and argue that the discrimination against the Kurds (even those not openly subscribing to their ethnic identity) is a deep-seated feature of the Turkish political system and state apparatus that did not change even with the AKP rule. They provide evidence that from 1980 to 2014, only 29 out of 496 governors of Kurdish-majority provinces were born in those, i.e., being Kurds. Moreover, some of these governors born in Kurdish provinces were, in fact, not even ethnic Kurds (ibid.).

Socio-economic indicators also illustrate persistent horizontal inequalities between Kurdish-majority areas and the rest of the country. The government of modern Turkey primarily focused on developing the capital, Ankara, and western littoral parts of the country. In turn, Central Anatolia and eastern parts inhabited mainly by the Kurdish minority were systematically neglected in terms of investment policies, infrastructure development, and public service provision. Kurdish-inhabited areas came to the spotlight as the pro-Islamist AKP government was looking to expand its electorate among conservative Kurds since 2002. While the socio-economic situation partially improved, eastern and southeastern provinces remain to fare comparably worse than the country average in socio-economic indicators.

For example, the government considerably invested in the education sector in eastern parts of the country since 2000 (see Figure 8.1.1a). However, illiteracy is still much higher than the country average in Diyarbakır, over 10%, compared to other Turkish cities. There are also below 10% of people with beyond high-school education (see Figure 8.1.1b). Access to secondary education in Southeast Anatolia remains at 65.6% in 2015, i.e., well below the country average of 79.4% (Buğra 2016). The economic

contribution of the Kurdish-majority provinces also remains modest. Apart from Diyarbakır, very few new firms were established in 2007-12 compared to the rest of the country, which experienced an economic boom, even in inlands, previously more peripheral areas (see Figure 8.1.1c). The unemployment level remains exceptionally high in Kurdish-majority provinces. In Diyarbakır, in 2013, there was 40-60% unemployment (Yörük and Özsoy 2013) as opposed to the country average of 10% (Hürriyet 2015). Poverty rates in the Southeastern Anatolia region inhabited by the Kurdish majority were at striking 30% or over 3.1 million poor at the poverty threshold of 5,390 Turkish Lira in 2014. The country average was 8.33% (Buğra 2016). KONDA polls from 2011 also shed light on comparably much lower household income for Kurds than ethnic Turks (see Figure 8.1.1d) (KONDA 2011).

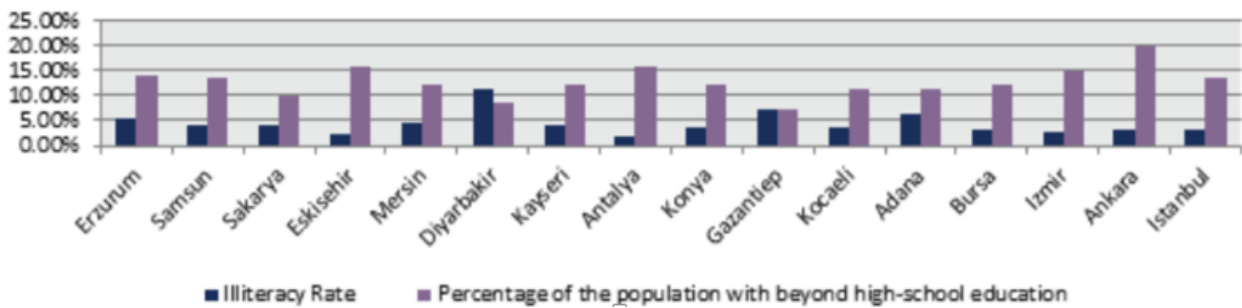
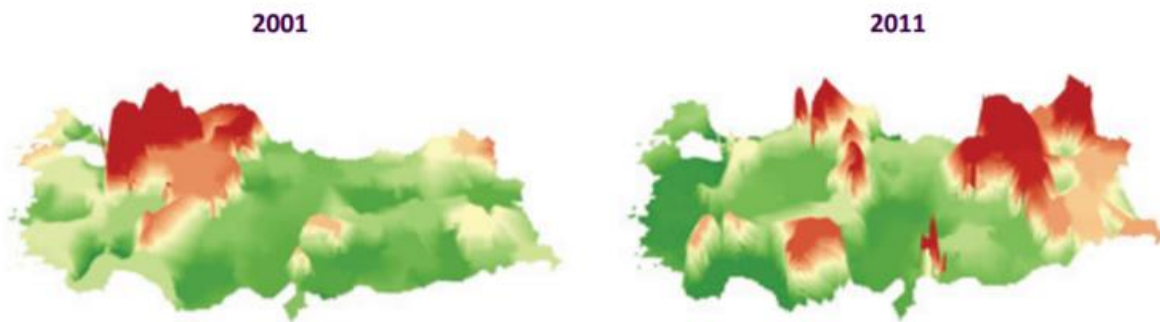
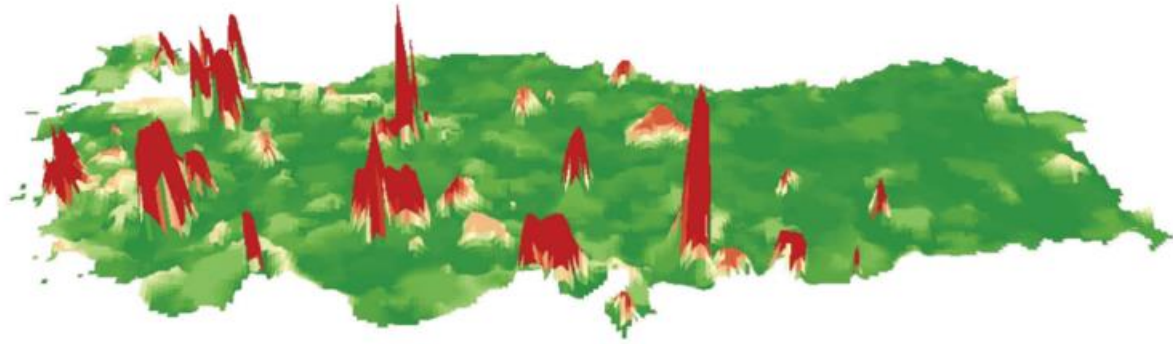


Figure 8.1.1a: Human Capital across Turkey's Cities in 2011 (Buğra 2016).



Source: Ministry of Development Public Investment Data, WB staff calculations

Figure 8.1.1b: Spatial Distribution of National Education Expenditures in 2001 and 2011 (Buğra 2016).



Source: TOBB, 2012

Figure 8.1.1c: Spatial Distribution of Companies Established in 2007-12 (Buğra 2016).

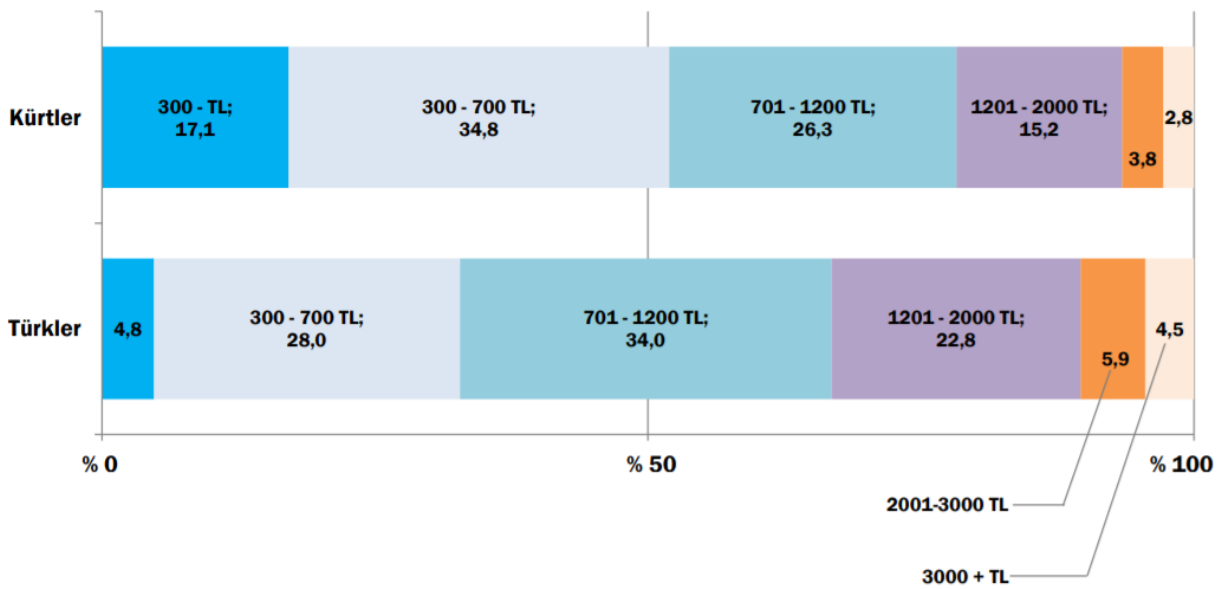


Figure 8.1.1d: Monthly Income of Kurdish and Turkish Household in 2011 (KONDA 2011).

8.1.2 State Policies

At the onset of Öcalan's capture in February 1999, the PKK was already militarily defeated (Pusane 2015). After Öcalan's arrest and in the light of PKK's withdrawal from Turkish soil and organisational uncertainty, in 1999-2002, the Turkish government widely believed the PKK insurgency is finished for good. It did not seize the opportunity to address the Kurdish issue's root causes by introducing any systematic policies (ibid.). However, by 2004, the PKK was back on track with almost consolidated organisational changes and ready to resume its armed struggle as it deployed up to 1,500 militants inside Turkey already in 2003 (Çandar 2012). In the meantime, the Turkish government finally abolished OHAL (Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği, Governorship of Region in the State of Emergency) on November 30, 2002, an emergency rule in the Kurdish-majority eastern provinces (Unal 2012). Similarly, the government abolished the military-controlled State Security Courts in June 2004 (ibid.).

Ankara embarked on a series of reforms as it was recognized as the EU membership candidate in late 1999, and finally, the negotiations themselves started in October 2005. Albeit these remain stalled, especially in 2002-07, the AKP government introduced liberalization reforms that also concerned the Kurdish issue. These early reforms included lifting constitutional restrictions on expression in the Kurdish language in October 2001, allowing broadcasting in Kurdish in March 2002, introducing private Kurdish classes in August 2002, or allowing parents to use Kurdish names for their children in June 2003 (see Tezcür 2014). At that time, the PKK struggled with legitimacy, facing terrorist designation from the US in 1997 and the EU in May 2002. It viewed the EU accession process as an opportunity to reclaim its position as the primary representative of Turkey's Kurds and its was *"(...) not seeking to actively undermine Turkey's accession to the European Union, but has turned its own political recognition into the condition for its support."* (Casier 2010, 394)

The AKP and PM Erdoğan embarked on a series of further political reforms, arguing these are pursued as the EU harmonization changes. For the AKP, the push for political reforms in 2000-07 was existentially-driven rather than specifically aimed at resolving the Kurdish issue since it had to dismantle the old Kemalist tutelary system allowing the military to intervene in politics (see Kaválek 2020). The AKP, as a pro-Islamist political party, was under constant threat of abolishment and removal from power as it happened in various interventions in politics against pro-Islamist political actors from the hands of secular, military-led institutions. The process also accompanied elite shifts as *"(...) a new Muslim conservative elite has become increasingly influential in the economy, political society, the media, and the judiciary at the expense of the old, pro-military, and generally assertive secularist elite."* (Kuru 2012, 39) Since 2007, as the Kemalist tutelage was dismantled, the AKP managed to dominate the system of Kemalist tutelary institutions, gain decisive influence in the state bureaucracy, judiciary, police, media, and most importantly to pacify the army (Kaválek 2020). Subsequently, from a promise of democratization, the AKP increasingly moved to authoritarianism, which became even more apparent following the July 2016 coup attempt. The coup attempt was followed by an unprecedented cleansing of the state bureaucracy, education, judiciary, police, and private sector, with up to 150,000 sacked and 80,000 detained (Reuters 2020). Furthermore, the constitutional referendum held on April 16, 2017, transformed Turkey into a presidential system, with the office having extensive executive and appointing powers.

The governing AKP's ideological outlook stems from the 1960s Millî Görüş (National Outlook), which is comparably more open towards ethnic diversity as opposed to the secular Kemalist currents in Turkish politics (Atacan 2005). From the AKP's perspective, the Kurdish issue, and as an extent, the PKK insurgency were a result of decades-long neglect of eastern Turkey. Similarly, it perceived the previous governments' neglect of Central Anatolia at the expense of more liberal and developed Western coastal regions as an issue. The AKP asserted that the Kurdish issue stemmed from political and

economic neglect, and if these issues are proactively addressed, it will also erode popular support for the PKK insurgency (see Kaválek 2014).

Consequently, the AKP employed a dual strategy of political marginalization of the PKK. In August 2005, PM Erdoğan famously stated in his Diyarbakır speech that Turkey indeed has a ‘Kurdish problem’ and that the government made grave mistakes in the past, and now it is time to resolve the issue through ‘more democracy’ (Gunter 2018). The AKP embarked on a series of reforms liberalizing Kurdish identity, including establishing the state TV channel (TRT6) broadcasting in Kurdish in January 2009 (Tezcür 2014). It was an important step even though it is labelled as being notoriously boring. By 2011 it failed to sway a significant number of Kurdish viewers as it was watched only by 4.4% of Kurds as opposed to 24.6% following the PKK-linked Roj TV (KONDA 2011).

In July 2009, the government announced the Democratic Opening, informally coined as the Kurdish Opening (Kürt Açılımı) (see Pusane 2014). The initiative was soon re-named as the Project of National Unity and Brotherhood as criticism arose that it targets specifically one ethnic group, the Kurds (Casier, Jongerden and Walker 2013). The space for cultural and even political expressions of ‘Kurdishness’ arguably increased. Nevertheless, the reforms the government program introduced were rather piecemeal, failing to address some of the most pressing demands of the Kurdish movement: ensuring education in mother tongue in schools, constitutional reforms, and other legal reforms (e.g., the amendment of the 1991 Anti-terror Law). Moreover, the government’s credibility and frankness were repeatedly taking hits with periodic repressive measures. For example, between April 2009 and November 2011, nearly 8,000 were detained and 4,000 arrested based on being members of the KCK with an apparent aim to cripple the KCK/PKK-linked political structures in Turkey (Jenkins 2011). Eventually, the Democratic Society Party (in Turkish, Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP) was disbanded by the court decision in December 2009, while 36 of its senior cadres were barred from politics for five years (International Crisis Group 2011).

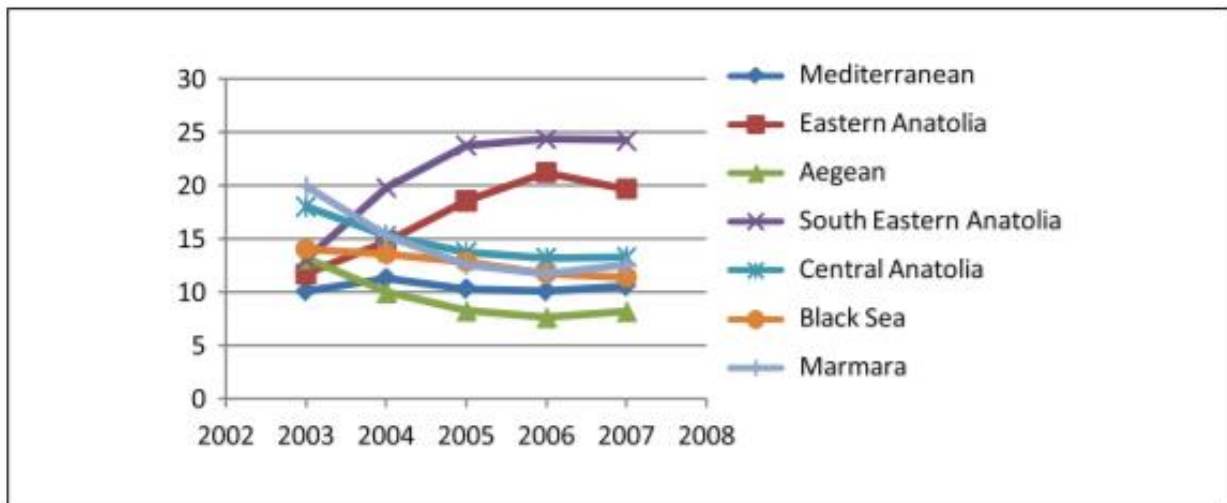
Among the AKP’s policies also promoted a common Sunni identity with the Kurds. Stressing out religiously conservative policies found fertile ground among a significant number of Kurds whose majority remain strongly pious. The principal agent of AKP religious policies among the Kurds was Diyanet, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which over time, evolved into an AKP-controlled apparatus to spread state-sanctioned Sunni Islam and promote common Sunni identity (see Ozturk 2016). The government also opened comparably more religious Imam Hatip high schools in the Kurdish-majority province. There were 2.17 Imam Hatips per 100 thousand people compared to the country average of 1.85 in 2018 (Gurses 2018). An integral part of the AKP’s narrative towards the Kurds was highlighting its pro-Islamist ideology while tarnishing the secular KCK/PKK-linked actors’ reputation by labelling them Zoroastrians, i.e., adherents of ancient pre-Islamic faith. For example, before the 2015

parliamentary elections, president Erdoğan “(...) expressed his belief that his Kurdish brothers were loyal to their religion and they would give the necessary answer to Zoroastrian politicians (author’s note: meaning the HDP) in the election.” (Kurt 2019, 12)

Nevertheless, religious identity policies also failed to erode support for the KCK/PKK-linked actors significantly. Firstly, the HDP/the Democratic Regions Party (in Turkish, Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi, DBP) managed to tone down their strictly secular reputation and even co-opt local religious figures (Gurses 2018). Secondly, as Karakoc and Sarıgil (2019) conclude, among the Kurds in 2011, public and private religiosity did not make much difference in supporting the PKK’s ethnic insurgency, and political and economic grievances prevailed as drivers of support.

The AKP continued the previous ‘developmentalist’ policies from the mid-90s arguing that the PKK conflict stems from regional poverty, unemployment, and economic backwardness, which, in turn, drives people into supporting the PKK. However, contrary to the government’s narratives, infrastructure investments in the southeast were significantly lower: “*Southeast Anatolia makes up 10 % of the country’s total population. Yet, the rate of public investments received by the region had an average of 7.9 % of the total national public investments between 2002 and 2007.*” (Yörük and Özsoy 2013) Much of these investments aimed to improve the security infrastructure; for example, in 2006, in Tunceli province, 70% of public spending was used for military installations (ibid.).

One of the policies aimed at wooing the Kurds during the AKP period were flourishing social policies. The government’s social programs grossly expanded in the southeast throughout the 2000s in the Kurdish-majority provinces. These regions even received much higher social aid than similar provinces with poverty in Central Anatolia (see Yörük 2012). Yoltar and Yörük (2020, 5) assert that the AKP’s “(...) trajectory of new social assistance programs in Turkey demonstrates remarkable parallels to changes in the composition and political strategies of the Kurdish movement.” The PKK-linked actors likewise become staunch critics of the AKP social programs and introduced scores of its own social assistance program, often tied to the Peace and Democracy Party (in Turkish, Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP)/HDP-controlled municipalities (see Gürbüz 2016). Yörük (2012) convincingly argues that while during the AKP era in 2003-09 total social expenditures grew by 85% as a percentage of the GDP, southeastern and eastern Anatolia (Kurdish areas) were in particular focus as the government used social benefits as part of its counterinsurgency policy (see Graph 8.1.2a). At the same time, the AKP periodically cracked down upon the social assistance programs affiliated with the KCK/PKK and DBP-led municipalities, notably since September 2016, while at the same time introducing a surge of AKP-linked social, youth, education projects of its own (Yoltar and Yörük 2020). Another example is the Sarmaşık Association, a HDP-linked food bank, regularly providing food for 30,000 poor citizens in Diyarbakir, closed down by the government in April 2017 (Yılmaz and Kayar 2017).



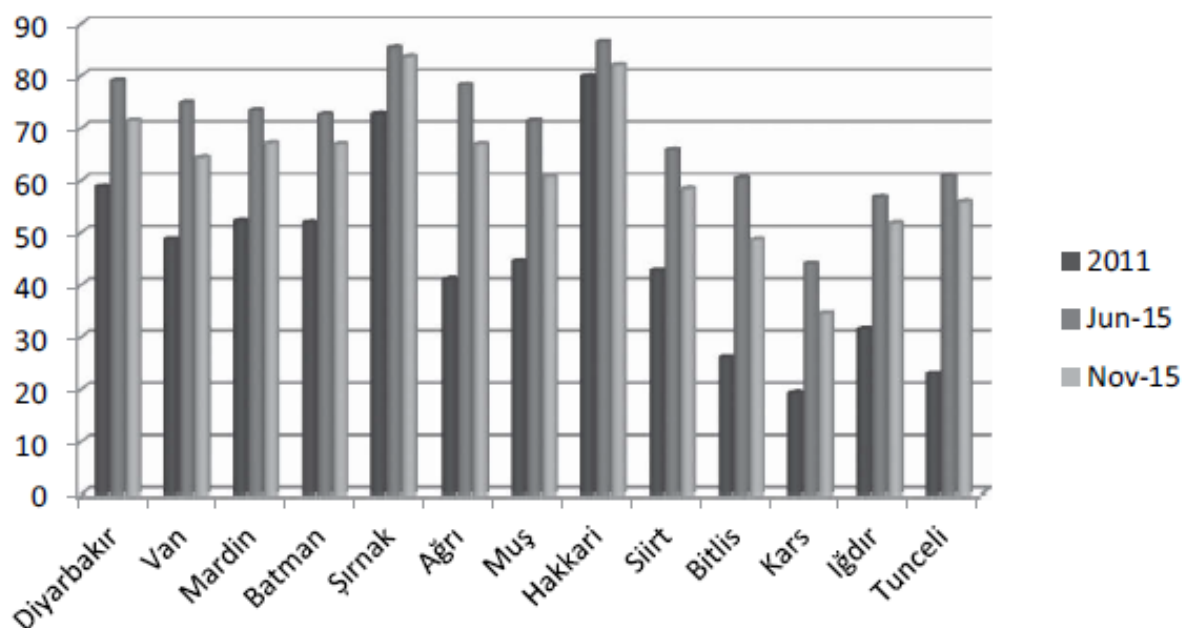
Graph 8.1.2a: Changes in Social Aid and Solidarity Foundation Expenditures as Percent of Total Expenditures by Region (Yörük 2012).

The Turkish state also repeatedly engaged in on and off indirect and since 2006 direct covert talks with the PKK-linked actors, including Öcalan himself (Çandar 2012). While in the 1990s, military representatives were the sole actor in exploratory talks, since 1999-2004, the civilian intelligence MİT started to assume a more pro-active role in meetings with jailed Öcalan. In 2006-11, there were several rounds of secret talks dubbed as the ‘Oslo Talks’ between representatives of the Turkish intelligence MİT led by undersecretary Emre Taner and since 2010 Hakan Fidan, a close Erdoğan’s ally, and representatives of the justice ministry and senior PKK commanders such as Sabri Ok, Mustafa Karasu, Adem Uzun or Zubeyir Aydar (Kadioğlu 2019). The talks were reportedly mediated by the British intelligence and several times also facilitated by the Swedish government. The ‘pre-negotiations’ served to de-escalate the armed conflict and explore possibilities to reach a political settlement leading to the PKK’s laying down arms.

There were many setbacks, and confidence issues during the talks as both the PKK and the AKP tried to maneuver sensitive negotiations. For example, as a part of seeking a lasting solution to demobilizing the PKK fighters, 34 PKK members entered Turkey through the Habur border gate with Iraq, eight of them armed on October 19, 2009. *“The group was transported from Habur to Diyarbakır via an open-top bus amidst the demonstration of love and joy by tens of thousands of people, and it caused turmoil in the Turkish political life and received some very harsh reactions from a significant part of the Turkish public opinion. Consequently, the Initiative came to a deadlock at a time when it was thought to have reached its culmination.”* (Çandar 2012, 79) The Habur incident showed the sensitivity of the attempts to resolve the PKK insurgency through political means. Cengiz Algan, a local society activist, noted that *“(…) the pro-Kurdish movement made a show by claiming the PKK was successful in the war against Turkey by touring the released PKK members around several cities in Turkey’s southeast, which resulted in strong opposition in the wider population of Turkey, and so interrupted the peace process.”*

(Kadıoğlu 2019, 925) Yet, the talks resumed in 2012 and culminated in Öcalan’s (2013) Newroz message read out in Diyarbakır in March 2013 announcing the ceasefire and renewed attempts to reach a political settlement with the government.

The carrot and stick strategy attempting to marginalize the PKK politically, however, failed. The AKP has steadily polled well in Kurdish-majority provinces, particularly during the parliamentary elections. It was among other stressing common Sunni identity and conservative politics attractive to many Kurds for whom their religious identity is crucial and find the PKK’s secular, leftist ideology hostile. Nevertheless, as the AKP’s credibility among Kurds decreased, the KCK/PKK-linked political actors continued to solidify their electoral performance and political and civic networks in the southeast. This becomes evident in Graph 8.1.2b, showing the electoral performance of the BDP/HDP in 2011 and then in 2015 parliamentary elections. While in 2011, there was arguably still belief in the AKP’s Kurdish Opening and democratization reforms, this significantly decreased by 2015. Similarly, the BDP performed historically well during the 2014 local elections securing 11 provinces, 68 districts, and 23 towns (International Crisis Group 2017c).



Graph 8.1.2b: BDP/HDP Electoral Performance in 2011 and 2015 Parliamentary Elections (Gunes 2020).

AKP’s policies indeed remained pragmatic on negotiations with the PKK, hinting that the AKP believed that more favourable policies towards the Kurds could politically marginalize the PKK. For example, to maintain the credibility of the ceasefire and talks with the PKK in 2013-15, the government refrained from launching any security operations against the PKK and its civic networks in the southeast. The military officials made 290 requests for such operations, and only eight were approved (International

Crisis Group 2015). The KCK/PKK utilized the unprecedented free hand in expanding its networks in Turkish Kurdish areas and bolster its parallel governance. The Imrali Peace Process, marked by the Öcalan's Newroz message read out in symbolic Diyarbakır in March 2013, over time became stalled.

The inherent issues included lack of exact time frame for steps in conflict resolutions and benchmarks during the talks between insurgents and the state, extreme ambiguity and uncertainty since it was not legally grounded and primarily AKP government-driven, and failure to comply with commitments on both sides (e.g., PKK's promise to withdraw from Turkish soil) (Çiçek and Çoskun 2016). Effectively, this lack of clarity and commitment offered both insurgency and the AKP enough wiggle room to backpedal on the whole process without paying high costs and being credibly blamed as spoilers of peace. The only tangible result apart from the 2.5-year ceasefire was, in fact, February 28, 2015, Dolmabahçe Declaration between the government and the HDP members responsible for communicating with jailed Öcalan and the PKK leadership showing that "(...) *there was an agreement for "PKK to go to Congress to replace armed struggle with democratic politics" in exchange for the negotiations to be led around a new constitution based on a pluralistic democratic system.*" (ibid., 10)

In the June 7, 2015 elections, the AKP scored only Pyrrhic victory with 40.87% (compared to almost 50% in 2011), unable for the first time since 2002 to form a single-party government. In turn, the HDP secured a historical success with 13.12%. The AKP arguably not only lost voters to the HDP, a party which it sought to marginalize but also lost a chunk of Turkish nationalist voters who frowned upon talks with the PKK. Subsequently, president Erdoğan took a pragmatic U-turn, openly scrapping the Dolmabahçe Agreement on July 17, 2015, saying that "*I, by no means, accept the expression of Dolmabahçe agreement. (...) An agreement cannot be made with those who lean their backs on the terrorist organization (meaning the PKK, author's note).*" (Daily Sabah 2015)

AKP's policies then focused on counterinsurgency efforts as the PKK resumed its armed struggle and fought in Kurdish cities. The urban fighting brought immense destruction as the Turkish security forces re-assumed control over parts of Diyarbakır, Nusaybin, Cizre, Şırnak, or Silopi by mid-2016. The government, in turn, extended its social assistance programs to alleviate the conflict consequences. It announced the 'social mobilization' (sosyal seferbelik) in 2016 to meet the basic needs, organize various reconciliation meetings, provide compensations, and family support programs targeting these cities (Yoltar and Yörük 2020; see also International Crisis Group 2016b). PM Davutoğlu noted in Mardin in February 2016: "*We will bandage all the wounds of terror.*" (Yoltar and Yörük 2020, 2) Consequently, the AKP government still tries to maintain or expand its support among the Kurdish voters.

In parallel to these developments, the government decisively cracked down upon HDP and DBP politicians in an even accelerated manner following the July 2016 coup attempt. 5,471 HDP party officials were detained since the coup attempt until March 2017, while 1,482 were placed in pre-trial detention

(Human Rights Watch 2017). The DBP recorded 3,547 officials in pre-trial detention in July 2015-March 2017 (ibid.). Following the May 20, 2016, parliamentary vote, immunity was also lifted for the 55 out of 59 HDP MPs (ibid.). On November 4, 2016, 12 HDP MPs, including co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested (BBC News 2016). The HDP/DBP also lost control over most of its municipalities by March 2017 as mayors were suspended in 82 out of 103 DBP-held municipalities and replaced by Ankara-appointed ‘trustees’ (kayyum) (Human Rights Watch 2017). The post-2015 crackdowns were also accompanied by the closing down of Kurdish non-governmental organizations linked to the KCK/PKK.

Since mid-2015 and even more notably after the July 2016 coup attempt, the AKP, thus, returned to the heavy-handed repressive measures to dismantle the KCK/PKK-linked political structures and military-focused counterinsurgency against the PKK both on Turkish soil and in cross-border incursions to northern Iraq. As opposed to 2009-14, these policies are not accompanied even by piecemeal attempts to introduce favourable policies aimed at Kurds. Despite the unprecedented attempt to cripple the HDP/DBP by mass arrests and stripping them of control over municipalities, the HDP prevailed as illustrated by its electoral performance during the June 24, 2018 parliamentary elections when it secured 11.7% votes.

8.1.3 Incumbent’s Power

Already by 1998, it was apparent that Turkey can defeat the PKK militarily. The 1990s attempts to shift PKK’s insurgency’s gravity to conventional warfare of two relatively equal dyads failed. The PKK was unable to wrestle control of swathes of Turkish territory both in rural and urban areas to create ‘liberated zones.’ In the post-2004 insurgency, little changed as even at the height of PKK’s armed struggle, it failed in controlling even remote border areas of Şemdinli in Hakkâri province in 2012. Similarly, attempts to wrestle control over parts of towns such as Şırnak, Diyarbakır, Nusaybin, or Cizre in mid-2015 to mid-2016 met with a decisive, albeit destructive, response from the state. As Ünal (2016) notes, the Turkish counterinsurgency approach usually reacted developed slowly or in reaction to the PKK’s developing strategies. Although the PKK was arguably more dynamic in changing their modus operation in reaction to the Turkish response, Ankara was always able to maintain military superiority.

The Turkish army is the second largest in NATO after the US, having 355,200 active and 380,000 reserve personnel in 2018 (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2018). Moreover, Turkey spent \$19 billion in 2018, with a 65% increase between 2009 and 2018 (Tien 2019). High manpower itself, primarily stemming from obligatory military service, does not guarantee adequate counterinsurgency capabilities. Turkey was gradually improving its tactics and capabilities in engaging the PKK from utilizing fixed military installations and conscripts to increase manpower to larger-scale search and cordon operations (Ünal 2016). Finally, since 2008, Turkey employed intelligence-driven, rapid response

deployment of special forces combined with aerial operations to engage insurgents (ibid.). The PKK also adapted to utilizing smaller cells and units preoccupied primarily with using IEDs and hit and run tactics (Kaválek 2013). By 2011, all specialized counterinsurgency units within the military became professionalized. Ankara was also increasingly able to employ advanced military technologies, including helicopters with thermal vision, en masse air cavalry deployment, and real-time tactical support by attack helicopters (Ünal 2016).

Arguably the single most important shift was the proliferation of both armed and unarmed UAVs to monitor and engage the PKK targets not only on Turkish soil but also in its safe havens of northern Iraq. While Ankara, in the past, procured a few surveillance UAVs from the US (1996) and Israel's Heron UAVs (2006), it embarked on developing one of the most dynamic and successful domestic drone programs in the world (Axe 2020). Apart from a variety of surveillance UAVs, Turkey employs a fleet of some 75 Bayraktar TB-2 armed drones that were since 2014 widely used in the anti-PKK operations both on Turkish soil and in Iraq and Syria (Farooq 2019).

Turkey is also able to project its military power in Iraq and Syria against the PKK. Cross-border incursions to the mountains of northern Iraq to counter the PKK in its safe havens and disrupt its logistics were common, as in 1984-2002, at least 25 such operations were conducted (Ünal 2016). Nevertheless, the incursions did not seem to have a significant long-term influence on downgrading the PKK's ability to stir trouble inside Turkey. Apart from maintaining up to 18 permanent bases in the KRI, Turkey increased its efforts by building up even more permanent military outposts to disrupt the PKK's logistics since 2018 in mountainous areas across the border from Hakkâri's Derecik-Şemdinli and Çukurca districts in Sidakan and Bradost vicinity (ISW News 2019).

Additionally, Turkey managed to raise its stakes in the Syrian civil war, arguably primarily to counter the PKK-linked administration led by the PYD and the military wing YPG. During the Euphrates Shield Operation in August 2016-March 2017, Turkey pushed back ISIS and assumed control over the border between the western bank of the Euphrates river and Afrin district, effectively preventing linking the PYD-held Afrin with Kurdish-controlled areas east of Euphrates (Gurcan 2019). In January-March 2018, during Operation Olive Branch, it successfully fought the YPG in Afrin (ibid.). Ankara embarked on engineering ethnic changes in the area, in Afrin in particular, to displace the Kurdish population and set on building full-fledged administration in occupied areas (see van Leeuwen and van Veen 2019).

In the aftermath of the July 2016 military coup attempt, Turkey took an increasingly authoritarian turn. Ankara embarked under the auspices of the AKP and president Erdoğan on an unprecedented wave of personal changes both among the security forces, public offices, judiciary, education, and private sector. A bulk of efforts was explicitly aimed at the law enforcement and the military, sacking individuals considered as tied to the Gülen Movement (albeit many of them had nothing to do with Gülen and were

simply deemed undesirable). These purges considerably disintegrated the abilities of the state's bureaucracy, judiciary, law enforcement, and military (see Bozkurt 2020; Yayla 2017). However, it appears that at the very least, the state's ability to keep the PKK insurgency and networks in check did not diminish.

As Kilcullen (2010) argues, counterinsurgency is a whole-of-government effort, not limited to military and law enforcement. Economic power and political stability are also crucial indicators that could weaken the state's effort and, in turn, favour the insurgent. Economically, Turkey performed relatively well, seeing a boom after the troubled 1990s plagued by high inflation rates and culminating in the 1999-2001 banking and economic crisis (Macovei 2009). The country's GDP experienced remarkable growth from \$273 billion in 2000 to \$771 billion in 2018 (World Bank 2020). In the aftermath of the attempted coup in July 2016, the economy stagnated. The ensuing political instability and authoritarian turn of the AKP government prompted inflation crisis in 2018, with the Turkish Lira also losing 34% of its value against US dollar between January and August 2018 (BBC News 2018). Generally, well economic performance prompted higher public investments in the country, including in Kurdish-majority provinces and, most importantly, an unprecedented proliferation of social welfare programs discussed in Chapter 8.1.2.

Under the AKP, Turkey experienced shifts towards democratization in 2002-07, then piecemeal erosion of the democratic reforms towards authoritarianism in 2008-14 and finally an apparent turn toward authoritarianism post-July 2016 coup attempt (Kaválek 2020; Kirişci and Sloat 2019). The 2005 and 2006 were earmarked by the highest percentile of political stability, according to the World Bank's Worldwide Government Indicator: 27.67 and 27.05, respectively (World Bank 2020b). Subsequently, there was a significant decrease in political stability. Following the military tutelage's dismantling utilizing Europeanization and democratization discourses by 2007, the AKP struck further back against the ancient regime. In 2009 to stability percentile 15.64, the AKP embarked on a series of 'monster processes' with hundreds of high-ranking military officials (Ergenekon and Balyoz) (ibid.). Setbacks in democratization efforts marked efforts to reconstruct the tutelary institutions overseeing the military, education, judiciary, and media under the AKP loyalists' control (Kaválek 2020). In 2013, the AKP government faced mass country-wide protests erupting in Istanbul's Gezi Park, and the stability percentile decreased to 10.9. Finally, in 2016, after the failed military coup, the percentile dropped to 4.76 and only recovered to 10.48 in 2018 (ibid.).

Nevertheless, despite these turbulent events, the government never lost its grasp over the Kurdish-majority areas, and its military and bureaucratic power did not decrease there significantly. Albeit, its effectiveness was temporarily affected by mass arrests and sacking of bureaucrats, soldiers, members of the judiciary, and police after the 2016 coup attempt.

8.1.4 Presence of Active Rivalry

Gürbüz (2016) identifies three main currents with long-standing grass-root presence and influence over Turkish Kurdish society chiefly in the country's southeast. Apart from the secular-Leftist Kurdish ethnonationalist movement, represented by the PKK, these are Islamist currents, Kurdish Hizbullah, and the Gülen Movement (Hizmet). The latter two actors were serious active rivals to the PKK, competing for the hearts minds of the Kurds through charities, social and educational programs, political activity, mobilizing political support, and maintaining the gravity within the society through indoctrinating the Kurdish youth. The third actor acting out as an active rival is the state, chiefly represented by the pro-Islamist AKP. AKP's shifting policies that put it into a rival position to the PKK are described in detail in Chapter 8.1.2. As a popular saying asserts, the AKP is the biggest Kurdish political party in Turkey. The AKP, introducing more favourable policies towards the Kurdish population, social security, and service provision in the southeast, and stressing common Sunni identity, managed to build up considerable support among Turkish Kurds.

Much of Turkish Kurdish society, majority Sunni subscribing to a more orthodox Shafi'i school of jurisprudence compared to the Hanafi rite, dominant among Turks, remains religiously conservative and driven by traditional societal structures such as clans and tribes. Consequently, pro-Islamist actors find fertile ground among the Kurds. The PKK eased on its ideological enmity towards religion already in the 1990s (Özcan 2006). It even established local imams' associations, introduced Civil Friday Prayers, founded the Democratic Islam Congress, or put on electoral lists well-known conservative figures since 2011 (see Kurt 2019; Çiçek 2013; Karakoç and Sarıgil 2020). However, its ideology, political program, and the overall outlook of PKK-linked structures remain inherently secular, and the organization failed to convince much of pious Kurds. After all, Öcalan still maintained in 2012 that *"Feudal institutions like tribes, sheikdom, aghas and sectarianism, which are essentially relics of the Middle Ages, are like the institutions of classic nation-states obstacles in the way of democratization. They must be urged appropriately to join the democratic change. These parasitic institutions must be overcome with top priority."* (Öcalan 2009, 34) As a result, the pool of supporters for Islamist actors among the Turkish Kurds at the PKK's expense remains steady over the years.

Voting behaviour, especially in rural areas, among Kurds remains determined by the traditional societal structures as tribal leaders determine which bloc the constituency will vote for. Before the June 2015 elections, tribes traditionally supporting the state or the AKP shifted allegiance to the HDP (Tastekin 2015). Patterns of co-optation of certain Kurdish tribes and clans in rural areas are the long-established Turkish state's strategy and the AKP to assert control over Kurdish areas. Consequently, the competition over Kurdish support between the PKK and its rivals goes along two major lines. Firstly, earning the support of tribal leaders, particularly in more rural areas. The PKK and the PKK-linked actors pragmatically engage tribes and tribal leaders despite considering these 'feudal structures' as relicts

endangering democratization (Öcalan 2009). Secondly, mustering grass-root support in urban spaces, accenting mobilization, and recruiting youth and poorer segments of society.

Karakoç and Sarıgil (2020) show that religiosity itself, both public and private (pious), does not constraint support for an ethnic rebellion. Even religious Kurds view the secular PKK as a legitimate organization representing the Kurdish cause, and variations of this perception stem from economic and political grievances and discrepancies between AKP's rhetoric and real policies (ibid.). In 2011, when the PKK embarked on a more violent campaign, and many were still hopeful about the government's Kurdish Opening, 48.8% believed PKK is a terrorist organization, and only 29.1% asserted it as representing Kurds (ibid.). In 2013, frustration over stagnated government reforms prevailed, and the Roboski incident, an aerial bombardment killing 34 civilians on December 28, 2011, assuming they were PKK insurgents, ended without any ramification or punishment for the mistake undermining the government's credibility further (Tastekin 2013). Consequently, 44.7% believed the PKK is a terrorist organization, and 53.3% considered the PKK representing the Kurdish cause (Karakoç and Sarıgil 2020). Consequently, the competition over hearts and minds of the Kurdish population remains pretty much alive as the religiousness does not necessarily prevent the support of pious Kurds for PKK's ethnically, secularly, and radically leftist-driven rebellion.

Hizbullah

Kurdish Hizbullah emerged during the 1980s as a Sunni Islamist movement in Diyarbakır (see Kurt 2017). Yet, it became more influential only in the 1990s during its bloody clashes with the PKK costing more than 1000 lives in 1992-95 (Bibermen 2016). Its clashes spread throughout the southeastern cities such as Mardin and Batman, clashing with PKK-linked urban networks. XX asserts that the group was particularly strong in organizing high schools and mosques (Gürbüz 2016).

The common notion was that the Turkish state not only turned a blind eye to the Hizbullah's activities and used them as a veteran proxy in order to counter the rising influence of the PKK in cities as Hizbullah in teams of two to four conducted assassinations against the PKK supporters (Biberman 2016). Turkey essentially viewed Hizbullah as a useful tool against the PKK, complementing the state's official promotion of Sunni orthodoxy over ethnic Kurdish identity. Hizbullah named the PKK its enemy number one labelling it as *Partiya Kafirin Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Infidel Party) (Gürbüz 2016). Nevertheless, in 2000 as the PKK insurgency waned down with Öcalan captured, the police decisively dismantled the Hizbullah in series of operations, with most of the leadership and operatives captured, killed (such as its leader Hüseyin Velioglu) or fleeing abroad (Cakir 2007).

With the organisation in disarray, the remainder shifted from violence and tried to re-establish itself as a civic movement. In 2004, the organisation resurfaced as the Association for the Oppressed (Mustazaflar-Der) while adopting a more pro-Kurdish approach. Mustazaflar-Der gradually established

itself as a relatively influential grass-roots organisation. *“Its success was a result of its propaganda reinforced by a campaign of social assistance to the poorest sections of the community through some 20 branches in different cities.”* (Elitsoy 2017, 10) Competition over the same pool of supporters resulted once again in rising tensions between KCK networks and Mustazaflar-Der, despite short of outright violent hostilities comparable to the 1990s. While Mustazaflar-Der was closed down in a court decision in April 2012 due to its supposed support for Hizbullah (listed as terrorist organization by Ankara), the movement did not lose its gravity and established a legal political party Hûda-Par on December 17, 2012 (Gursel 2012). Jenkins (2020) asserted that Hizbullah *“(...) focused on strengthening its social base by creating a huge network of Islamic NGOs, charities, soup kitchens, Koran courses, bookshops and media outlets across Turkey.”* To illustrate its growing influence and ability to mobilize supporters, on April 18, 2010, Hizbullah was able to organize a gathering attended by estimated 120 thousand to celebrate the Prophet’s Birthday (ibid.). In 2006, it was able to attract 50,000 people in a similar event (Gursel 2012). That indeed challenged the PKK’s grasp over symbolic Diyarbakır showing that not only the PKK is able to mobilize mass demonstration and subversive actions such as organizing general strikes. Only in Diyarbakır, up to 20 Hizbullah-linked organizations were believed to operate in 2012 (Jenkins 2020).

Ideologically, personally, and organisationally, the Hûd-Par is a successor of Hizbullah and Mustazaflar-Der. Moreover, it is led by Mehmet Huseyin Yilmaz, former head of the Mustazaflar-Der (Gurses 2012). However, as Al (2017) notes, *“Although the militant Hizbullah aimed to overthrow the secular Turkish state and establish God’s rule, Hûda-Par today seeks to promote a pro-Islamic and pro-Kurdish agenda within the legal political sphere.”* In 2014 municipal elections, Hûda-Par received 92,000 votes, third after the BDP, and the AKP in Kurdish majority-provinces. According to Görbüz (2016), entering electoral competition also prompted new interaction with PKK-linked actors, including attacks on Hûda-Par’s politicians and party offices. Its pool of supporters remains relatively modest, yet it maintains stable support as *“The HÛDA-PAR is ideologically positioned between the AK Party and the HDP. In other words, it has both ethnic nationalist and conservative tendencies.”* (Alptekin 2018) Compared to June 2015 elections, in November 2018, it was able to more than double its vote from 70,000 to 155,000, maintaining stable support in Batman, Bingöl, and Diyarbakır.

Spillover from the war in Syria, increasingly dominated by radical Islamist groups, prompted many recruits from Turkey to travel to the battlefields joining ISIS in particular. Turkey became one of the main access points for foreign fighters flocking to Syria and Iraq, while ISIS operatives built extensive networks to facilitate their travel and foster local recruitment.⁶⁹ In October 2015, Gurcan asserted that over 3,000 Turkish citizens joined ISIS ranks, 65% were Kurds (Gurcan 2015). Only from Bingöl province, 600 Kurds joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq (Bozarlsan 2015). Kurt (2017) asserts that Hizbullah’s

⁶⁹ See Stein’s (2016) analysis of ISIS networks in Turkey.

legalization prompted many of its more radical members to join ISIS or other al-Qaeda-linked groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra as foreign fighters.

The proliferation of solidarity and mobilization against ISIS attacks against Syrian Kurds led by the PKK's Syrian branch, the YPG, iconically defending encircled city of Kobanî in September 2014-March 2015, further worsened the relations with Hûda-Par. Similarly, Turkey's Kurdish Islamists became increasingly attracted and mobilized by the battle-provess of ISIS across the border. While the connection between Hûda-Par-linked networks and ISIS is unclear (and staunchly denied), the KCK maintained in December 2014 that "*Hür-Dava Party is as much Muslim as the Islamic State,*" while adding it is Kurdish Hizbullah in disguise and works as a proxy of the Turkish state against the Kurds (Ekurd 2014). Since October 2014, enmities further escalated when riots and street violence, including all familiar tit-for-tat assassinations, resulted in dozens Hûda-Par and the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (in Turkish, Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi, YDG-H) killed across the southeast (Jones 2015). The YDG-H was a PKK-linked youth group, active in cities since 2013. Hûda-Par and linked associations such as the Özgür-Der were blamed for sending food aid to Islamist rebels in Syria, including ISIS, and were targeted in Van, Diyarbakır, Cizre or Silopi by the YDG-H supporters (Butler 2013). The attacks against the Hûda-Par networks continued since then, in particular since the PKK renewed its armed struggle in mid-2015 and 2016.

The Gülen Movement aka the Hizmet

Jager asserts that the Islamist Gülen Movement (commonly also known as Hizmet), led by US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, is a modern incarnation of Charles Tilly's social movement: "*It is a movement in Turkey with transnational appeal that promotes pious, market-based activism based on traditions of Turkish culture and the unique Turkish approach to Islam and is focused on youth enrichment and education that aims to shape the nature of the Turkish state and society in order to re-assert religion in the public sphere, and possibly gain control of the machinations of government in the process.*" Gülenists became more active in Turkey's southeast since the 1990s, yet their imprint rapidly increased in the 2000s. It is most active along two axes, education and charitable work, which puts it at odds with the PKK-linked leftist secular movement.

Koç (2013) asserts that since 1988, when Hizmet opened its first educational institution in Kurdish-majority areas, their numbers almost doubled each year, reaching 289 in 2009 with over 84,000 students. These institutions include university exam preparation centers, private schools (generally superior to the public ones) and tutoring centers. Koç (ibid., 183) notes that "*People in the movement have established these institutions in remote areas, where often no person had continued in school beyond age fifteen.*" He further argues that in areas where such institutions operate, the youth is less prone to support and join the PKK and become less sympathetic to the PKK (ibid.).

Similarly to Hûda-Par, Gülenists outreached to the Kurdish population through a variety of charities and social programs. Notably, branches of its charitable organisation Kimse Yok Mu began to open in the southeast in 2004 (Gürbüz 2016). Its programs included assistance to low-income families during Muslim holidays and even humanitarian assistance such as after the 2006 flooding of cities. Already in 2007, its outreach during the Eid al-Adha holiday supported 60,000 families (ibid.). Gürbüz (ibid., 86) further notes that “(...) *the AKP government benefited the movement’s charity activism because of the movement’s long-term support for the AKP policies in the Southeast. In fact, like all political parties, the AKP makes donations to the poor especially before election periods. Yet, Hizmet activists’ persistent charity efforts benefited the AKP since it was framed as a sign of Islamic brotherhood.*”

The competition between Gülen-linked networks of education and charities, the PKK, and the more radical Islamist currents was mostly short of outright violence. Nevertheless, in 2012, Zaman’s (Gülen-linked newspaper) regional representative Aziz Istegun lamented that “*It is like a competition between the Movement, the PKK and Hizbullah,*” and added that “*Of course, the extremists aren’t happy. Sometimes our study rooms are firebombed in the middle of the night, although nobody has been hurt yet.*” (Jenkins 2020) The PKK-linked actors, however, remained strongly critical towards Gülenists activities. Following the 2007 elections in which the AKP polled well among Kurds, the DTP co-chair Emine Ayna maintained that the AKP simply exploits Kurds’ religious feelings while relying on Gülenists (Gürbüz 2016). The PKK largely viewed Gülenists as in collusion with the government. As the AKP’s policies shifted towards talks with the PKK in Oslo 2006-11 or with the Democratic Opening initiative since 2009, the PKK’s stance also accordingly softened at such times. For example, Öcalan noted on December 6, 2010, that the Gülenists are “*quite a force, as we are,*” adding “*If these two forces were to show each other understanding and solidarity, several fundamental problems could be solved in Turkey.*” (Birch 2010) In turn, Zaman’s columnist Hüseyin Gülerce asserted on December 9 solving the Kurdish issue is “*vital for our future (...). What needs to be done: democratization (...) rule of law, equal rights, freedom of thought and expression (...).*” (ibid.)

Effectively, the Gülenists’ activities in the southeast pursued the AKP’s discourse of stressing the religious unity between the Kurds and Turks. Critics argued that Hizmet’s approach remains assimilationist as the state’s as it fails to acknowledge the significance of ethnic recognition as it sees “(...) *educating Kurdish youth and providing civic channels for economic development are seen as panacea for the root causes of ethnic tension.*” (Gurbuz 2015, 11)

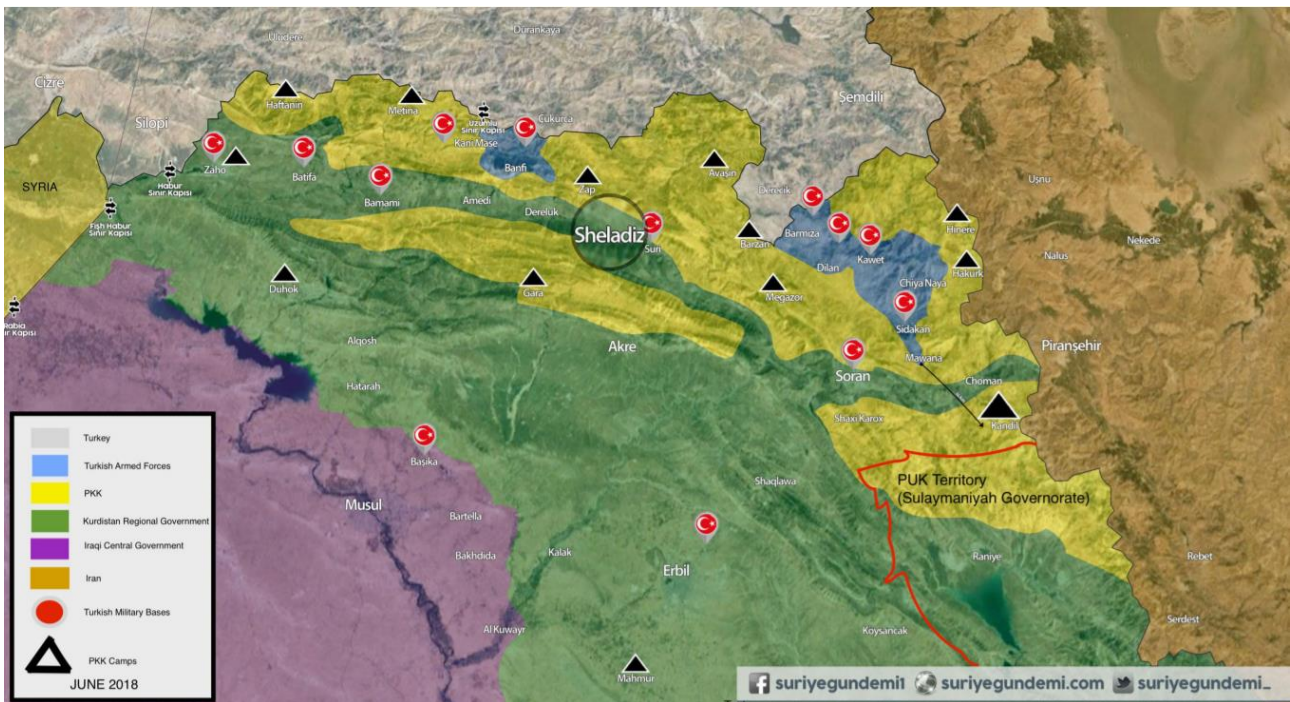
However, following Turkey’s coup attempt in July 2016, the AKP government labelled Hizmet as a terrorist organization, and an unprecedented crackdown on Gülen’s supporters and organizations crippled the Gülenists activities. International Crisis Group asserts that the AKP officials’ narrative construed that at the movement in the wake of the 2015 surge of insurgent violence in cities “(...) *played a role in the PKK mobilisation, alleging that FETÖ-linked (author’s note: meaning Gülen-linked) governors, police*

chiefs and military commanders acted in ways that put the government in a difficult situation, including purposely underreporting the gravity of the security problem in the south east.” (International Crisis Group 2017c, 6) Nevertheless, any collusion between the Gülenists and the PKK is most likely merely part of AKP’s propaganda against the once allied movement in the wake of its crackdown (see also Aktan 2016).

8.1.5 Other Variables: Safe Haven, Geography, External Support

The physical terrain of majority-Kurdish provinces in the southeast of Turkey favours insurgents. It is an area of continuously rugged mountainous terrain with peaks exceeding 3,000 meters. Especially in the Iraq-Iran-Turkey border area provides an ideal environment for the PKK. Mountainous provinces, chiefly Hakkâri and Şırnak, become the PKK’s main infiltration points from their safe haven in the KRI. The western-most point of infiltration remains Cudi and Gabar mountains in Şırnak (New York Times 2007). In these areas, we see the most insurgent activity (see Chapter 8.2.1). The PKK is comparably less active in rural lowlands of western Şırnak, Mardin, and Şanlıurfa that stretch further to Syria into the al-Jazira Plateau.

The connected mountain systems of Zagros in Iraq and Iran and Eastern Taurus provide an essential pathway for the PKK to move in and from Turkey at leisure. The PKK exercises dominant control over northern Iraq’s mountainous areas, albeit officially under the Kurdistan Regional Government’s administration in Erbil remain under rebel influence. These mountains contain a system of hideouts, cave systems, caches, camps, and roads for PKK’s logistics, such as the main valley road between Metina and Gara (road Bamarni-Amedi-Dereluk). Ultimately, these connect to the main PKK camps around the Qandil Mountain, where its leadership resides. Apart from frequent ad hoc cross-border raids, airstrikes, and larger-scale military operations, Turkey maintains 18 fixed bases and seasonal outposts in the KRI (Map 8.1.5; see also ISW News 2019). However, it could not deny the PKK its safe havens and prevent rebel infiltration on its soil.



Map 8.1.5: Turkish and PKK's Bases and Areas of Control in northern Iraq as of mid-2018 (Suriyegundemi 2018).

The prevailing ‘developmentalist’ mentality guiding the Turkish counterinsurgency efforts significantly influenced the physical terrain for insurgents. Most notably, since the 1980s, Ankara pursued the GAP intending to build a massive system of dams, hydroelectric stations, and irrigation networks to boost the local economy, agriculture in particular. The project, taking place in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, was also effectively used as a tool for further territorial control, cutting insurgent’s trails by new dams and flooding their hideouts and, in general, impeding their freedom of movement as a by-product. By 2013, 85% of hydroelectric stations were completed, while only 15% of irrigation networks were ready to use, suggesting that the state preferred to finalize the dam system first (Yörük and Özsoy 2013).

The PKK, usually citing ecological or cultural-social concerns (criticizing re-shaping the social fabric and displacing people due to filling out the dams), staunchly criticized GAP-related projects (see Kemman 2015). On many occasions, attacked, threatened, or sabotaged the construction efforts, such as in Diyarbakır province, where PKK militants attempted to blow up the Silvan dam on May 4, 2012 (International Crisis Group 2012). Similarly, the PKK staunchly opposed building the Illisu dam on the Tigris river between Şırnak and Mardin provinces, effectively cutting one of the crucial infiltration pathways for insurgents from Iraq (Cagaptay and Otun 2012).

Ankara before and after 2000 also considerably invested in improving transportation infrastructure, chiefly building asphalt roads even to remote mountainous areas to increase accessibility and mobility of security forces. In turn, the PKK frequently targeted construction efforts and transportation infrastructure through kidnappings of engineers and workers and arson. This tactics is

since the early 1990s and is frequently used also in 2004-18. As Marcus (2007) illustrates, PKK operatives then tried to convince the Nusaybin mayor to refuse the state's efforts to pave the streets. In the words of the PKK provincial commander: *"We say to you ... let the streets stay muddy," the PKK militant said, "that way, the tanks can't enter; you don't listen to us, that's why we burned the shed."* (ibid., 177) Similarly, the government invested into improving and building new military installations in order to alleviate for unfavourable terrain for counterinsurgency. These consist a large chunk of public investment in the region. For example, in Tunceli in 2006, 70% of state funds were directed to constructing military installations (Yörük and Özsoy 2013).

The infrastructure building efforts coined with environmental and human terrain changes due to the heavy-handed 1990s counterinsurgency policies were in general in favour of the incumbent. Among these were primarily waves of mass forced displacement of the village population to strip the PKK from a rural supporter base. The total number of displaced is unknown; however, credible estimates speak about 560,000 forcibly evacuated people by 2000 (Turkish Parliamentary Commission provided a figure of around 401,000 people in June 1998) (Norwegian Refugee Council 2004). The vast majority of displaced moved to poor neighbourhoods in the West, such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, or the southeastern Kurdish cities, chiefly Diyarbakır. Continuous urbanization also arguably contributed to the PKK's interest in building support and networks among urban Kurds, yet experimenting with full-fledged urban warfare only in mid-2015-mid-2016. As Lucas (2019, 61) argues, *"Theories of urban insurgencies suggest that the urbanization of a population overall leads to the urbanization of insurgencies."*

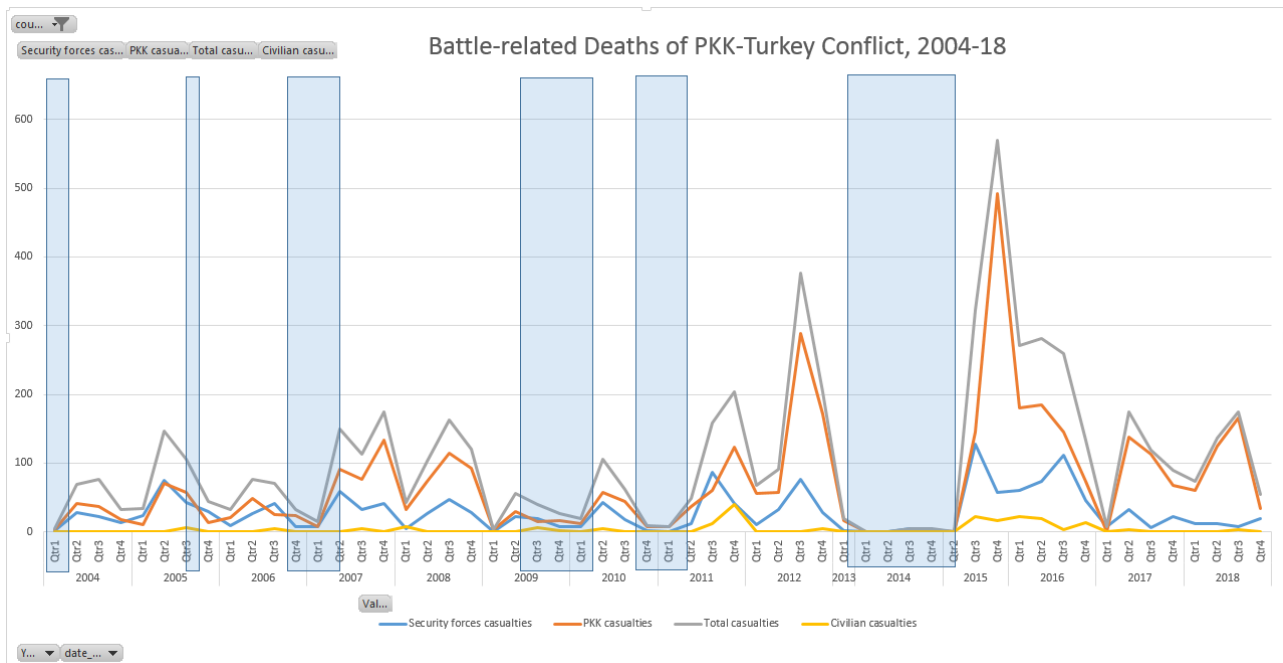
An additional significant component of Turkish counterinsurgency strategy changing the physical terrain was widespread deforestation to hamper insurgents' ability to move around under the trees' cover. For example, in Bingöl and Tunceli, the forest village population declined by 25% and 51% respectively in 1990-2000, compared to 1% in Adıyaman province where the PKK was not active (Gurses 2012). A similar suit could be encountered in Diyarbakır's Lice and Kulp districts with a decline of 43% and 63% compared to Cermik (7%) and Cungus (18%) without significant insurgents activity (ibid.). In Bingöl, for example, productive forest area decline from 4,326 hectares in 1984 to 1,391.5 hectares in 2005 (ibid.).

However, these alone can hardly attribute to the PKK's accent on political grass-root activity, urban areas, and decrease of intensity of the rural campaign, shift to smaller unit tactics, the proliferation of the use of the IED and in general attacking softer targets in 2004-18 (see Chapter 8.2.1). These shifts are chiefly results of acknowledgment of the inability to reach military victory. Secondly, they can be attributed to the increase of incumbent's power in terms of military counterinsurgency capabilities and evolving state policies during the AKP government, devising a strategy to woo Kurds and erode public support for the PKK.

8.2 Insurgent Behaviour

8.2.1 Armed Conflict Intensity

The dynamics of armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state varied considerably in 2004-18. The UCDP (2020) dataset provides a useful overview to grasp the changing dynamic of the intensity of the armed conflict. However, there are significant differences in numbers provided by the state and the PKK as one appears to inflate the number of killed PKK militants and the other of killed members of security forces (see Tezcür 2014). In total, in 2000-18, 5,780 people were killed; out of that, 205 civilians, 1,575 members of security forces, and 3,924 insurgents (see Graph 8.2.1a below).



Graph 8.2.1a: Battle-related Deaths of PKK-Turkey Conflict, 2004-18 (prepared by the author; data from UCDP 2020; blue areas indicate ceasefires).

Conflict intensity significantly varied over time, but that was mainly due to the periods of declared ceasefires. After the first few years of renewed insurgency (2004-07) with lower intensity levels with few hundreds killed per year, the conflict's intensity steadily grew to over 800 in 2012 (UCDP 2020). Given the PKK's preference to wage rural warfare coined with subversive and political activities in urban spaces, the conflict consequences in the term of IDPs or level of material destruction were low. Nevertheless, the urban warfare shift in mid-2015-mid-2016 brought conflict consequences associated with high-intensity conflict – if not in casualty tallies, in unprecedented levels of IDPs (up to 355,000; Stein 2016b) and immense destruction of housing, economy, and infrastructure in a number of cities. Weapons used are associated with medium intensity conflict, especially the proliferation of IEDs, yet deployment levels were mostly in small units of tens, even less. Larger-scale deployment, such as the 2012 attempt to control Şemdinli areas in Hakkâri, is rare and exclusively limited to the proximity of the rugged terrain of the

Turkey-Iraq-Iran border. The only exception is PKK's experiment with urban warfare, where hundreds of fighters were deployed.

Armed Conflict Intensity, PKK-Turkey, 2004-18					
Period	Conflict Consequences			Conflict Means of Insurgent	
	Battle-related Deaths	IDPs and Refugees	Level of Destruction	Weapons Used	Level of Deployments
2004-14	200-800 per year (outside ceasefires), steady increase 2010-12	No significant numbers reported	Lower levels of destruction, limited damage to infrastructure, focus on rural operations	Light arms prevail, but the use of explosive devices, RPGs, mortars occurs	Small units of tens of combatants, small scale ad hoc operations often in a hit and run style
2015-mid-2016	Around 1500 battle-related deaths	Up to 350 thousand displaced from urban areas in the southeast	significant destruction of housing, infrastructure, and economy during the urban campaign	Light arms prevail, but the use of explosive devices, RPGs, mortars occurs	Medium-sized units in the urban campaign, youth fighters with seasoned PKK veterans as a force multiplier
Mid-2016-2018	Around 800 battle-related deaths per year	No significant numbers reported	Lower levels of destruction, shift to rural campaign	Light arms prevail, but the use of explosive devices, RPGs, mortars occurs	return to small units hit and run style, rural guerrilla campaign

Table 8.2.1: Armed Conflict Intensity, PKK-Turkey, 2004-18 (prepared by the author).

As Tezcür (2014) notes, regardless of the discrepancies between reported battle-related deaths on the side of the Turkish state and the PKK, the fighting remains highly professionalized with a relatively low number of civilian casualties. The dynamics of armed clashes significantly changes over time. Firstly,

as the PKK, except for 2015-16, engages mainly in rural warfare, in winter and early spring months, there are very few operations due to severe weather conditions and PKK's forces' hibernation in their hideouts mainly in northern Iraq. Secondly, there is a significantly lower number of battle-related deaths during unilateral ceasefires declared by the PKK. Since 2000, there were six ceasefires (Ünal 2016):⁷⁰

- September 1, 1999-June 1, 2004;
- September 1, 2005-October 9, 2005;
- October 1, 2006- May 18, 2007;
- April 13, 2009-July 15, 2009;
- August 13, 2010-June 15, 2011;
- March 23, 2013-July 22, 2015.

These are often declared prior or during elections (2006-07), at times when the government signals certain concessions to resolve the Kurdish question (2005, 2010-11), or when there is a negotiation between the PKK and Turkey (most notably 2009, 2010-11, 2013-15). In that sense, the PKK flexibly reacts to changes in the state's behaviour. The post-2000 PKK clings to the mantra that it seeks negotiated settlement through political negotiations with Ankara to achieve its goals of the Democratic Autonomy. It does not want to lose its credibility and popular support by being perceived as an aggressor when the government introduces glimpses of positive policies to improve the Kurds' situation (on the AKP's strategy of piecemeal concession to politically marginalize the PKK see Chapter 8.1.2 and Kaválek and Šmíd).

The notion of self-defence has a firm grounding both in PKK's ideology and justification for the use of violence. Öcalan maintains that *"Democratic societies are the most advanced existences of nature and they could not show up and endure their existence without self-defence."* (Öcalan 2012, 34) The DTK's 2011 outline of the Democratic Autonomy notes that *"Self-defence is a security policy for the moral and political society. The self-defence dimension does not only mean the military defence of society. In fact it means the protection of identity, politicisation and democratisation."* (Democratic Society Congress 2011, 24) The discourse of the need and right to self-defence (never aggression or violent expansion), not only against military attacks but also against non-violent actions that are perceived by the PKK as threatening to its policies and goals remains one of the prominent parts of justifying the need to take up to mobilize the society and take up arms. For example, PKK commander Cemil Bayık noted on the eve of collapsing ceasefire in July 2020 that *"Our people should*

⁷⁰ In total, the PKK declared nine unilateral ceasefires until 2018, the first taking place March 20, 1993-May 24, 1993 (Çandar 2012).

improve self-defense consciousness and organization. This should not be solely on the basis of expanding military power; the community should improve its self-defense [abilities]. Our entire community should take up arms, educate itself on this ground and get organized.” (Daily Sabah 2015)

The imminent interest in maintaining popular support was apparent after the urban warfare experiment in 2015-16, which was perceived as highly unpopular among previously sympathetic Kurds. The PKK had trouble with convincingly selling the armed campaign’s resumption in such a destructive urban manner after the 2.5-years ceasefire. Since mid-2016 it returned to rural campaign despite having trouble to maintain its intensity. Tezcür (2014, 174) arrives at similar conclusion, explaining the changing dynamics primarily against the background of government policies and ongoing negotiations: *“The intensity of clashes steadily increased from 2002 to 2008 before significantly declining in 2009 when the AKP government initiated negotiations with the PKK leadership. However, with the failure of the 2009 negotiations, the armed conflict gained a new momentum in 2011 and 2012 and reached levels unprecedented since 1999.”*

Tezcür (2009, 174) notes that the June 2004 resumption of violence after four years of the ceasefire *“(…) was primarily a function of the insurgent leadership’s fear of losing control over its constituency.”* Seeing AKP’s government push for political and judicial EU accession-driven reforms (Casier 2010), the PKK feared political marginalization. Another contributing factor was simply the fact that shock and retreat after Öcalan’s capture and period of organizational reconstruction (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011), refining its regional strategy and local strategy as dealing with competing factions within the PKK was concluded and allowed for a new push (see Chapter 6). Çandar (2012) also asserts that the resumption of armed struggle ordered by Öcalan on June 1, 2004, bolstered unity and set aside ideational differences within the organization.

As Tezcür (2014) notes, it validates Piconne’s (2017) argument that regimes that are democratizing or currently in the ‘grey zone’ as opposed to stable autocracies or democracies may be prone to ethnic violence. After 2009-11 when government pursued policies of the Kurdish Opening and PKK and representatives of the Turkish intelligence, MİT engaged in more talks in Oslo in 2006-11 (Kadioğlu 2019), or after 2015, the PKK always decisively resumed violence, apparently reacting to state’s policies and context threatening to strip it over its constituency.

To conclude, the PKK appears to volume down its armed struggle at the moments there seems to be a genuine push for more positive state’s policies towards the Kurdish minority and conflict resolution efforts. Nevertheless, when it feels that the government is not committed to genuine settlement, including the PKK, or the PKK feels that it is losing grip over the Kurdish political movement and popular opinion, it increases the intensity of its armed struggle.

Apart from developing state policies, the PKK also reacts to incumbent power changes, particularly the evolution of the Turkish counterinsurgency strategy. Ünal (2016) argues that the Turkish

state counterinsurgency strategy since the inception of the conflict reacted mainly ex post or rather slowly to novelties in PKK's waging insurgency. That is the main reason why the PKK insurgency was defeated only militarily. The PKK shows a great deal of flexibility in shaping its armed struggle coping with setbacks with novel approaches focusing on human landscape and political activities short of violence and consequently, as Pusane (2015, 727) argues, it "(...) *became apparent that Turkey's military defeat of the PKK could not bring an end to the insurgency.*" From the mid-90s until approximately 2008-09, Turkey pursued cordon and search tactics involving large military operations (Ünal 2016). By 2008, its approach started to shift into smaller targeted operations while utilizing special forces, air cavalry deployment, UAVs, and on-time intelligence allowing for rapid deployment (ibid.). Moreover, the Turkish military embarked on the professionalization of its counterinsurgency forces by 2011, namely the Ranger units within the five Commando Battalions stationed in Hakkâri, Siirt, Tunceli, Bolu, and Kayseri (ibid.).

After 2004, the PKK pursued widespread grass-roots political activities and network building in urban space within the KCK framework. It also shifted its overall modus operandi by conducting bombings, using IEDs, and organizing into smaller units and cells (Kaválek 2013). Mostly absent were tactics of the past, such as large-scale attacks on remote military outposts. The last major ones occurred on October 19, 2011, in Hakkâri, killing 24 soldiers (France24 2011). While fixed military installments are from time to time targeted, it is, as Jenkins (2007) notes, usually a quick hit and run attacks conducted by a small group. Aydın and Emrence (2015) also conclude that the PKK in 2004-08 moved from targeting immobile to mobile military targets utilizing IEDs in 66% of the incidents.

The PKK's shift to less confrontational military tactics in conventional engagements with the military is also underpinned by an apparent decrease of casualties among soldiers at the expense of police forces. Compared to the 90s, since 2004, we see a steady decrease of killed police officers that even surpasses killed Turkish soldiers in 2009 or 2011 (Ünal 2016). This indicates an urban shift and also the overall preference for softer targets. Changing the overall manpower of the PKK militants similarly reflects the acknowledgment of the inability to win a conventional insurgency. In 2012, the PKK had 8,000 insurgents in total and only 3,000 inside Turkey, while the rest mainly in northern Iraq (International Crisis Group 2012b). Ünal (2016) argues that since 2010, the Turkish military entirely shifted to monitor-detect-engage operations, which proved to be successful. The PKK's last attempt to create a 'liberated zone' in rural areas failed in 2012. Between July 23 and August 12, 2012, a large PKK force, including heavy weapons smuggled from across the Iraqi border, unsuccessfully tried to control Şemdinli town in Hakkâri (International Crisis Group 2012b). PKK commander Murat Karayılan asserted that "(...) *now we have [a] tactical agenda of striking and digging in, taking control of territory. That's why there's heavy warfare going on in Kurdistan (...)*" (ibid., 2) The next PKK's move in its military campaign attempted to create liberated zones within cities.

A Novel Shift to Urban Warfare in 2015?⁷¹

The PKK was no stranger to building influence over cities, as it established the ERNK as its urban wing already in 1985 to mobilize Kurds in urban spaces (Marcus 2007). Cities became even more critical for insurgency as the 90s state's displacement vacated around 30% of rural settlements in the OHAL provinces and created a mass of uprooted, poor and uneducated Kurds suddenly living in cities (Aydin and Emrence 2015). With the state failing to introduce policies alleviating their hardship, they became an ideal group for insurgent mobilization and created a network of recruits, supporters, and political structures. Since the 1990s, and more notably after 2004 and 2011, when the KCK arrests took place, the PKK's urban networks regularly organized rallies, demonstrations and marches, funerals for fallen fighters, and strikes, and business closures as a part of its subversive campaign. The shape of the state's heavy-handed countermeasures such as mass arrests, discriminatory policies, and existing horizontal inequalities towards Kurds made urban mobilization easier. Nevertheless, the PKK, until mid-2015, never emphasized urban warfare per se.

In May 2010, the PKK declared the '4th Period of Strategic Struggle' and announced the 'Revolutionary People's War Strategy' (see Serxwebûn 2011). Firstly, the PKK command emphasized the need for pursuing a 'democratic self-rule' (ANF 2019b). PKK's structures are also supposed to work proactively on performing state functions in the southeast of Turkey, which was already in hand in several remote hotbeds of PKK's presence, such as in Hakkâri and Şırnak. Secondly, next to traditional rural warfare, it emphasized urban campaign during which "(...) *the PKK aimed to control districts and streets so that the State's security forces wouldn't be able to enter these zones.*" (Kandemir 2013: 28) Furthermore, the commander-in-chief of the PKK Murat Karayılan noted in June 2011 that "*The revolutionary people's war is different. (...) The war will depend on the public masses and will spread to cities.*" (Cemal 2011) In other words, apart from the rural guerrilla campaign, the cities play a significant role in the two-pronged strategy: "*The guerrilla war in the mountains, the self-defence war in the cities (...).*" (ANF 2019b)

Therefore, it is clear that the PKK is no stranger to the idea of widespread urban revolutionary warfare, and the current shift to urban warfare is a result of a more extended transformation rather than a sudden decision. However, a reason for this gradual shift was indeed that the Turkish military improved its counterinsurgency operations and acquired better equipment for both surveillance and waging war in the mountains itself (Gurcan 2016). The rural campaign was not getting the PKK any further. Previously, the PKK had friendly networks in the southeastern cities, but the armed presence was usually ensured by ad hoc arrivals of PKK fighters from rural areas. Since early 2013, the PKK actively built more rigid and armed groups in cities, accompanied by increased efforts to impose governance.

⁷¹ Parts of the following paragraphs on PKK's urban shift are modified from author's previous publication (Kaválek 2016).

Since the ceasefire collapsed by July 2015, the armed conflict quickly moved to higher intensity while newly focusing on controlling and fighting in handpicked urban spaces within Kurdish cities and towns in the southeast. Hottest battlefields became areas in Silvan, Nusaybin, Sur in Diyarbakır, Cizre, Yüksekova, and Şırnak. As Yeşiltaş and Özçelik (2018, 8) note, these “(...) suburbs were selected where people’s grievances could easily be manipulated in order to support the PKK’s cause.” These areas would serve as a vanguard for the revolution that would “(...) culminate in a large scale people’s war by the PKK and its adjacent elements.” (ibid.) However, support for the PKK in Sur or Yüksekova was already traditionally high. These poor suburbs, especially in Sur, often comprised of disenfranchised politically active youth, some of them descendants of villagers forcefully displaced from rural areas in the 1990s as part of the Turkish counterinsurgency strategy. Areas adjacent to Syria, such as Cizre or Nusaybin, allowed for easier mobilization due to cross-border solidarity and almost first-hand experience with the success of the YPG/SDF fighting in northern Syria.

The PKK’s experiment with urban warfare further intensified in the third quarter of 2015 and continued until mid-2016. Since December 2015, the government decided for a wider deployment of the military, including heavier weaponry to conquer insurgent-controlled urban areas that quickly became encircled no-go zones. Considering the usual Turkish counterinsurgency approach, the military’s deployment on the mass scale inside urban areas in the southeast was a novelty, a response to changed PKK’s behaviour, dragging the fight primarily from the rural areas inside the cities. Before 2015, urban spaces were mainly serving as a recruitment and resource base, theatre of mostly non-violent political activities coined with an occasional targeted attack against surgically picked targets, such as police stations, state’s offices, or members and networks of rival groups.

Between August and October 2015, local pro-PKK politicians in 18 southeast towns declared autonomy (International Crisis Group 2015). Such a move enraged Ankara and prompted it to sack or arrest tens of municipal officials. In December 2015, the DTK convened and fully supported PKK’s urban strategy. Additionally, the DTK communiqué called for autonomy and strong decentralization, in line with PKK’s Democratic Autonomy (Kurdish Question 2015). Dalay (2016: 3) pointedly comments on these efforts: “The PKK has tried to replicate the experience of the PYD in the Kurdish part of Turkey by attempting to forcefully occupy some Kurdish neighbourhoods and towns, declaring what it calls ‘democratic self-governance’ and de facto wresting political authority over these areas from central government.” Simultaneously, violence between the state security forces and youth groups quickly spread.

Armed youth groups denied entry to Turkish authorities and wrestled over control of many urban districts. Ankara eventually called in the army into the cities in December 2015. Over time, the state also responded with a declaration of both round-o-clock and night-time curfews. At least 63 curfews were declared between August 2015 and March 2016 in 7 cities, while some lasted more than three months

(e.g., Diyarbakır's Sur and Bağlar districts, Cizre, Nusaybin or Silopi) (Human Rights Foundation of Turkey 2016). The amount of societal and economic destruction is striking: businesses had to close down, hundreds of homes were destroyed, and an estimated 355.000 people had to leave their homes facing fierce clashes between the PKK and the security forces (Stein 2016b). Apart from several thousands of dead, widespread arrests of PKK-linked people occurred: till March, 10,326 people were detained, out of which 3,387 were arrested (Bozarslan 2016).

In the past, urban youth willing to join the cause would be almost exclusively sent to the mountains after spending time active within PKK-linked networks. This was no longer necessarily the case as the PKK established its youth urban wing YDG-H, expanded and consolidated its urban networks. The YDG-H members were then the backbone of initial post-July 2015 build-up in cities with footsoldiers often in their teens.

YDG-H's formation was announced by the pro-PKK television channel SterkTV in February 2013 (SterkTV 2013). In the upcoming months, local branches were organized, and eventually, in July 2013, there was a ceremony in Diyarbakır where more than 50 YDG-H members pose in a video (International Crisis Group 2015). More local branches of the YDG-H resurfaced in towns like Cizre, Silopi, or Şırnak throughout 2013. Already in December 2012, PKK leader Karayılan hinted that a great responsibility fell on youth and called for a youth revolution to oppose the government's policies in the southeast (ibid.). Although the PKK commander Cemil Bayık described the YDG-H as a youth organization without ties to the PKK, such a statement is not true (Beck 2016). Moreover, YDG-H's structures and other pro-PKK networks in cities largely benefited from the Peace Process in 2013-15, when Turkish security forces were conducting almost no operations, and thus, PKK's urban structures both armed and for governance were given unprecedented breathing space.

The YDG-H became well-known in late 2014 and early 2015, when it became a vanguard for riots and demonstrations against Turkish indifference to the siege of the YPG-defended Syrian town Kobani and alleged Ankara's support of ISIS (Salih and Stein 2015). More than 30 people died alone in October 2014 during those clashes, which were aimed against the Turkish state and concurrent Kurdish groups, namely Islamist Hüda-Par.

YDG-H was established in alignment with PKK's shift to 'urban revolution'; it is armed, trained, and injected with experienced PKK members who serve as a force multiplier or specialists such as snipers or IED experts (Blaser and Stein 2016). Moreover, it is no coincidence that the fiercest clashes now occur in towns adjacent to PYD-controlled areas in Syria (such as Nusaybin, Cizre, Kiziltepe), where presumably hundreds of young Kurds were engaged in the fight for PKK's Syrian wing PYD, which fiercely battled with ISIS since the summer of 2014. Many of them returned to Turkey. Bozarslan (2016) observes a long list of similarities between the YDG-H's and PYD's warfare: usage of booby traps,

digging trenches, IEDs, tunnels, and safe passages between the buildings. Widespread usage of the internet to disseminate propaganda messages of heroic deeds of YDG-H fighters is also a relatively new phenomenon for the PKK (at least to this extent). Previously, during riots, youth were mostly using Molotov cocktails or rocks as their weapon of choice. Around 45% of the Turkish security forces killed in 2015-16 urban fighting was reportedly due to IEDs (Blaser and Stein 2016).

In late December 2015, PKK leader Cemil Bayik revealed that *“The civil war in Turkey will greatly intensify in the coming months.”* He added that *“We [the PKK] reserve the right to deploy more fighters to Kurdish cities in Turkey because our duty is to protect the people [in Kurdish cities].”* (Ekurd 2015b) Moreover, in December 2015, the Civil Protection Units (in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Sivîl (YPS), were established, taking inspiration from PKK’s Syrian armed wing, the YPG (International Crisis Group 2017c). The YPS consists mainly of YDG-H members, but it can be perceived as a step to assert firmer PKK’s control over youth groups in urban areas. Furthermore, the YPS included more experienced and hardened PKK fighters, either with experience from rural campaigns or even from urban battles in Syria, which led to an increased usage of IEDs, snipers, and other specialists (International Crisis Group 2016b).

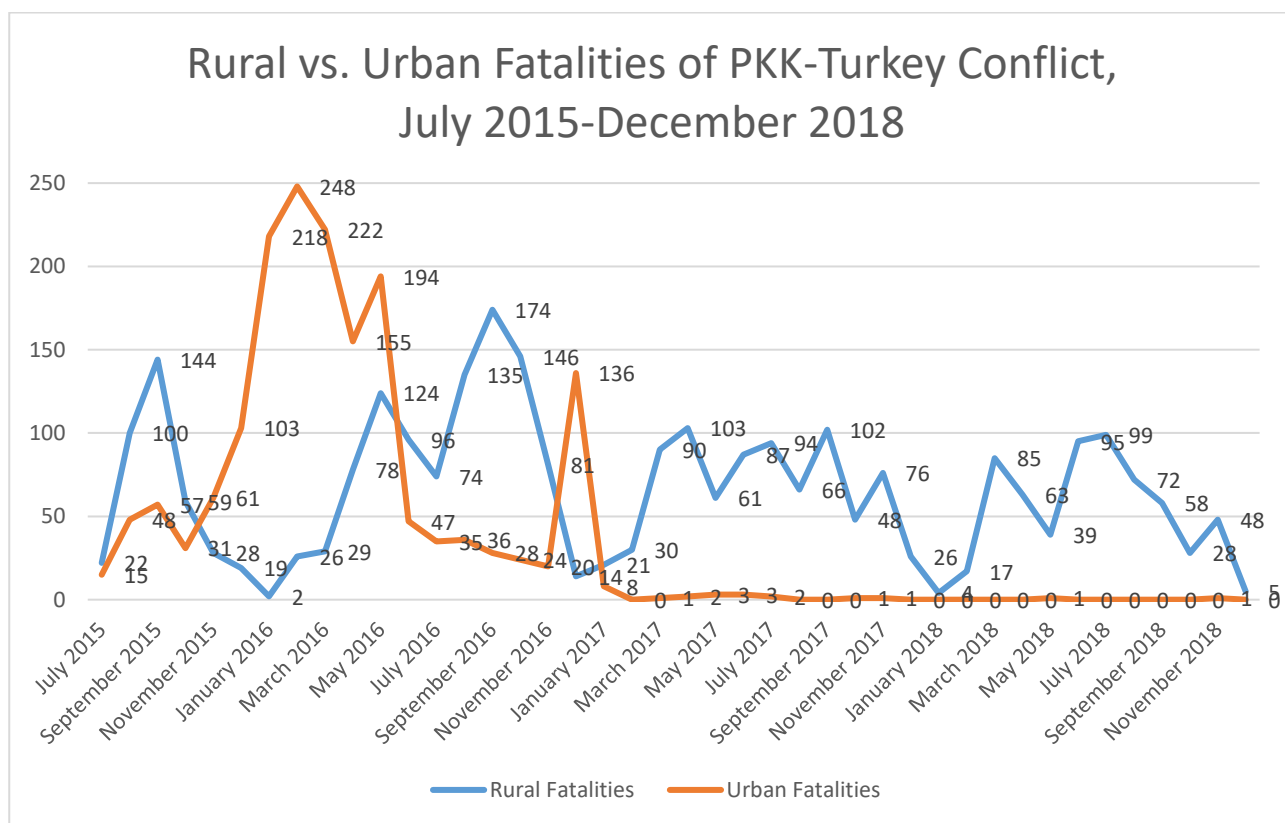
As the Turkish state was defeating insurgents entrenched in cities and re-assuming control roughly by half of 2016, the number of urban fatalities also significantly declined. While at the height of the urban campaign in August 2015-June 2016, the ratio between rural and urban fatalities was 37% to 66%, in July 2016-December 2018, the PKK almost completely abandoned waging war in cities with the ration of 86% to only 14% of urban fatalities (International Crisis Group 2020). The period of urban fighting brought immense destruction of infrastructure, housing, and social fabric to a number of pre-dominantly Kurdish cities. For example, in Nusaybin, a town of 120,000 inhabitants, stunning 6,000 buildings were destroyed or heavily damaged, six of the city center’s fifteen neighbourhoods, leaving 30,000 people homeless (International Crisis Group 2017c).

The return to the rural campaign was not only induced by the defeat of urban insurgencies by Turkish security forces but also due to decreasing support for the PKK among the Kurds as urban fighting brought immense destruction unheard of during the rural campaigns. In late 2015, 43% believed urban strategy should be given up (Leezenberg 2016, 685). Even as the urban strategy was abandoned in favour of a return to rural operations, the feeling among many Turkish Kurds previously sympathetic or supportive of the PKK remained that it was a grossly costly miscalculation and a mistake on the side of the PKK’s leadership and overall trust in the organization decreased. As the International Crisis Group (2016b, 16) report recommended, the PKK understood that *“(…) trying to establish control in mainly Kurdish-speaking-southeastern districts is unrealistic and counterproductive to the right and well-being of the region’s Kurds.”* Lucas (2019, 62) convincingly explains the return to rural campaign and overall failure of the urban experiment by the fact that *“(…) an urban insurgency emerged in southeastern Turkey due to the presence of strong social networks*

but was unsustainable due to the government's use of unconstrained military force. Further, the lack of these social networks in western Turkey prevented an insurgency from emerging among the Kurdish population there.”

Back to Rural Campaign

Following the defeat of PKK urban insurgency by heavy-handed security response from the Turkish security forces, including the military by June 2016, we are seeing sharp decrease in urban incidents. A sharp decline of fatalities in urban areas from over 200 in the first months of 2016 to 20-50 in July-November coined with more intensive urban campaign support the thesis that the PKK essentially left the cities (see Graph 8.2.1b). To put it more precisely, it refrained from waging war in urban spaces and effectively returned to political and civilian networks as prior to the mid-2015 as the main mode of maintaining influence. In 2018, there are only 15 fatalities in urban spaces confirming the return to rural warfare.



Graph 8.2.1b: Rural vs. Urban Fatalities of PKK-Turkey Conflict, July 2015-December 2018 (prepared by the author; data from International Crisis Group 2020).

Interestingly enough, the YDG-H, already re-organized into the YPS and the YPS-Jin (women's wing created in early 2016), more or less ceased its violent operations and keeping a low profile. In 2017-

18, it mainly focused, again as a primarily urban youth group, on commemorating martyred from its ranks during the 2015-16 urban fighting and keeping a low profile and other activities raising awareness.⁷²

The PKK's rural campaign in 2017-18 was short of intensity, for example, in 2011, when 738 battle-related deaths occurred. In 2017, there were 390, and in 2018, 439 battle-related deaths (UCDP 2020). Moreover, most of these occurred alongside the Iraqi border, suggesting that the PKK had issues infiltrating further inside the Kurdish provinces. Moreover, looking at the ratio of PKK and state security forces fatalities, it went down from 1.41 for the PKK in July 2015-January 2016 to 4.2 killed PKK militants per member of security forces July 2018-January 2019 (International Crisis Group 2020). Apparently, the PKK had issues with ramping up the intensity of its armed campaign inside Turkey, which corresponds with Ünal's (2016) positive assessment of the post-2010 technologically-driven and on-time monitor-detect-engage counterinsurgency approach.

The Spatial Dimension of PKK's Operations

From the geographic perspective, the vast majority of battle-related incidents between the PKK and security forces occurring on Turkish soil are clustered in ten provinces in the country's very southeast. There is no significant difference in PKK operations' spatial distribution in 2004-14 and 2015-18 (see Graph 8.2.1c and 8.2.1d). In total, 88% in 2004-14 and 90% of battle-related incidents in 2015-18 occurred in these provinces, and sporadically in adjacent Kurdish-inhabited provinces, such as Erzurum, Ağrı, Muş, Elazığ, Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Osmaniye, Kahramanmaraş, or Hatay. The spatial pattern of violence indicates that the PKK cannot shift its operations outside majority-Kurdish areas and show that its operations are most intensive in provinces bordering Iraq. Rugged mountainous terrain coined with the fact that Şırnak and Hakkâri provinces are the main infiltration points for PKK militants from their safe havens in northern Iraq makes these areas the main battlefields.

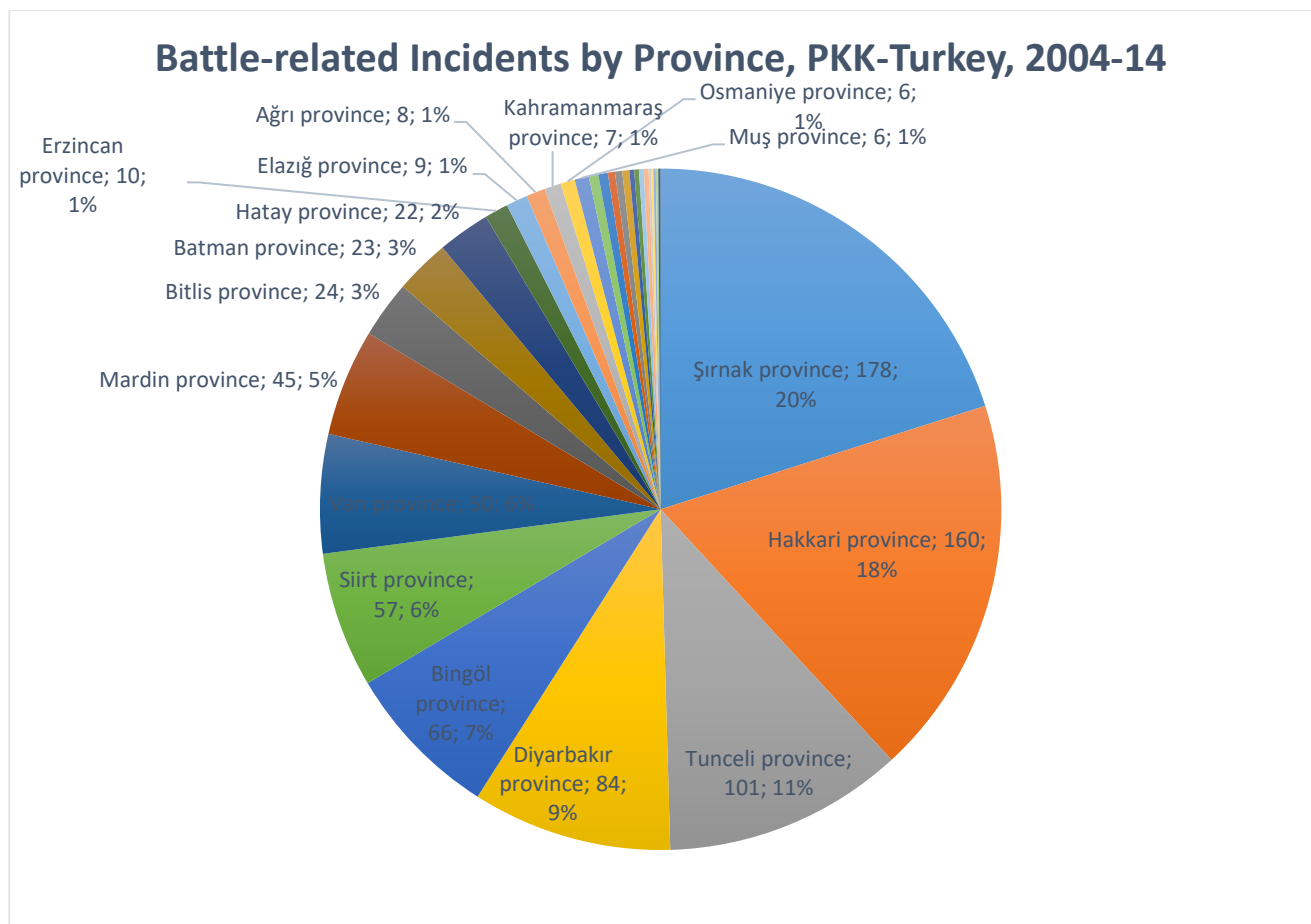
The space covering approximately Şırnak-Hakkâri with Cizre and Çatak is traditionally coined Botan Defense Area by the PKK (Aydın and Emrence 2015). Şırnak-Siirt-Pervuri-Eruh areas were then the main infiltration lines for insurgents further into the heart of Kurdish provinces. Aydın and Emrence (2015) note that in the 2000-08 area, the PKK essentially returned to its 1980s origins: focusing mainly on fighting in Botan Area against military targets and failing to keep a military presence in urban space. 43% of PKK's attacks in that period occurred in Şırnak and Hakkâri with the difference the PKK from then on, compared to the 90s shifted from immobile targets (bases and outposts) to mobile ones (patrols and convoys) while utilizing IEDs in 66% of operations (*ibid.*).

Hakkâri and Şırnak border areas are also strongly militarized, making the deployed security forces the main barrier to prevent the PKK to further expand their operations inside Turkey at leisure.

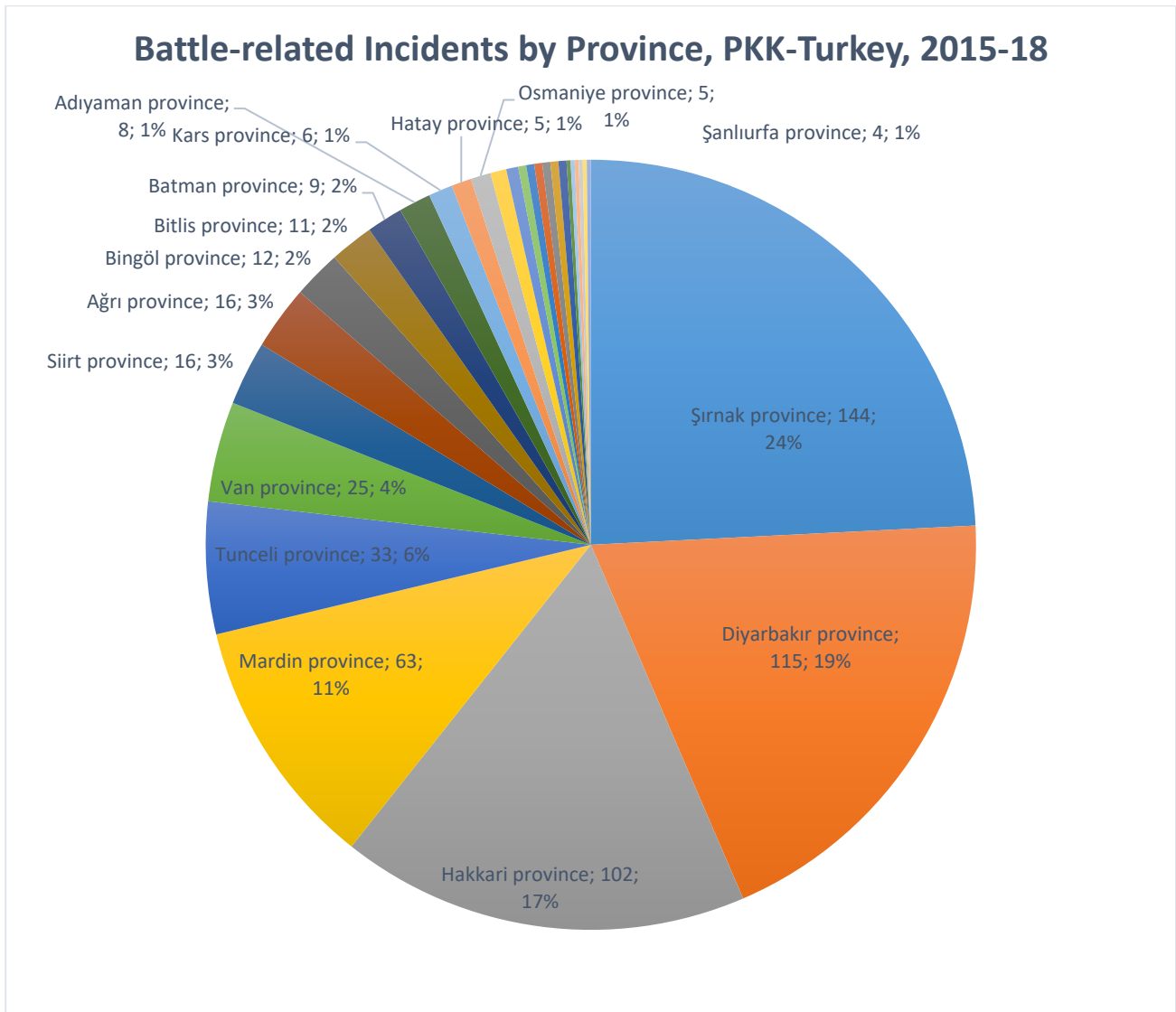
⁷² This assessment is based on the mentions of the YPS activities in the PKK-linked media such as the ANF.

Nevertheless, the continuous belt of rugged terrain and at least to an extent supportive population allow the PKK to infiltrate and conduct operations as far as in Diyarbakır, Tunceli, and Bingöl. PKK's gradual infiltration to Kurdish cities in the post-2004 period, more notably after the inception of the DTK in 2007 and successes of PKK-linked legal parties in local elections in 2009, was instead conducted through building political structures and attempts to introduce parallel governance (discussed in detail in chapters 8.2.3 and 8.2.4 respectively).

In the second period in 2015-18, the PKK managed to bolster its operations in Mardin province neighbouring Syria, where chiefly the town of Nusaybin became one of the hotspots of PKK's urban insurgency in 2015-16 (11% of incidents occurred there compared to 5% before 2015). Strong cross-border solidarity, an influx of PKK-linked fighters from Syria, and their know-how contributed to the emergence of one of the fiercest urban battles between the PKK and the state. Furthermore, the PKK expanded its operations into urban areas of Diyarbakır, marking another increase of incidents from 9% to 19% in the post-2015 period. Following the return to rural campaign from mid-2016, the Botan Area and mainly the Hakkâri and Şırnak provinces became once again the main theatre of operations at the expense of armed struggle in urban spaces and further inside Turkish Kurdish provinces.



Graph 8.2.1c: Battle-related Incidents by Province, PKK-Turkey, 2004-14 (prepared by the author; data from UCDP 2020).



Graph 8.2.1d: Battle-related Incidents by Province, PKK-Turkey, 2015-18 (prepared by the author; data from UCDP 2020).

8.2.2 Use of Terrorism

The PKK itself insists that it does not engage in terrorist activities in Turkey (or anywhere else). Its leadership insists their operations are within the military's scope or to say guerrilla operations that try to avoid harming civilians. As the PKK commander, Murat Karayılan noted in October 2010, reacting to higher intensity of PKK's operations, avoiding civilian casualties, including during urban operations, is the organization's fundamental principle (Hürriyet 2010). The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) offers a comprehensive dataset of terrorism-related incidents. The event is recorded if it fulfills at least two of the three following criteria (Global Terrorism Database 2020):

- *“Criterion 1: The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal. In terms of economic goals, the exclusive pursuit of profit does not satisfy this criterion. It must involve the pursuit of more profound, systemic economic change.*

- *Criterion 2: There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims. It is the act taken as a totality that is considered, irrespective if every individual involved in carrying out the act was aware of this intention. As long as any of the planners or decision-makers behind the attack intended to coerce, intimidate or publicize, the intentionality criterion is met.*
- *Criterion 3: The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities. That is, the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law, insofar as it targets non-combatants.”* (Global Terrorism Database 2019, 11)

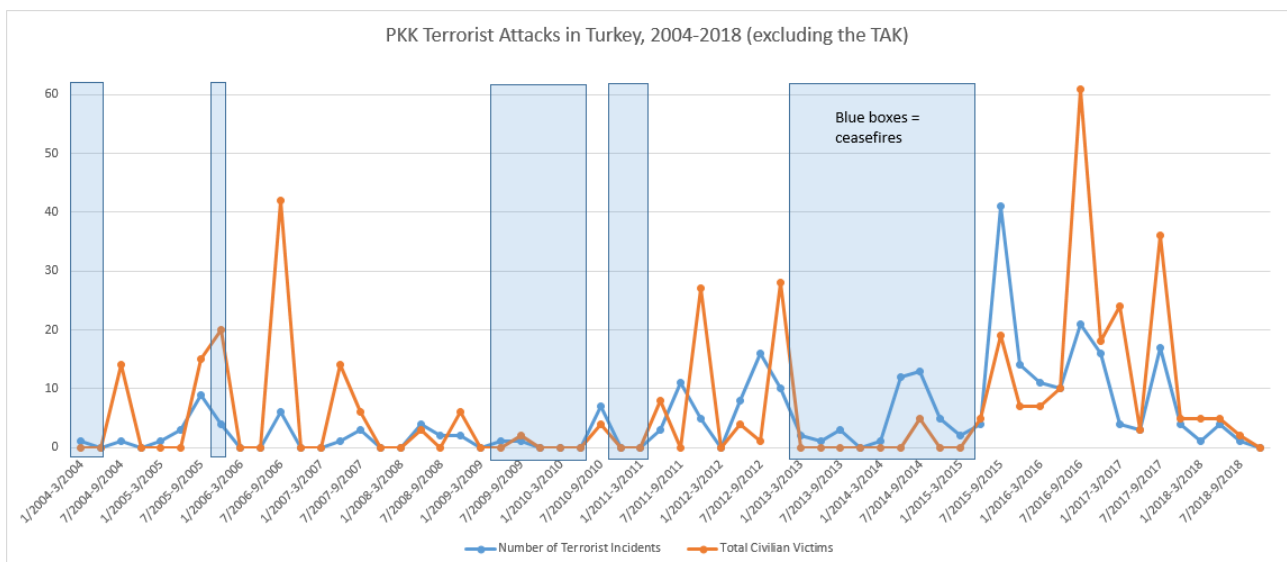
Nevertheless, the GTD fails to make a clear distinction between outright terrorist attacks against businesses or spectacular bombings on the one hand and operations against the state’s security forces. The GTD labels both as terrorist incidents, albeit in the FAQ section, it adds that the GTD should not be considered as a comprehensive database of insurgent attacks (which is understood as primarily against incumbent’s security forces) (Global Terrorism Database 2020b). As a way out, I decided to filter the incidents according to the target type, excluding military, police, and unknown targets and additionally omitting ambiguous cases. The database’s output included a total of 572 incidents perpetrated by the PKK, fulfilling all of the three terrorism criteria in 2004-2018 (military and police included additional 354 incidents). According to Forst (2009, 5), *“Terrorism is the premeditated and unlawful use of violence against a non-combatant population or target having symbolic significance, with an aim of either inducing political change through intimidation and destabilization or destroying a population identified as an enemy.”*

Correspondingly, the dataset of 572 incidents was subsequently manually screened through detailed incident description in the GTD and consultation with media sources when needed in order to exclude cases falling outside Forst’s (2009) understanding, such as where there is considerable doubt that non-combatants were a primary target (e.g., a bomb went off and harmed civilians in the mountains frequented by military convoys or patrols). Moreover, several incidents were listed under terrorism despite targeting the state-paid militia the Village Guards, or primarily targeting police or military facilities and vehicles despite civilians being often hurt during such operations.

Consequently, I identified 291 instances of terrorism-related incidents in 2004-2018 perpetrated by the PKK, excluding the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (sometimes called Kurdistan Freedom Hawks, in Kurdish, Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan, or TAK), which is discussed in detail below. The PKK only rarely claims terrorist incidents. As a general rule, it usually does not claim incidents aimed at harming businesses, transportation infrastructure, construction projects, education system, or even government offices. Since Turkish official sources blame most incidents, especially in the southeast, on the PKK, one has to rely on the identified modus operandi of the PKK’s attacks and triangulate sources from the GTD. In the whole period, the PKK claimed mere 38 attacks out of 291 terrorism-related incidents. The majority of claimed attacks were either related to assassinations of the AKP-linked public officials and

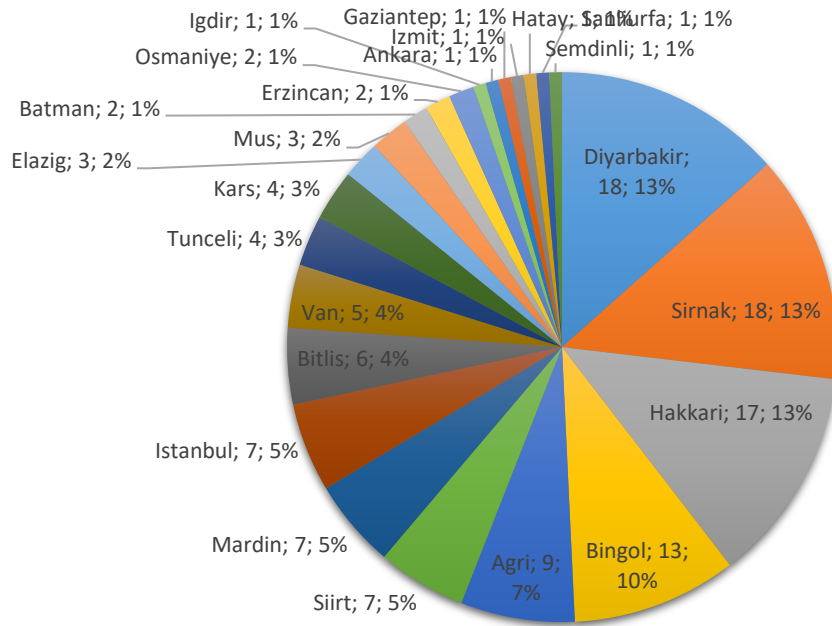
politicians or attacks on civilians and local officials identified as collaborators with the state. However, judging from the attacks' modus operandi and the actual figures of civilians victims, 30 killed and 169 injured in 2004-14 and 66 killed and 140 wounded in 2015-18, it appears that the PKK refrains from loss of civilian lives even when utilizing terrorism tactics. In other words, the PKK avoids indiscriminate terrorist operations, such as high-casualty urban bombings. For such operations, it utilizes the TAK franchise while insisting it does not fall under its command.

Examining Graph 8.2.2a, it appears that even the PKK's terrorism campaign mostly respected declared unilateral ceasefires as there is a significant decrease in terrorist incidents during those periods. Contrary to common assumption, we do not experience significant increase in use of terrorism tactics in periods when the PKK could not sustain a higher intensity of its military campaign (see Graph 8.2.1a). It seems that the higher intensity of terrorism tactics appears to roughly copy the increased intensity of the armed campaign and vice versa. However, this somewhat changes in the 2015-18 period. As the PKK lost its urban battle and returned to the lower-key rural armed campaign by late 2016, the terrorism tactics were still intensely utilized throughout 2017 and only declined later in 2018. The urban operations shift is also illustrated by the fact that 42% of incidents occurred in urban spaces after 2015, while prior, it was only 29%. Geographic distribution of the terrorist-related incidents essentially copy the dynamics of the armed campaign – the vast majority (74% before 2014 and 91% after) of incidents occurred in the following provinces: Hakkâri, Van, Şırnak, Mardin, Batman, Siirt, Diyarbakır, Bingöl, and Tunceli. The post-2015 period increase can be attributed to the PKK's general push to induce popular uprising in Kurdish cities and thus even more focus on (urban) operations in said provinces.

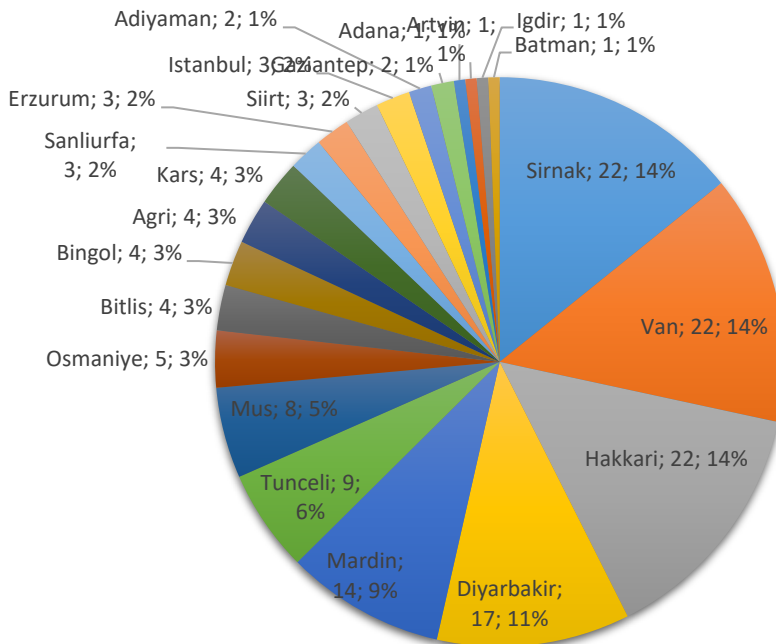


Graph 8.2.2a: PKK Terrorist Attacks in Turkey, 2004-2018 (excluding the TAK) (prepared by the author; data from Global Terrorism Database 2020).

PKK Terrorist Attacks in Turkey by Province, 2004-14



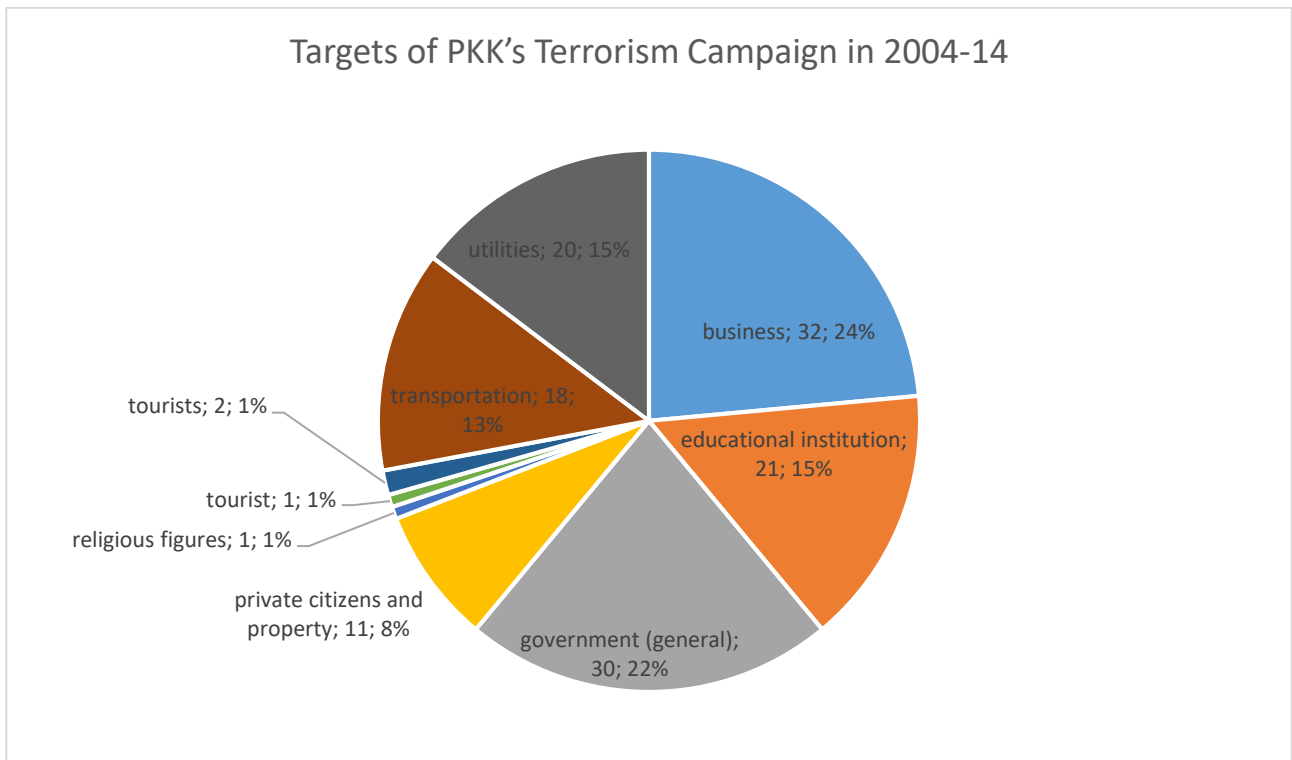
PKK Terrorist Attacks in Turkey by Province, 2015-18



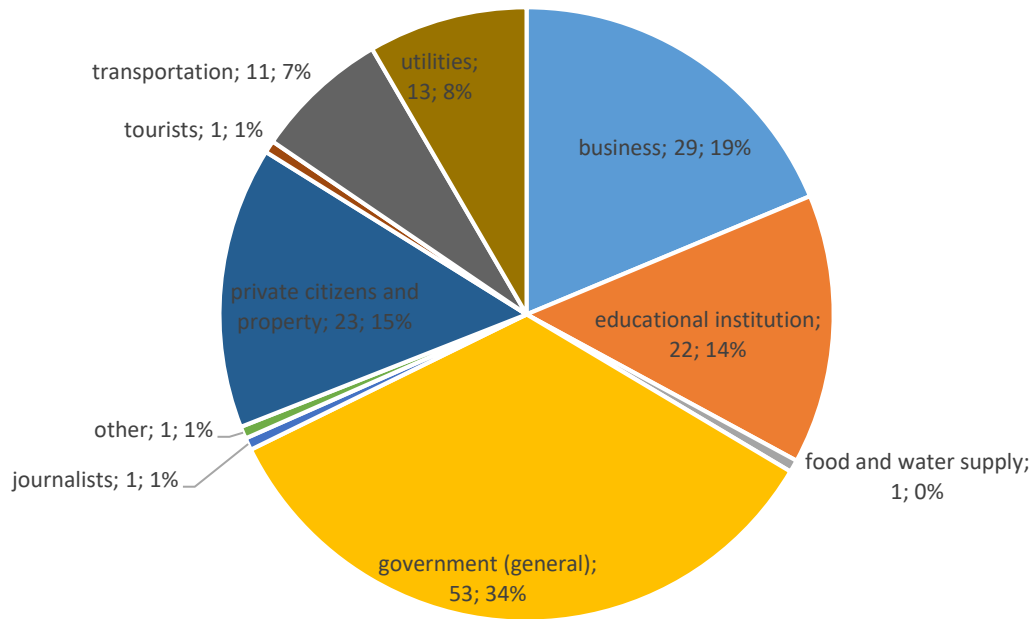
Graph 8.2.2b: PKK Terrorist Attacks in Turkey by Province, 2004-14 and 2015-18 (prepared by the author; data from Global Terrorism Database 2020).

In both periods, bombings represent dominant mode of terrorist attacks: almost 40% in 2004-14 and 31.6% in 2015-18. Nonetheless, before the March 2013 ceasefire, PKK's terrorist attacks appear to be more operationally sophisticated. They regularly and in clusters targeted oil and gas pipelines, railway

infrastructure, including derailing both passenger, freight, and combined trains, damaged government's transportation infrastructure, construction of security facilities, energy infrastructure, as well as engaged in instances of the kidnapping of school teachers, which are traditionally viewed as tools of for spreading state ideology. Moreover, these PKK attacks rarely resulted in a high number of killed or injured civilians. Among other common targets were businesses or facilities related to construction of local infrastructure by the state. See the overall breakdown of target types in Chart 8.2.2c for 2004-14 and 2015-18. As opposed to the more common practices in the 1980s and partially in the 1990s, the PKK refrained from murdering state-employed teachers, health officials as well as committing summary punishments against villages and members of the Village Guards along with their families (Marcus 2007). As will be further discussed in Chapter 8.2.3, insurgents rely on more subtle coercion of the civilian population in the post-2004 period.



Targets of PKK's Terrorism Campaign in 2015-18



Graph 8.2.2c: Targets of PKK's Terrorism Campaign in 2004-14 and 2015-18 (prepared by the author; data from Global Terrorism Database 2020).

From 2004 to March 2013, only 30 civilians were killed due to 101 PKK's terrorist attacks as opposed to the period of April 2015-2018 when the majority, 190 out of 291 terrorist incidents occurred and cost 66 civilian lives. The explanation is two-fold. Firstly, the PKK experimented with full-fledged urban warfare in 2015-16 and shifted its terrorist tactics accordingly, resulting in more civilian deaths than predominant rural engagements and careful targeting in the past. Secondly, facing imminent military defeat of its urban insurgency since September 2015, when the Turkish military engaged against PKK-controlled urban centers, and subsequent return to primarily rural warfare after popular backlash by late 2016, it was considerably weakened and apparently continued to resort to limited terrorist attacks. These steps outside the usual modus operandi avoid civilian casualties and damages to private property. They rely less on major infrastructure attacks against utilities such as pipelines (only six incidents, or 1.14% of the total compared to 20 incidents before March 2013, or 20%).

The PKK was much more engaged in smaller-scale, less sophisticated attacks, such as an incendiary hit and run operations, in order to hamper government's infrastructure rebuilding efforts. Many of its attacks resemble somewhat uncoordinated riot-like episodes, including arson attacks against education institutions and lower-key bomb attacks. Nevertheless, it appears that terrorism tactics were more instrumental in openly coercing the local Kurdish population since July 2015. The increase of

armed assaults with firearms from 3% in 2004-14 to 15% in 2015-18 also went hand in hand with urban operations shift and attempts to mobilize to wider insurgency as opposed to previous focus on rural warfare and building clandestine networks in urban spaces.

Firstly, the hallmark of PKK's older *modus operandi* pursued relentlessly in this period were assassination campaigns against government officials and Kurdish AKP-linked figures. In at last 30 incidents, AKP-linked politicians and officials (see, for example, A Haber 2017) experienced assassination attempts, kidnappings, and a number of them were successfully killed by the PKK. Local government officials such as village leaders or district mayors were also targeted at least 12 times. Thus, assassination attempts comprise over 22% of terrorism incidents, as opposed to 7% in 2004-March 2013. The surge in assassinations can arguably be attributed to the PKK's push to intimidate local Kurdish notables from cooperating with the government and the AKP against the background of PKK's efforts to trigger wider Kurdish uprising and mobilization, which proved to be futile. Simultaneously, as discussed in chapters 8.1.2 and 8.2.5, PKK-linked networks able to flourish without significant security intervention in 2013-15 within local bureaucracy and governance and develop parallel governance were systematically targeted by mass arrests since 2015. Among the most prominent assassinated victims were Ahmet Budak, lead of the AKP's list for 2018 parliamentary elections in Şemdinli (murdered on September 14, 2016); Aydın Muştu, Deputy Head of the AKP in Özalp District shot dead on October 11, 2016 (A Haber 2017).

Secondly, the PKK targeted members of the Village Guard system *en masse* not only during regular military operations but also during kidnappings and subsequent executions. Albeit the Village Guards are combatants and thus their targeting does not necessarily fall under the scope of terrorism, it certainly shows a pattern of increased terror to ensure loyalty and discourage collaborators with the Turkish state. The Village Guards appeared as a target in 53 incidents in 2015-18 (Global Terrorism Database 2020). Out of that, in 30 instances, it appears they were explicitly targeted in kidnappings, bombings, assassinations, or attacks on their checkpoints and patrols. In 23 remaining instances, the Village Guards could not be considered a primary target as they were a part of joint operations with regular security forces (*ibid.*). To compare, in 2004-11, Village Guards were targeted in PKK's offensive operations only sporadically, in 10 incidents (*ibid.*).

Kurdish notables tied to the AKP are viewed as collaborators with the state and traitors in parallel to members of the state-sponsored Village Guards. They are thus considered legitimate targets by the PKK in parallel to local government officials. Similarly, the PKK considers infrastructure building sites, industries, railways, or energy infrastructure as permitted targets. Considering the number of terrorism incidents in the examined period and the relatively low number of civilian victims of these operations, it is apparent that the PKK tries to avoid indiscriminate civilian casualties in order to maintain popular

support. It rarely claims such actions as opposed to 'guerilla operations' resembling regular warfare, which are strongly propagated.

Outright spectacular terrorist attacks and other high-profile bombings of civilian targets were attributed to a TAK group. The TAK attacks outside the scope of PKK's usual operations areas, mainly urban spaces in the Western cities, including Istanbul and Ankara, or tourist areas on the western coast. When it comes to assessing PKK's use of terrorism tactics in 2004-18, the important matter is the origin, affiliation with the PKK, and attacks perpetrated by the TAK. The group claiming to follow Abdullah Öcalan emerged already in 2004 to argue that more violent and radical methods of struggles must be employed to advance the Kurdish issue and criticize the PKK's 'soft' approach. Gurcan argues that semi-autonomous TAK to utilize urban recruits was created already after Öcalan's arrest in 1999, although unilateral ceasefire was declared and upheld until 2004 (Gurcan 2016b). It called for Kurds in 2006 to "*Come to duty now with the motto: 'revenge, revenge, revenge'*" and threatening foreign tourists that "*The fear of death will reign everywhere in Turkey.*" (Bekdil 2008)

Assessments of the TAK range between it being an independent splinter group from the PKK opposing the PKK's 'conciliatory' approach to the conflict with Turkey (also a narrative of the group itself), and the TAK being sort of a shadowy special group for possibly unpopular operations, such as suicide bombings. Eccarius-Kelly (2011, 35) notes that it is important "*(...) to recognize that the PKK is far from monolithic organization, devoid of internal dissent, as is often suggested by Turkish sources.*" Brandon (2006) notes that the TAK "*appears less of a front group or successor to the PKK than a marginal, but more radical alternative.*" Over the years, the prevailing consensus among analysts is that the TAK "*(...) is best understood as a semi-autonomous proxy of the PKK that operates at arm's length.*" (Gurcan 2016b)

There are several strong arguments supporting the narrative that the TAK is indeed closely linked to the PKK. Firstly, Marcus argues that the PKK does not traditionally allow any other Kurdish groups to operate in the same space. It is even more unlikely since the TAK also claims to follow Öcalan's ideology (Geerdink 2016). Bekdil (2008) notes that while there are some operational differences between the two, the TAK can be considered an urban branch of the PKK operating mostly in western cities and counting up to few hundreds of militants.

Secondly, the PKK experimented with suicide bombings in the past: in 1995-2007, 15 such attacks occurred; in 11 cases perpetrators were female (a trend that continues with the TAK) (Altınay 2013). Later, on the discourse of the glorification of suicide bombers, especially females who are more than half of the perpetrators, disappeared from the PKK and the HPG websites by 2010. On occasions, TAK's suicide bombing operations and attacks against civilian targets were labeled as spontaneous problematic initiatives (e.g., following Istanbul bombings on June 22 and October 31, 2010, PKK announced that such attacks damage any peace efforts and condemned the perpetrators and the attacks;

ibid.). The PKK even blamed the Turkish state for being behind the TAK to tarnish the PKK's reputation. PKK commander Cemil Bayık claimed after the series of suicide bombings in May 2016 that *"We have information that Turkey carries out attacks in the name of TAK, aims at killing civilians (...)"*. (Geerdink 2016b) In this line, Gurcan (2016b) asserts that the TAK is a proxy group of the PKK used to conduct bloody attacks to provoke the Turkish government to react without damaging its domestic and international reputation. In parallel, I also argue that outright suicide bombings or attacks against clearly civilian targets (both the hallmark of the TAK operations) are unpopular even among staunch supporters of the PKK and have a completely different level of acceptance compared to 'martyrs' who die in combat.

Thirdly, it is highly unlikely that the TAK would be able to conduct such high profile attacks being only a small marginal group without logistics, tactical, intelligence, and material support of the PKK. Moreover, in February 17, 2016 Ankara car bombing, special materials to hide the explosive device from the scanners were utilized (see Kaválek 2016b). Furthermore, the February 2016 attackers were connected with the PKK and its affiliate in northern Syria. Abdülbaki Sömer joined the PKK in 2005 and after working in Iraq and Turkey, he was relocated to Syria to fight under the YPG. Assuming fake Syrian identity, he moved back to Turkey in July 2015 (ibid.). Seher Çağla Demir, a young female student behind March 13, 2016 attack, joined the PKK in 2013 and was posted in Syria from where she was most likely recruited for this operation and moved to Turkey (Gurcan 2016c). The Syrian connection supports the argument that the TAK is a project under the auspices of hawkish Syrian Kurdish PKK commander Fehman Huseyin (aka Bahoz Erdal). However, there is no definitive evidence to support this claim (Stein 2016b).

The fourth argument putting independence of the TAK on the PKK under scrutiny is that it always completely disappears and re-emerges after a series of carefully planned and timed attacks. Given the level of sophistication of their operations, it is unlikely that the group can simply re-emerge 'out of the blue' to conduct series of high-profile successful attacks every couple of years without at least logistics, material, and intelligence backing from the PKK. That is even more so since Bekdil (2008) asserted that the TAK comprises of *"mostly unhappy and unemployed Kurds"* who are *"operating in small cells in Turkey's western cities."* Attacks claimed or attributed to the TAK occurred in all three examined periods (2004-09; 2009-15; and 2015-18). However, as Gurcan (2016b) notes, incidents occurred in three relatively short distinctive waves: 1st wave in 2005-07 (11 incidents); 2nd wave in 2010-2011 (4 incidents); and 3rd wave in 2015-16 being the most bloody (13 incidents, 140 deaths). While consulting GTD data and Gurcan's review of spectacular attacks, we see that the TAK conducted (or was tied to with high probability) 36 attacks with 157 fatalities and over 900 injured, which were almost exclusively bombings, out of that, eight were suicide bombings, and in eight cases VBIEDs were used (Global Terrorism Database 2020). The TAK's typical modus operandi includes attacks specifically targeting touristic places in Istanbul and Ankara and southwest coastal resorts and cities (Izmir, Antalya); off-duty police members

and military in public places. We can see that the indiscriminate high-casualty spectacular suicide bombings and usage of VBIEDs became hallmark since the 2nd wave and mainly in 2015-16.

Looking at the timing of waves of TAK attacks, the 2005-07 wave comes at the time when the PKK was considerably weakened and only slowly renewing its insurgency – confirming the premise that terrorism is the weapon of the weak. However, in 2010-11 the PKK already proved its insurgency could maintain its gravity and grew from 326 in 2010 to 603 battle-related deaths in 2011 and 811 in 2012 (UCDP 2020). This period coincides with the AKP's relatively favorable initiatives towards the Kurdish issue and, as Kaválek and Šmíd (2018) argue, this was mainly an attempt to marginalize the PKK politically and erode its popular support. The PKK felt under pressure and juggled between declaring ceasefires, engaging in informal talks with the government, and renewed violence periods.

Utilization of terrorism falls under the provocation insurgency tactics - to provoke the state to react in an intensely repressive manner and derail its determination to win the population's hearts and minds. This shows that favourable policy changes concerning the contested Kurdish population prompted the more intensive violent campaign, including employing terrorism tactics. The TAK also regularly disregards the PKK's stance towards war as too 'humanist' (ANF 2015), not binding for the organization. In reality, it mostly respects existing PKK-declared ceasefires, including the longest one in 2013-15. Its most spectacular attacks only come when the ceasefire collapse is imminent (mid-2010-mid-2011) or fighting already resumed.

The third wave in 2015-16 comes at a time when the PKK-government talks failed and mutual escalation occurred since August 2015. The PKK, experimenting with urban insurgency, met with crushing military response (as discussed in Chapter 8.2.1). It ultimately lost considerable ground in urban spaces in Kurdish cities and lost a great deal of popular support, partially blamed for bringing destruction upon the Kurdish population. The TAK's utilization as a proxy of sort for conducting (suicide) operations and high-casualty bombings falls within the PKK's long-term ambition to maintain international sympathy and support. This is even more pressing interest since its advances in northern Syria since the siege of Kobanî (September 2014) brought immense western public and political support and vastly improved the organization's image.

8.2.3 Violence towards the Contested Population

In 2004-18, the PKK faced increasingly active rivalry from several actors competing for Turkey's Kurdish constituency. The governing AKP proved to be the most serious competitor for the Kurdish population's hearts and minds, pursuing more favourable policies than the previous governments in Turkey. However, these became stalled, largely viewed as simply not enough, and, most importantly, they were accompanied by regular repressive periods and nationalist policies. The carrot and stick approach failed to diminish support for the PKK-linked actors, and the Kurdish population is still divided in support of the PKK-

linked and the government camp. Simultaneously, the AKP's government until 2015 provided more space for the KCK/PKK-linked actors to expand their civil networks and became a more embedded grass-root organization. Despite the existing rivalry, the KCK/PKK that despite the existing rivalry, not only maintained but also expanded its pool of supporters. Furthermore, it increasingly faced competition from Islamist current, both Kurdish (Hizbullah) and the Gülen Movement.

Despite the significant and increasing active rivalry, the PKK refrained from highly unpopular spectacular coercion such as assassinating local members of the Village Guards, including their families, kidnappings, and murders of state workers and teachers were relatively common in the 1980s and 1990s. Haner, Benson, and Cullen (2019) assert based on the PKK's internal code of conduct and behaviour that in general, the PKK refrains from indiscriminate violence against non-combatants as it would contradict its key ideological premise of violence being used only in 'self-defense.' While it is impossible to determine the exact level of civilian coercion, there are still re-occurring patterns of behaviour that indicate that the KCK/PKK networks keep a tight grasp over the certain Kurdish-majority areas. Shopkeepers and restaurant owners as well as businessmen are required not only to financially contribute to the cause in the form of 'revolutionary tax,' but are for example forced to close down their business when the KCK/PKK calls for general strikes often in support of Öcalan, or there is a militant funeral (International Crisis Group 2012).

In Diyarbakır, in late August 2015, on the onset of renewed fighting with the state, the general strike over the city's centre was almost exclusively upheld without any exceptions.⁷³ The PKK targets individuals and companies refusing to pay protection money (International Crisis Group 2012). Schools and public transportation must then closed town at PKK's orders as well (ibid.). As Diyarbakır restaurant owner lamented in 2012, *"Whenever there is a guerrilla funeral, KCK hands out a statement ordering shops to be closed. Stores are fed up with it. But it's hard to defy [the PKK/KCK]. They could attack your store."* (ibid., 17) In a symbolic Diyarbakır, *"Some of the public supports PKK-staged protests voluntarily, while others do so from fear of punishment, but most of the city, except a few better-off areas like the Ofis district, goes along."* (ibid.) In case a shop remains open, it risks being targeted. In a typical show-of-force when one disobeys, Mersin's restaurant was burned down by the PKK by Molotov cocktails on February 16, 2011, as the owner refused to closed to protest on the anniversary of Öcalan's capture (Yılmaz and Ozkaya 2011).

There is also a geographic variation in the level of control and society penetration between different provinces, cities, and neighbourhoods. Provinces on the Iraq-Turkey-Iran border, such as Hakkâri, Şırnak or Van, have a comparably firmer insurgent grasp, and the PKK is there even more sensitive towards rivals and resorts fairly regularly to violence and intimidation of local actors viewed as disloyal. Typical modus operandi are assassinations and kidnappings of locals joining forces with the AKP, particularly in

⁷³ Author's observations in Diyarbakır.

these areas (Anadolu Agency 2017; Hürriyet 2012). In cities, the PKK usually has certain ‘traditional’ neighbourhoods under the more substantial influence. These usually count among poorer, often containing people forcibly displaced from their villages by the Turkish state in the 1990s. In Diyarbakır, it is chiefly Sur and Bağlar district. In Nusayibin, it is Fırat, Abdulkadir Paşa, Yenişehir, and Dicle (International Crisis Group 2017c).

In general, the violence the PKK employs amid the Kurdish population is selective and targets carefully selected actors – such as politicians cooperating with the AKP. The PKK targets exclusively those perceived as disloyal or as traitors. Being labelled as a traitor has a special place in PKK’s narratives both prior and after 2000. In the 80s and 90s, traitor label was widely used within the organization by Öcalan to get rid of any dissent as being named a traitor usually resulted in one’s swift execution (Marcus 2007). The overall nature of the PKK ideology claiming the monopoly of representing Kurdish interest and maintaining narrative that ‘who is not with us is against us’ widely employs condemnations of dissenters or people maintaining ties with PKK’s active rivals.

The DTP co-chair Emine Ayna zealously noted in December 2008: *“No one who becomes a candidate of the AKP can say, “I am a Kurd.”* (Tezcür 2009) The statement pretty much illustrates the tense boundary-making between the PKK-linked actors and their rivals. Gürbüz notes that *“(...) rival Kurdish activists’ proximity in the cultural habitat, making use of the Kurdish language, symbols, historical figures, and local narratives has translated into a debate over who make up genuine/authentic Kurds and who betray, i.e. the traitors.”* Rhetorical condemnations of someone being ‘jash’ (a derogatory term for a collaborator with the enemy in Kurdish discourse, literally meaning donkey’s foal) are quite common even for non-political figures. For example, the PKK labelled legendary Kurdish singer Şivan Perwer a ‘jash’ for meeting AKP’s Deputy PM Bulent Arınç in February 2011 (ibid.). Perwer, in turn, called the PKK leadership traitors who do not even speak Kurdish. Apart from creating enemy images rhetorically, the PKK occasionally resorts to selective violence against the government’s informers. For example, on June 24, 2018, the PKK abducted and murdered one Mevlut Bengi, a shop owner from Doğubayzıt, Ağrı province, claiming he was a government spy (Daily Sabah 2018).

While there is a little doubt the PKK maintains tight social control over the contested population, it seemed to increasingly rely on non-violent means of competition, which is arguably related to the organizational shift to becoming a grass-roots organization, focusing on politics and civic activities apart from waging armed struggle. This does not mean that intimidation, rioting, assassinations, or goon attacks aimed at curbing the political competition do not occur, notably in tit-for-tat violence between Hûda-Par and the PKK-linked actors in Kurdish cities in 2014-16.

8.2.4 Building Political Structures

An essential puzzle in assessing the PKK-linked legal and semi-legal political structures in Turkey is the exact nature of the relationship between the KCK/PKK, the KCK Türkiye Meclis, the DTK, the People's Democratic Congress (in Turkish, Halkların Demokratik Kongresi, HDK), and various incarnations of pro-Kurdish political parties such as the DTP, the BDP, the HDP, and the DBP. The assessments oscillate between the complete denial of any links between the legal pro-Kurdish parties and the KCK/PKK on the one hand and labelling them as legal, political wings of the PKK, fully obedient to the organisation. While the dynamics are more complicated than that, there is an organic relationship between the legal pro-Kurdish political actors and the KCK/PKK, which also maintains considerable influence over these actors. However, this does not mean there are no disputes and disagreements between the two on the use of violence in particular.

The purpose of the KCK and its relations to the PKK and its overall subjugation to the PKK leadership was discussed in Chapter 6. The issue is how does the KCK “(...) *as a multi-dimensional entity that has become the main actor of social movement,*” (Saeed 2017, 158) operate and organize itself in Turkey specifically. While the KCK serves as an umbrella, not all associations, charities, unions, parties, and organizations in Turkey openly participate in KCK-linked overt structures. This comes naturally, as the KCK was numerously targeted by Turkish law enforcement and is commonly considered as an urban/political extension of the PKK. Since at least 2009, the commonly known expression utilized by the Turkish government and media for KCK networks in Turkey is ‘KCK Türkiye Meclis’ (Milliyet 2009).

Saeed (2017) asserts that the DTK is a smaller picture of the KCK covering all of its activities in Turkey. Thus, effectively the DTK is the KCK Türkiye Meclis. He adds that “*In each city, town and some villages also there is a council. This can be dependent on the size of the area and the number of Kurdish or Kurdistani people that have the commitment to or regard themselves as citizens of the KCK. Within this assembly there are similar committees to those that are in the KCK to divide the jobs and tasks within Turkey. Thus all the committees are somehow connected to the main assembly.*” (ibid., 149)

There is a significant unclearness as the DTK appears to serve both as a quasi-parliament, executive, association of associations for Turkey as a whole, yet it also engaged in creating and maintaining KCK-linked parallel governance structures. The DTK, established in October 2007, serves according to Leezenberg (2016) as a shadowy parliament. It appears that it is also a united front (similar to the TEV-DEM in Syria) for a myriad of political parties, various associations, and other organizations that subscribed to the KCK/PKK ideology and goals, including governance, yet not necessarily subscribing to violent struggle.

The DTK itself says it “(...) *upholds that all peoples will be liberated through democratic confederalism. The Congress carries out social and political activities based on democratic-ecological-women liberation paradigm. The realization*

of this paradigm is possible with Democratic Autonomy. DTK with all its active bodies works towards democratic resolution of Kurdish question and realization of Democratic Autonomy. The Congress sees Democratic Autonomy not only as indispensable for solving the Kurdish question but also all societal conflict originating from “class society and system of nation-states.” DTK proposes Democratic Autonomy for all peoples of Turkey and Democratic Confederalism for the Middle East.” (Democratic Society Congress 2020). It is an umbrella organization or a united front for a wide range of KCK/PKK-linked organizations. International Crisis Group (2011, 29) concludes that *“It is led by BDP politicians, backs some KCK policies, often holds its meetings in BDP buildings and is influenced by the PKK. But it groups legitimate entities, including lawyers, farmers, business people and women’s groups and is more broadly representative than the BDP.”*

The DTK regularly convenes with a high number of delegates, and its function falls within the KCK/PKK’s strategy to create a notion of broad popular legitimacy and democratic processes within the organization. *“From the 850 delegates, 500 are elected from the population, 300 delegates are elected political representatives (...) and 50 are Confederalism and autonomy in Turkey reserved for representatives of religious minorities, academics, or others with particular expertise. For the 2011 election of the 500 ‘popular’ delegates, elections were organised in 43 districts.”* (Akkaya and Jongerden 2014, 201-2) In reality, there were no competitive elections organized, and customarily, these posts were filled in it upon the KCK/PKK decision. Personally, the DTK overlaps with a number of veteran pro-Kurdish politicians subscribing to the KCK’s ideology, such as Hatip Dicle or Leyla Güven.

The DTK is furthermore the primary conceptual vehicle for adopting major governance decisions. On July 14, 2011, in Diyarbakır, the DTK proclaimed the democratic autonomy in Turkish Kurdish provinces, arguing that *“For the DTK, autonomy is not a democratic state system, but a system in which the Kurdish people could govern themselves.”* (Ekurd 2011) In other words, it announced a project of creating parallel governance. It effectively proscribed itself into realization of the KCK Agreement adopted already in May 2005 by the PKK (see Chapter 6).

The DTK’s role as a conceptual vehicle for the realization of the Democratic Autonomy and its umbrella-role even for the legal pro-Kurdish parties such as the HDP and DBP became more apparent in the second half of 2015, following the breakdown of the 2.5-year ceasefire and resumed PKK’s armed struggle this time mainly in cities (International Crisis Group 2017c). Since August 2015, a number of DBP mayors declared autonomy on Ankara. This followed a DTK’s congress in December 2015 during an unprecedented intensity of violent conflict between the state and the PKK. The HDP politicians were present. The HDP proscribes to the idea of Democratic Autonomy in their 2015 electoral program (HDP 2015), current political program (HDP 2020), and in party’s bylaws (HDP 2014), while it refuses it should be achieved by violent means. *“This dilemma became particularly clear at the December 2015 DTK gathering, where those HDP representatives present at the meeting, including Demirtaş (author’s note: HDP co-chair), decided – with*

some apparent reluctance – to accept the congress’s vote for autonomy, and for 14-point road map to a peaceful resolution of the ongoing conflict.” (Leezenberg 2016, 684)

Within the DTK and the overall KCK/PKK system in Turkey, there is a strong emphasis on social and political mobilization through various NGOs, such as associations, charities, educational and cultural institutions running various social programs and initiatives. Saeed (2017) asserts that organisations such as the Human Rights Association, the Kurdish Democratic Culture and Progress Association, or even the Kurd-Der, providing education in Kurdish as well as training Kurdish teachers all fall under the KCK umbrella. Gürbüz (2016) explores the particular focus on women and youth mobilization. For example, he notes in 2009 that the BDP/HDP-led municipalities organized summer camps for female youth, while some of the programs include PKK propaganda, such as revering famous female martyrs (ibid.). He also notes that *“Founded after 2007, the youth centers are supported by the pro-Kurdish party municipalities and work closely with the women’s wing of the ethno-nationalist movement. As an activist who works at a women’s house, houses which are also funded by the municipalities (...).”* (Gürbüz 2016, 99) While various social, education or cultural associations and programs had undoubtedly a positive impact, these are also implicitly strongly ideologically-driven and serve insurgents’ political mobilization and recruitment strategies. Similarly, the DTK includes mature and overarching women organization, chiefly the Free Women’s Congress (in Kurdish, Kongreya Jinên Azad, KJA) and its branches, as well as KCK-linked environmental groups, such as the Mesopotamia Ecological Movement, established in 2011 against the realizations of the GAP (Fadaee and Brancolini 2019).

The pro-Kurdish political parties faced significant legal obstacles participating in electoral competition, chiefly repeated court closures. The People’s Democracy Party (in Turkish, Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, HADEP), active since 1994, was shut down on March 13, 2003. Its successor, the Democratic People’s Party (in Turkish, Demokratik Halk Partisi, DEHAP), abolished itself while transforming into the DTP, active since October 22, 2004, until it was once again shut down by court order on December 11, 2009. The decision always argued similarly, as in the DTP case. As the Constitutional Court argued, the DTP became a *“focal point of activities against the indivisible unity of the state, the country and the nation.”* (BBC News 2009) Nevertheless, the BDP was already established and active since May 5, 2008, and it later, on July 7, 2014, crystallized as the DBP, a party focusing on municipal politics in Kurdish-majority provinces in the southeast (Evrensel 2014).

The HDP was established on October 15, 2012, and became a political party focusing on national-level politics, and the BDP politicians on the national level joined its structure on April 28, 2014 (Sabah 2014). Examining these parties’ electoral performance both in local and parliamentary elections, there is a significant increase in their voters. While in 2002, DEHAP ran as a party and earned 6.22%, yet failed to win any seats due to the 10% threshold. In 2011, the BDP won 36 seats as independents (Villegier 2011).

2011). In June 2015, for the first time, the HDP successfully passed the 10% barrier to enter the parliament, winning 80 seats. Similarly, in June 2018 elections, it won 67 seats. Thus, the KCK-linked parties performed increasingly well despite staunch competition with the AKP for voters and incumbent's countermeasures aimed at weakening their political structures that included party closures, stripping MPs of immunity or frequent detentions and arrest of party members.

The KCK-linked pro-Kurdish political had long tried to step out of the shadow of being a single-issue party, which represents only Kurds. For the July 22, 2007 elections, the DTP established electoral cooperation with several marginal radical leftist political parties, the Freedom and Solidarity Party (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP), the Socialist Democracy Party (Sosyalist Demokrasi Partisi, SDP), and finally the Labour Party (EMEK Partisi). However, these were only small parties earning only two seats as opposed to over 20 seats for the DTP candidates, all running as independents to avoid the electoral 10% threshold. A similar situation repeated itself during the June 12, 2011 parliamentary elections, when the BDP attempted to create a notion of a wider leftist bloc with several small parties under the banner of Labour, Democracy and Freedom Bloc (Emek, Demokrasi ve Özgürlük Bloğu) winning 36 seats.

Further attempt to create a broader Turkish leftist platform marked the establishment of the HDK in October 2011. *“The initial idea for the establishment of the HDK came from the PKK’s jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan and was suggested for overcoming the impasse and repetition experienced within the left in Turkey.”* (Gunes 2019, 262) After all, in Öcalan’s perspective, the Democratic Autonomy model should be an alternative not only for the whole of Turkey but for the whole of the Middle East. The HDK served as a precursor for establishing the HDP in October 2012, serving as the wider national-level not necessarily Kurdish-focused political party. The BDP and since its renaming in 2014 the DBP, focused on municipal politics in majority-Kurdish areas (ibid.). The HDK consists of 38 small leftist groupings, including those representing Alevis, Circassians, LGBT, or environmentalists (HDK 2020).

During the June 2015 parliamentary elections, the HDP arguably managed to portray itself as the party for the Kurds and earn votes outside its regular Kurdish constituency. However, the overall electoral success was owed to the HDP’s notably better performance in Kurdish-majority provinces, mostly at the expense of the AKP. 87% of HDP’s voters identified themselves as Kurds, only 9% as Turkish, 1% as Arab (Gunes 2020). The HDP listed a number of minority candidates, including Alevis, Armenians, Yazidis, or Assyrians (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2015). The HDP’s narrative included not only the PKK’s usual trademark topics, such as ecology and women rights but also LGBT and other minority rights in an idea of a bigger tent or ‘Türkiyelileşme’ – *“turning away from a struggle for solely more rights for the Kurds and instead calling for the democratization of Turkey as a whole.”* (ibid.)

The HDP project remained under the scrutiny of the KCK-linked actors who, for example, wielded the ultimate say in who is going to run and who not. The HDP's candidate selection process was not decided by the HDP's constituent member but by the "*consultations with Kurdish mass organizations, women and youth organizations, trade unions, associations and renowned individuals. Final decision over a candidate rested then with the party leadership. (...) In the Candidate Selection Commission, the HDP's co-presidents together with the HDK co-spokespersons, the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) co-presidents and the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) co-presidents then finalized the list.*" (ibid.) Consequently, rather than genuine co-optation and cooperation with the Turkish left, the HDP and the KCK-tied actors continue to dominate the political process.

While the HDP, the DBP, and its predecessors, starting with the DTP, subscribe to the same strategic goals as the KCK/PKK, they refuse to reach them by violent means. In 2007, when the DTP won 21 seats in the parliament as independents, it openly championed Öcalan's and PKK's new approach based on the three principles: Democratic Republic, Democratic Autonomy, and Democratic Confederalism (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012). Moreover, the pro-Kurdish parties never disassociated themselves from the PKK by labelling it as a terrorist organization and maintains a line steadily formulated already in 2007. In the words of BDP/HDP senior politician Selahattin Demirtaş from October 2007: "*(...) the PKK does not belong in the list, because it has different roots, different reasons of existence and its fight is a different fight.*" (Casier 2010, 406)

The assessment of KCK/PKK and pro-Kurdish parties that carry the most validity appears to be Uslu's (2016) notion that "*The two wings of the movement, the political HDP and the militant PKK, are united in strategy but divided in tactics.*" This essentially adheres to the KCK/PKK's strategic shifts in the 2000s, focusing on building political and governance structures and become institutionally firmly embedded in the Kurdish social fabric. Akkaya (2020, 740) notes that "*A territorial strategy (the creation of liberated land) and state-building seems to have been replaced by an institutional strategy, which aims at the development of a civil society recreating Kurdistan from the bottom.*"

At times of mass arrests aimed at the KCK/PKK-linked institutions, notably in 2009-11, or following the sacking and detentions of DBP politicians on municipal levels following the 2015 Democratic Autonomy declarations, the prosecution argued their ties to the PKK as well as conducting propaganda on behalf of a terrorist organization. "*In the course of the KCK trials various organisational schemes were drafted, obviously based on PKK original documents, and which, with a few exceptions, reflected the structures described in the Agreement (author's note: KCK Agreement).*" (Posch 2016a) HDP co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were also arrested on terror-related charges on November 4, 2016, along with nine other HDP parliamentarians (Cupolo 2019). President Erdoğan asserted in May 2015 that the HDP is "*ruled by the mountain,*" i.e., by the PKK leadership and "*has no will of its own.*" (Uslu 2016) Before the election re-run in October 2015, Erdoğan once again labelled the HDP as the "*accomplices to those in the*

mountains.” (France24 2015) While this assessment lacks finesse and strips the DTP/BDP/HDP politicians of any agency whatsoever, it would be foolish not to acknowledge organic links between the KCK/PKK and the legal pro-Kurdish political parties and other political institutions. There are strong historical, organizational, and personal ties, mutual rhetoric support, following the same ideology and goals, institutional and personal (albeit at times not so obvious) overlap, support of KCK/PKK’s political projects such as the DTK. As International Crisis Group (2012b, 8) notes, “*The leadership’s strategies may in fact include keeping distinctions murky between the KCK, the KCK’s various subsidiary armed, “judicial”, and “legislative” groups, the PKK and legal groups like the BDP and Europe-based associations.*”

The organic relationship between the HDP and the KCK-linked structures manifested in divergent ideas. The apparent pattern of subjugation of the HDP to the KCK/PKK may be illustrated throughout the events of 2014-16. Prior to June 2015 elections, the DTK was instrumental in swaying Kurdish tribes and clans to vote for the HDP instead of the HDP. The DTK’s ‘commissions’ previously mainly providing services of reconciliation and mediation of local (tribal) disputes, embarked on a successful mission to persuade conservative and AKP-linked tribes to vote for the HDP (Tastekin 2015).

On July 11, 2014, the BDP, then already a party primarily serving for local politics, changed its name to the DBP, which became even more organisationally distant from the HDP (Evrensel 2014). The DBP is widely considered a more hardliner, uncompromising, and with deeper organic day-to-day ties to the KCK/PKK networks (International Crisis Group 2017c). It can be argued that the decision to maintain one party for parliamentary level and one for municipal level in the southeast was a preventive diversification measure in case the Turkish state would decide to move against one or the other. It appears that as much important reason was to divide-and-rule, as the move allowed to cut the HDP from the grass-root municipal level in the southeast, which in turn remained under more influence of the DBP and KCK/PKK. The HDP was on the verge of becoming an essential interlocutor in talks with the government on solving the PKK conflict since 2013. The party leadership, including Demirtaş, built their remarkable electoral success in June 2015 elections on the promise of maintaining peace and framing voting for the HDP as a guarantee for an extended ceasefire.

As Insel notes, HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş was “*caught between a rock in a hard place, between the hardliners of the PKK and the one-upmanship of the nationalists in power* (author’s note: meaning president Erdoğan and the AKP).” (France24 2015) Nevertheless, the developments in 2014-16 showed that the KCK/PKK has a decisive influence over Kurdish legal politics and does not hesitate to ensure their obedience. The KCK/PKK also resorted to undermine their HDP’s position by creating DBP or resuming violent activities in mid-2015 despite the HDP when it appeared that the party might become an interlocutor to resolving the Kurdish issue without the KCK/PKK leadership having decisive control over it. For example, popular young BDP/HDP politician Osman Baydemir, serving in 2004-14 as a

mayor of symbolic Diyarbakır, was then sidelined to run in the local elections in Şanlıurfa, where the pro-Kurdish parties never had any significant foothold (Hürriyet 2013b). Instead, Gültan Kışanak, a more hardliner pro-Kurdish politician and a co-chair of the DBP, was running and became a mayor. According to one source, this was due to his rising popularity as a young moderate leader giving him more independent maneuvering space, which the KCK/PKK frowned upon.

Moreover, the International Crisis Group (2011, 29) asserted that “(...) *the unelected advisers who now often sit with the BDP mayor in Diyarbakır and other municipalities are actually commissars who report to the PKK.*” That is precisely in line with the PKK’s role, according to the KCK Agreement stating that “*It is the ideological power of the KCK system. The leadership is responsible for the realization of philosophy and ideology. (...) they take part in the democratic institutionalization of democratic confederalism bodies. Every PKK cadre within the KCK system is committed to the PKK structure in terms of ideological, moral, philosophical, organizational and other vital dimensions.*” (PKK 2005)

The PKK managed to build overarching political structures under the KCK umbrella that effectively put together political parties on the local and whole-state level, associations, unions, charities, and other non-governmental organizations to follow its goals and ideology. As Gurses (2018) notes, the PKK managed to create a social movement industry, including a myriad of organizations and political platforms under its influence. The PKK maintained the ability to mobilize its constituency at the grassroots. State’s counter-measures did not significantly hurt this ability. Arguably, the overall loosened atmosphere in the southeast and, to an extent, more tolerant policies of the AKP towards such activities, especially in 2004-15, created a favourable environment for the KCK-linked networks to establish and entrench. The conditions drastically changed following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, when hundreds of HDP/DBP officials were detained and stripped of control over municipalities. Moreover, hundreds of Kurdish non-governmental organizations were closed down that year. (Cetingulec 2016). However, the KCK-linked political actors’ ability to politically mobilize did not diminish, as illustrated by the 11.7% votes coming for the HDP in the June 24, 2018 elections.

8.2.5 Building Governance Structures & Producing Legitimacy

As Tezcür (2014) notes, among the PKK’s core demands, is a decentralization process that would increase self-governance at local levels. In other words, that would legalize and empower the KCK-stipulated grass-root bottom-up governance structures from communes to villages and towns up to the international level of the KCK, topped with Öcalan as the leader. This would include the recognition and liberation of Öcalan himself and the effective integration of the KCK into the political system (ibid.). Building parallel governance structures was, therefore, at the centre of KCK/PKK efforts to penetrate the Kurdish society and to mobilize it.

The principal entity pursuing the Democratic Autonomy in Turkey is the DTK, which includes both legal political parties (the DBP and the HDP) and elements of the KCK Türkiye Meclis and various associations and nongovernmental organizations. *“The DTK is organised at the levels of village (köy), rural area (belde), urban neighbourhood (mahalle), district (ilçe), city (kent), and the region (bölge), which is referred to as ‘Northern Kurdistan’ (author’s note: Turkish Kurdish areas).”* (Akkaya and Jongerden 2014, 193) The DTK declared the Democratic Autonomy as its program in 2011 and again boldly declared autonomy across Kurdish-majority areas in December 2015 following the individual proclamations of autonomy on the Turkish state from DBP mayors (Kurdish Question 2015).

The DTK apparently overlaps with the KCK-proscribed structure. It is essentially a smaller picture of the KCK, specifically for Turkey. As Saeed (2017, 149) sums up, *“In each city, town and some villages also there is a council. This can be dependent on the size of the area and the number of Kurdish or Kurdistani people that have the commitment to or regard themselves as citizens of the KCK. Within this assembly there are similar committees to those that are in the KCK to divide the jobs and tasks within Turkey. Thus all the committees are somehow connected to the main assembly. Yet, there is significant scope for independence and autonomy of the plan, policy, initiatives and activities according to the needs of reality, the opportunity for implementation and the condition of the different areas.”*

There is a duality of the legal and illegal governance structures within the KCK system. The duality stems from the fact that the legal KCK-linked BDP/DBP managed to control an increasing number of municipalities. In turn, for example, the DTK meetings overlap with the BDP/DBP and take place in their offices (International Crisis Group 2011). Similarly, *“(...) unelected advisers who now often sit with the BDP mayor in Diyarbakır and other municipalities are actually commissars who report to the PKK.”* (ibid., 28) The DBP-controlled municipalities engage in various activities, including educational activities, social service provision, or supporting the KCK-linked women’s organization. These activities are often strongly ideologically-driven. For example, municipality-sponsored youth centres, such as the Arjin Youth Center in Diyarbakır’s Yenişehir, openly displays PKK’s martyrs (Gürbüz 2016).

DBP municipality-organized children summer camps then include ideological indoctrination and quizzing about the PKK’s martyrs and are widely viewed as a recruitment ground. Gürbüz (2016, 99-100) also touches upon the overlap between the KCK structures and DBP municipalities, noting that *“Founded after 2007, the youth centers are supported by the pro-Kurdish party municipalities and work closely with the women’s wing of the ethno-nationalist movement. As an activist who works at a women’s house, houses which are also funded by the municipalities Feride points out the importance of their organized action that unites all associations and houses. “We, as women’s organizations, have an organized body within the Kurdish movement. All those who are working for women’s institutions are united under the title of Democratic Free Women’s Movement. This type of organized body, of course, brings great benefits.”*

There appears to be a geographic variation between the maturity of the KCK-linked parallel governance structures although the KCK tries to create an image of the ‘whole-of-Kurdistan’ presence having “(...) *a network of village, city, and regional councils, functioning as an organisation to provide an ideological orientation for structures and institutions that were oriented to the idea of democracy, ecology and gender equality.*” (Jongerden 2019, 74) Fadaee and Brancolini (2019) conclude that when it comes to rural peripheral areas, including the said provincial capitals, border provinces of Hakkâri (with a robust PKK-linked parallel governance), Şırnak (a hub for training and recruitment) and in rural Van province have the most overarching coverage of local governing assemblies. Elsewhere, especially in Kurdish-majority cities in the southeast, the KCK-linked governance always appears to be concentrated mainly in neighbourhoods that are traditional hotbeds for the PKK support, are usually lower-income, often having a number of inhabitants that count among people displaced from their villages by the state in the 1990s. In Diyarbakır city, it is, for example, Sur, Bağlar, and partially Yenişehir districts; in Silvan, it is the Tekel area.

While the KCK-linked parallel governance structures are far from maturity and omnipresence than the post-2011 northeast Syria, the KCK managed to gradually expand its governance utilizing duality of legal control over municipalities creating parallel governance. These two aspects of governance overlap and are closely interconnected. The parallel governance and the DBP municipal success were also allowed by its increasingly good electoral performance and state policies, which, especially in 2013-15 (but partly already since 2009), refrained from dismantling them. Nevertheless, the coverage of neighbourhood and communal councils remains highly-localized and inadequate. As a result, people often bring their problem primarily to the BDP/DBP party structures in municipalities, which creates inevitable frictions since “(...) *according to our project, the state should keep its relationship with the Kurdish people through this Congress (meaning the DTK structures).*” (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012) This implicates that the KCK/PKK’s ambition is to have parallel governance structures that should be the principal and only interlocutor between the people and the Turkish state and its bureaucracy.

It is important to note that in 2004-18, the PKK never established substantial territorial control areas. Two significant attempts, in Şemdinli areas of Hakkâri in July-August 2012 (International Crisis Group 2012b), and 2015-16 with brief assuming control over areas inside Kurdish-majority cities, failed as the Turkish state soon renewed control. Instead, it appears that “*A territorial strategy (the creation of liberated land) and state-building seems to have been replaced by an institutional strategy, which aims at the development of a civil society recreating Kurdistan from the bottom.*” (Akkaya 2020, 740) The KCK/PKK-governance is thus conducted in areas of mixed control. In 2015-16, the PKK tried to craft an image of fighting for the ‘Kurdish survival’ against the oppressive state. “*With ID controls, fireworks, street protests, taxation, provision of justice, and civil disobedience in the Kurdish-majority towns in southeast Turkey, the PKK is trying to prove that it can paralyze the state authority with activist violence initiated by locals without appealing to a full-fledged guerilla war.*” (Gurcan 2016: 52)

Policing the Population and Dispute Resolution

There are no reports that the KCK/PKK would employ overt, institutionalized forces to police the population as it does in Syria or Shingal district in Iraq with the Asayish internal security force. Nevertheless, it maintains a robust covert presence in the social fabric as exemplified by the well-documented ability to mobilize and order closures of businesses and shops at times of militant funerals, organizing demonstrations and levying ‘revolutionary tax’ from locals.

The KCK/PKK, however, regulates social and personal relations. As an integral part of its stance towards women’s rights and combating the traditional tribal customs, it frowns upon polygamy. Men disobeying the rule would then lose their job and prevented from getting a new one in the area, suggesting quite tight social control (Haner and Benson 2019). Leezenberg (2016) also notices that within local and communal councils, special attention is paid to running a sort of quasi-court system in the forms of institutionalized mediation and arbitration of domestic violence cases, blood feuds, women abuses. Akkaya and Jongerden (2014) also add that mediation is not only limited to family and personal disputes but also engages in resolving conflicts in the private sector between shopkeepers and companies.

Leezenberg (2016) asserts that mediation and arbitration were among the first efforts of the newly established Free Citizenship Councils since 2005, including resolving feuds, divorces, domestic violence, and honour killings. Attempts to mobilize and re-shape Kurdish society and introduce new lawful and social regulations are apparent as the DTK, for example, views family as a social institution as outdated and needing conversion. *“Thus, the laws and the concept of property of children and women which is based on hierarchy must be replaced.”* (Saeed 2017, 174) Consequently, the organization cares greatly about organizing women and youth.

Provision of Public Goods

The KCK/PKK-linked structures include many associations concerning providing social assistance for the poor, for example, Sarmaşık food bank that was active in Diyarbakir until its closure by the state in 2017 (Yılmaz and Kayar 2017b). Similarly, the BDP/DBP-led municipalities introduced a wide range of social aid programs, effectively competing with the government that vastly expanded its social policies and financial assistance in the southeast in the 2000s. Yoltar and Yörük (2020) note that the government and BDP/DBP-led programs were competing, and as the state was appointing trustee mayors instead of DBP politicians in 2016, it immediately also included ‘state-branded’ social project, programs for youth, scholarships, etc. At the same time, the authorities went on a closing spree of KCK/PKK- and the DBP-linked social assistance programs.

One of the long-standing efforts of the KCK/PKK remains the revival of the Kurdish language and education provision in general. In 2005, a prominent Kurdish language association Kurd-Der, linked

to the KCK, opened and not only provided education to over 70,000 students but also trained 10,000 Kurdish teachers being a principal organization behind bringing Kurdish culture and language back to the public space (Saeed 2017). At the same time, Leezenberg (2016) notes that various ‘academies’ providing ideological education within the PKK party line were also a backbone of the educational and mobilization efforts.

Feedback Mechanisms for Civilian Participation

The DTK boasts of having up to 850 delegates, 500 supposedly elected at the local, district level, and the rest are appointed representatives of constituent associations, non-governmental organisations, or minorities (Akkaya and Jongerden 2014). In practice, however, no elections were ever held to determine the membership of the KCK or the DTK assembly. Similarly, there are no reports on any election process for the communal or local councils on the ground. Apparently, these structures follow the usual PKK’s suite of appointing and hand-picked co-opting of persons in charge of their structures rather than being genuine bottom-up grass-roots organization as its ideological premises proscribe.

Within the different incarnations of legal KCK-linked pro-Kurdish political parties such as the DTP, the BDP/DBP, and the HDP, the KCK/PKK also maintained a considerable influence, for example, by having a final word in the forming up concrete electoral lists in local and parliamentary elections. In turn, the KCK/PKK and by an extension the HDP was remarkably flexible in co-opting candidates for the June 2015 elections that would be appealing to religious and tribal Kurds: for example, Altan Tan, mufti Abdullah Zeydan in Diyarbakır, Mehmet Mir Dengir Fırat in Merson, or in Bitlis, Mahmut Celadet Gaydali from Gaydali-Inan clan running the Bitlis politics since the 1950s (Gunes 2019).

While there is undoubtedly a democratic deficit in selection processes and most positions are filled by appointments overseen by the senior KCK/PKK figures, the organization cares much for fostering mass mobilization and participation of the people. A great deal of energy is invested in educating the masses, their political mobilization, organizing public events, or demonstrations. Participation and recruitment within the KCK/PKK-linked structures are encouraged as it is, after all, the hallmark of the idea of an overarching grass-roots organization under the PKK’s ideological guidance. One could argue with Gurses (2018, 91) that *“War dynamics, along with insurgent relentless efforts to remake Kurdish identity, have greatly reshaped Kurdishness. The PKK movement and armed conflict have successfully transformed traditional, non-political Kurdish masses into Kurds who are well aware of their Kurdishness.”*

Influence over Economic Sector

In the post-2000, the PKK abandoned statist Marxist-Leninist national liberation ideology and instead insisted on creating ecologist-rural communes enjoying state sovereignty as basic economic units (Yarkin 2015). Instead of a capitalist hunt for maximization of profit, one should serve the commune

and ensure their food sovereignty, which will resolve persistent unemployment issues and poverty, especially in Kurdish cities (ibid.). There are occasional mentions of particular success stories of communes or cooperatives in Turkish Kurdish areas in the pro-PKK media outlet. For example, Gever peasant commune consisting of 24 villages, with *“particular committees of law, education, culture and finance to solve their daily problems and improve their social lives without the involvement of the Turkish state.”* (ibid., 40) Furthermore, *“They collectively resolve pasture and water, have created a livestock breeding collective farm and also built houses for those in need.”* (ibid.) However, the new economic model proposed by the PKK is not prevalent or on the rise. These particular examples are chiefly used for propaganda purposes, in parallel to such instances in northeast Syria.

The KCK/PKK in Turkey attempted to create a rebelocracy (Arjona 2016). Yet, its success was limited as it does not have a monopoly over any area on Turkish soil. It managed to create a combination of political and parallel governance structures. It engages in dispute resolution mechanisms as well as fosters civilian participation. However, this is happening in the contested spaces where the state’s authority is also strong. As for the claims of legitimacy, according to Schlichte and Schneckener (2016), it enjoys symbolic legitimacy by successfully putting itself into the position of representative of Kurdish socio-economic and political aspirations against the ‘enemy,’ the Turkish state and its policies. Performance-centred claims of legitimacy are also employed, especially credibility to sacrifice for the Kurdish cause. By creating parallel governance structures and having a strong influence over municipal politics, the KCK/PKK also managed to provide a certain degree of services, mainly various cultural and social assistance programs. The PKK/KCK also has well-established formal procedures to attract and mobilize followers, encourage political participation, and support civil society groups in a complex system of political parties, associations, and local councils.

9. The PJAK Insurgency in Iran

The PJAK's insurgency in Iran can be divided into two distinctive periods. During the first period 2004-11, the PKK established the PJAK to appeal to the Iranian Kurdish population and started its armed struggle. Iran, effectively defeating Kurdish insurgency groups by the mid-1990s and ending their 20-year de facto military rule of the region with Muhammad Khatami's presidency in 1997-2005, was perhaps caught by surprise by the ferocious PJAK's campaign costing 480 lives by 2011 (UCDP 2020c). Major military operations effectively defeated the PJAK, driven it out of Iranian soil to Iraq, where it attacked its bases in July-September 2011. Subsequently, an agreement was reached with the PJAK declaring a ceasefire. The PJAK ceased most of the violent operations in Iran and primarily focused on limited political activities, marking the second period of PJAK's insurgency in 2012-18.

9.1 The Context of Insurgency

Iranian Kurdish political ambitions were always kept in check by the state employing a combination of heavy-handed security measures, limited co-optation, and allowing space for cultural (never political) expressions for Kurdish identity. Unlike in Syria or Turkey, cultural expressions of Kurdish identity do not necessarily get one into trouble with state authorities (Home Office 2016). One of the contributing factors is the relative closeness of Kurdish and Persian cultures (e.g., Newroz celebrations), language proximity between Persian and Kurdish dialects, and official nationalist narratives revolving around constructing Kurdish identity being within the body of Aryan peoples of Iran (Posch 2017). There are still certain language restrictions, such as the non-existence of Kurdish language education in schools, although the Iranian Constitution (Article 15) allows it (Entessar 2014). Nevertheless, there is a relatively rich landscape of Kurdish radios, media, and publications in the Kurdish language that the state does not crack down on as long as they are not perceived as political. However, Kurdish-inhabited areas suffered through underdevelopment, as well as discriminatory policies against co-opting Kurdish, especially Sunnis, to senior positions within Iranian polity.

Estimates of the Kurdish population vary between 10.3 to 17.5% (7.87 to 12 million) (see Table 5.1a). Kurds are divided among Sunnis (66%) and Shiite (27%), and several other minority faiths (Vogt et al. 2015). Sunni Kurds live mainly in Western Azerbaijan (divided among Kurds living in western parts and Shia Azeris, with whom relations are tensed in the east), Kurdistan, and northern parts of Kermanshah provinces. Shiite Kurds, comparably less 'rebellious' and better integrated into Iranian polity (Tezcür and Asadzade 2019), live mainly in Kermanshah, Illam, and the northeast in Khorasan (Izady 2020c). Shiite Kurds of Northern Khorasan (counting around 1 million; Madih 2007) track their ancestry into several waves of ethnic engineering policies displacing the population from the western part of Persia in the 16th and 18th centuries (ibid.; see also Gunter 2020). However, they are much less politicized and never inclined to rise against the state. They are assimilated to a point when Madih (2007, 12) asserts

that “(...) *the Kurdish ethnicity in Khorasan has become a rather social label, or characteristic; to be a Kurd implies the belonging to rustic milieu, a villager par excellence.*”

Kurdish social and political landscape remains strongly divided, not only along religious lines but also due to geography and a continuous strong influence of tribal structures, especially in rural areas. As Gresh (2009, 188) notes there is still “(...) *strong divide between the urban and rural elites, with the Kurdish urban elites, many of whom believe that the traditional Kurdish tribal leadership and its many factions have contributed to the lack of a strong and unified Kurdish national movement.*” Essentially, the society is divided along three lines: nomadic or semi-nomadic people living in the mountains in the northwest and sedentary people in plains in the northeast, divided by Zagros mountain range, and city dwellers (Yildiz and Taysi 2007).

9.1.1 Horizontal Inequalities

Iranian Kurds experienced strong horizontal inequalities, with the government paying little attention to changing its policies in that regard. Kurdish provinces are traditionally poorer, lack development and infrastructure. Kurds face a score of discriminatory policies. For example, while the Iranian Constitution stipulates in Article 15 that other languages, including Kurdish, should be taught at schools, it has never been put into practice. Overall, the problem that “*the state’s policies that have consistently securitized ethnic issues and have failed to institute a desecuritized approach to nationality issues since the Islamic revolution,*” remains (Entessar 2014, 212-13). In 2004-18, this approach did not change. Horizontal inequalities were alleviated only very little. For example, by increasing local public sector employment among the Kurds, or de-militarization of governance during Khatami (1997-2005) and Rouhani presidency (2013-18). However, these periods were interrupted by the heavy-handed securitized approach of president Ahmadinejad (2005-13).

It is essential to clarify that Iranian Kurds are divided among Shiites (27%) and Sunnis (66%) (Vogt et al. 2015). Sunnis live mainly in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, northern parts of Kermanshah, and certain border regions of Illam. In turn, Shia Kurds live in Kermanshah, Illam, and Khorasan in the northeast of the country. Shia Kurds are, in general, better integrated into the body of Iranian politics, and the majority of high profile Kurds such as oil minister since 2013, Bijan Namdar Zangane, are Shia (Tezcür and Asadzade 2019). Even the first-ever Kurdish governor of the majority-Sunni Kurdish province of Kurdistan, Abdullah Ramezanzadeh, appointed in 1997, was Shia (Koochi-Kamali 2003).

Moreover, Shia Kurds have never been as ‘rebellious’ as their Sunni brethren. All Kurdish insurgencies, such as the Republic of Mahabad in 1946, subsequent PDKI and Komala activities in the 1980s, or the PJAK insurgency, were concentrated in Sunni Kurdish areas. Tezcür and Asadzade offer an excellent argument utilizing PKK/PJAK martyr data. They found out that until 2016 the vast majority of recruits came from Sunni-majority provinces Kurdistan (24%) and West Azerbaijan (69%), and only 8% from Illam and Kermanshah combined (Tezcür and Asadzade 2019). They conclude that “*These*

findings suggest that Kurdish ethno-nationalism has a much weaker basis among the Shiite Kurds than their Sunni brethren in Iran,” arguing that it is because they share religious identity with the majority (ibid., 666).

Additionally, among Sunni Kurds, radical Islam has been on the rise since the early 2000s (Posch 2017). At first, increasing attacks on religious and state officials were blamed on the al-Qaeda currents, such as the attempt on an Iranian judge's life and the September 2009 murder of a Sunni Kurdish cleric supportive of Tehran (Zambelis 2011). Later on, ISIS became a prominent source of inspiration and motivation for many Iranian Sunni Kurds to join its ranks. By early 2016, 150 Iranian Sunni Kurds fought for ISIS in Iraq or Syria (Hawramy 2017). By the end of 2017, the number rose to 400 (Faramarzi 2018). A major coordinated terrorist attack in Tehran (first such event in 10 years) targeting parliament and Khomeini's mausoleum on June 7, 2017, costing 18 lives, was perpetrated by ISIS, and the attackers were Iranian Sunni Kurds (Hawramy 2017).

Faramarzi (2018) notes that contrary to the Iranian government's blaming of Saudi Arabia and other countries for the rise of radical Islamism, it is mostly home-grown, albeit strongly influenced by radical Islamist currents in the KRI. This is also due to Iran allowing members of Ansar al-Islam (Kurdish radical Islamist insurgents defeated by combined operations of the KDP, PUK, and the US forces by March 2003 in the KRI; Romano 2007) to seek refuge in Iran as a counterweight to traditional (secular) Kurdish parties such as Komala, the PDKI, or the PKK (Faramarzi 2018).

Another contributing factor may be that most Shiite provinces are better off economically: GDP per capita in 2018 in Kermanshah was 86.9 million rials, in Illam 142 million, as opposed to 69.3 and 71.6 million rials in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan (Omrani, Shafaat and Emrouznejad 2018). To compare, the country average GDP per capita was 122.3 million rials in 2018 (ibid.). In 2014, 52.12% of urban and 48.97% of the rural population lived in poverty in Kurdistan province, which is significantly higher than the country average of 33.4% and 40.1% (Tabatabai 2018). In general, what stands is that “(...) *on the whole, the Kurdish regions of Iran have historically been left out of infrastructure projects by the Iranian state, and unemployment is high.*” (Yildiz and Taysi 2007) Posch (2017) summarizes narratives to explain the prevalent poverty and underdevelopment of Kurdish provinces. They usually revolve around blaming previous regimes in Iran, the impact of the Iran-Iraq war, or foreign interventions and, at the same time, highlight the government's recent efforts to alleviate the situation. Such efforts include opening the border with Iraq and supporting cross-border trade that brought wealth, major employment projects such as opening a sugar factory in Bukan or refinery in Mahabad, coined with social policies, including on housing (ibid.). More universities operate in Kurdish cities. Peyam-e Noor and Islamic Azad University opened new branches. Nevertheless, he concludes that “(...) *results are sobering as the contribution of Kurdistan's economy to the national economy remains very low.*” (ibid., 340)

Especially Sunni Kurds experience high levels of horizontal inequalities since they face double discrimination – because of both religious and ethnic identity. The state has employed discriminatory strategies in designing barriers for Kurds to enter public service or advance their business. For example, *“The Selection Law has been used frequently to deny employment to Kurds in particular in the state sector including in the Education Ministry as teachers or the possibility of standing for parliamentary elections or issuing business licence for not having the obligatory belief in and adherence to the principle of Velayat-e Faqih.”* (Alternative Report 2010, 20)

This goes in line with a general perception of Kurds described by Akbarzadeh et al. (2019, 1156) arguing that *“If a Kurd is active in line with the ideology of the Islamic Republic, along with the current and recognized political movement in Iran, he may partially be able to participate in political movements, but if he considers his Kurdish identity, he will be excluded from political participation.”* Yildiz and Taysi (2007, 51) conclude that *“In general, due to ongoing discriminatory state activities, the Kurds of Iran experience a lack of representation within political and military establishments, the denial of language rights and the underdevelopment of their region leading to economic marginalisation.”* To conclude, in the examined period of 2004-18, Iranian policies maintained the same security-oriented approach, as will be discussed in length in Chapter 9.2.1, towards Kurdish-majority provinces (especially during the Ahmadinejad period). In turn, it introduced only piece-meal policies to alleviate horizontal inequalities among Kurds, especially Sunnis.

9.1.2 State Policies

Tehran’s policies since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 followed Shah’s regime’s cautious and securitized approach to Kurds, remembering their centrifugal tendencies, sometimes fuelled by development in neighboring Iraq. However, *“Iran has historically allowed space for modicum of cultural (never political) activity for Kurds that, has at time outshined what was and is offered to some of the other Kurdish population.”* (ibid., 6) The core of its policy revolves around continuous securitization of the issues of ethnic (or religious or both) minorities. However, Iran accepts and, in some discourses, embraces its multi-ethnic character (Stansfield 2014). As Posch (2017, 341-42) notes, the common official narrative revolves around the assertion that Kurds are among *“the purest Iranian races and peoples”* as they are part *“of the most ancient peoples of Aryan origin.”*

Reformist president Mohammed Khatami was elected in 1997 and went a great length into looking into minority problems, including Kurds. He finally ended 20-year de facto military rule and changed the public sector’s hiring policies in Kurdish areas. Since then, up to 80% were Kurds, including most of the district governors and administrators (ibid.). This included even Sunni Kurds as Khatami appointed several *“(…) to important positions, including key roles in economic, and financial affairs, industries, and administration.”* (Koochi-Kamali 2003, 212-13)

Up until 2005, restrictions on cultural activities, publications, and media in Kurdish were significantly eased. However, even then, pro-Khatami Kurdish officials were facing regular blowbacks

from the conservatives. For example, the first-ever (Shia) Kurdish governor of Kurdistan, Abdullah Ramezanzadeh, was summoned by the Special Court for Public Officials in April 2001 based on the Guardian Council's accusation that he 'disseminates lies' (Stansfield 2014). Khatami's reformist policies were increasingly sidelined, and subsequently, favourable policies towards Kurds ended. In the February 2004 parliamentary elections, 70% of Kurds boycotted the vote following the ban of over half of Kurdish MPs to run again (Yildiz and Taysi 2007). The June 2005 presidential elections were likewise heavily boycotted by the Kurds. They opposed hard-liner candidate Ahmadinejad (only 29.96% and 37.15% participated in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan in the second round, with the average country turnout 59.76%) (Iran Data Portal 2020). Ahmadinejad's period was indeed a setback for Kurds. It marked a return to systematic discrimination and a high level of securitization of governance in Kurdish-inhabited provinces, particularly in Kurdistan, deepening for years also as a response to the slow birth of the PJAK insurgency in 2004. Paramilitary Basij was given police powers and resorted to confiscation of pastoral lands (Yildiz and Taysi 2007), a practice described by the UNHCR report in 2005, enforced broadly in Iran western border provinces (Kothari 2006). Since 2005, there were on-and-off protests and civil unrest, accompanied by militarization of the Kurdish provinces, Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan in particular.

Among two reasons to explain why Ahmadinejad's period (2005-13) witnessed a return to heavy-handed securitized policies in Kurdish areas was that the PKK's wing for Iran was about to emerge. The PKK changed its approach and started creating local franchises. This led to (albeit short-lived) Iranian-Turkish cooperation against the PKK. Upon the Turkish PM's Erdogan visitation in Tehran in July 2004, Iran put Kongra-Gel (the PKK) on terrorism list in contrast to previous periods when Iran ignored the PKK's activities and supported its presence in Iraq (Yildiz and Taysi 2007; see also Kaválek and Mareš 2018). Secondly, this was coined with fears that the Kurdish region's imminent institutional establishment in Iraq under the US patronage may fuel either naturally as an inspiration or deliberately due to the US policies rebel groups against Iran. Moreover, Ahmadinejad was a proponent of Persian-centric nationalist policies, far away from Khatami's interests in minorities with a motto 'Iran for all Iranians' (Entessar 2014). As Stansfield (2014, 77) asserts, "(...), *Kurdistan witnessed the return of the heavy imposition of Persian-dominant nationhood that was given extra weight by the increasingly sectarian (Shi'i-Sunni) agenda now being adopted by the Islamic Republic.*"

Re-securitization of Kurdish areas during the Ahmadinejad era came hand in hand with the emerging PJAK insurgency increasing its intensity in 2005-11. Iran arrived at the 'enough is enough' point in 2011 and launched a major security operation in border areas with Iraq, and defeated the PJAK militarily in July-September 2011. The PJAK retreated to the PKK camps in the KRI (see Chapter 9.2.1). This was a rare example of a sustained military campaign as Iran usually prefers containment in countering insurgencies (or terrorists in their terminology). "*Containment aims to limit the targeted terrorist*

group's effectiveness by encouraging internal divisions. This strategy is focused on avoiding direct combat (...). If initial containment fails, a state can 'upgrade' to 'offensive containment'. In other words, it can employ 'a combination of limited military tactics and a broad diplomatic strategy to halt [the group's] expansion, isolate the group and degrade its capabilities'." (Tabatabai 2018, 200) Security dimensions and importance of Kurdish areas for Iranian regime can be further argued by various instances of senior Iranian officials systematically earning their spurs while deployed in Kurdish province: "(...) IRGC (author's note: Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps) commanders *Mohsen Rezaei, Yahya Rahim-Safavi and Mohammad Jaafari, who had their first combat experience in Kurdistan, and also Qasim Soleimani, the commander of the Qods Branch of the IRGC. Soleimani was in Kurdistan and Western Azerbaijan at the same time as a certain Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, later to become president of the Islamic Republic of Iran (...).*" (Posch 2017, 338)

Hassan Rouhani polled quite well in June 2013 (from 62% turnout in Kurdistan province 80% voted for Rouhani; Entessar 2014) and in June 2017 (67.39%; Iran Data Project 2020b) presidential elections. However, he did not pro-actively campaign for 'Iran for all Iranians' as Khatami did. However, the new governor of Kurdistan Abdul Mohammed Zahedi declared his goal to de-securitize the area (which indeed happened compared to Ahmadinejad's period), and the new interior minister, a Kurd, Abdolreza Rahman Fazli, promised not only desecuritisation but also professionalization of administration based on competence – effectively continuing Khatami's policies (Entessar 2014). Rouhani's administration attempted to de-securitize ethnic issues and bridge the gap between the central government and Kurds (Tezçür and Asadzade 2019). Simultaneously, strict punishments of the proscribed political activity of Kurds continued, with high numbers of executed (328 Kurds in his first term; Gunter 2020) coined with a continuous crackdown in the form of arrests and handing out long prisons sentences. These measures targeted increasingly problematic radical Sunni Muslim currents among Kurds or members of other Kurdish parties such as the PDKI or Komala (Akbarzadeh et al. 2019). PJAK chair Haji Ahmadi argued that 40% of executed Kurds were members of his organization as of 2010 (van Wilgeburg 2010). Kurds remain disproportionately represented among political prisoners. In January 2018, they accounted for 45% of political prisoners in total as opposed to usually perceived 'troublemakers' Baluchis (19%, extremely high number though there are only 1.5-2 million Baluchis estimated living in Iran; United States Institute of Peace 2013), or Arabs (8%) (Minority Rights Group International 2018).

Iran continued its skillful double-prone containment counterinsurgency strategy on Kurds by combining repressive measures with attempts at co-optation, easing particular (mainly cultural, not political) restrictions, or refraining from crackdowns on episodes of social unrest. With more Iranian Kurdish parties returning to armed struggle in 2016-17 and on and off periodical civil unrests, further securitization occurred. IRGC ground commander Muhammed Pakpour noted that "*on the other side of the border [the KRI], many consulates have been opened to revive the dead groupings and stir them against us.*" (Milburn

2017) In turn, PDKI leader Mustafa Hijri asserted in April 2017 that *“The regime is terrified of these activities from these independent militant groups, along with the presence of our Peshmerga Forces inside the homeland, and the widespread support and assistance to our forces.”* (Jerusalem Post 2017) Although this assessment of the PDKI’s and other rebels’ prowess at stirring problems for Iran is far too optimistic, Iran reacted by increased intelligence activity in the KRI (Rudaw 2017) as well as with assassinations of Iranian Kurdish figures widely attributed to Iranian operatives (e.g., PDKI Peshmerga commander Qadir Qadiri killed in Ranya on March 7, 2018; Ali 2018). A high-profile missile attack then occurred on the PDKI and the KDP (Iran) bases in the KRI in Koya on September 8, 2018, killing 18 and injuring scores of other while targeting leadership meeting between the two parties (van Wilgenburg 2018e).

Simultaneously, there were patterns of restraint and limited easing on securitized policies. Iranian security apparatus abstained from any crackdowns on the KRI’s controversial independence referendum held in September 2017, followed by significant demonstrations and public solidarity expressions across Iranian Kurdish cities such as Paneh, Mahabad, or Sanandaj (Brandon 2018). A more subtle way of exercising control continued during Rouhani’s era. For example, an Iranian Kurdish activist lamented that *“They frequently summon Kurdish social, cultural, and political activists to security agencies to control them.”* (Akbarzadeh et al. 2019, 1155) They further note, *“(…) official monitoring and control of Kurdish organisations is seen as extending beyond the political to encompass cultural groups and activities, which theoretically should be entirely free.”* (ibid.) At the same time, Iran frequently allows for expanded symbolic cultural expressions of ‘Kurdayeti.’ For example, in July 2019, famous Sanandaj-born singer Mazhar Khaleghi was allowed to return from exile where he was since 1979 (Dri 2019). A major annual Kurdish fashion festival was held (Iran Front Pages 2019). Iran was occasionally courting selected Iranian parties in covert talks, in 2018-19, for example, with the PDKI and the KDP (Iran) (Zaman 2019). After all, PJAK’s effective cessation of armed activities after its military defeat in the summer of 2011 (see Chapter 9.2.1) was also a result of apparent agreement between the PKK and Iranian officials, reportedly mediated by the Iraqi Kurdish PUK (Hawramy 2018).

To conclude, Iran continues its double-pronged containment policy against Kurds (and other ethnic minorities in the country, for that matter). While it generally allows for increasing space for cultural activities and engages in much wider co-optation of Kurdish, for example, into the (lower level) public sector or security apparatus, any political activity is still prohibited. At times the boundary between cultural and political may appear to be blurred in state officials’ eyes (and sometimes indeed for Kurdish activists as well). However, it seems to be in place and relatively predictable during Khatami and Rouhani, as opposed to Ahmadinejad’s presidency or the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Nevertheless, Iran strictly punishes any resemblances of Kurdish political activities, including life imprisonment and capital punishment. As discussed in Chapter 9.1.1, state economic policies failed to bring systematic economic or infrastructure development of long-neglected Kurdish areas. They remained rather a piecemeal effort.

9.1.3 Incumbent's Power

According to Picconne (2017), stable authoritarian regimes or established democracies are at a lower risk of armed conflict compared to only partially democratic systems. Iran in 2004-18 falls under a category of a stable, albeit not a free country. Looking at the development of Iran's Fragile State Index, it was steadily decreasing from 2010 (92.2) to 84.3 in 2018 (The Fund for Peace 2020). Moreover, Iran was able to keep any ethnically or religiously motivated insurgencies at bay without any serious problems. That includes ethnoreligious insurgency in Sistan-Baluchistan, spearheaded by Jundullah and Jayish al-Adl (Cappuccino 2017).

Iran never lacked capabilities to conduct a major armed campaign against insurgents to defeat them militarily when necessary (in 2011, up to 5,000 soldiers were deployed to drive the PJAK fighters out of Iran; Aryan 2011). Also, it maintained a tight grip in terms of surveillance of the Kurdish population and overall high density of military deployment in Iranian Kurdish provinces, albeit short of up to 200,000 soldiers deployed there in the mid-1990s (Koochi-Kamali 2003). After heightened re-militarization of Iranian Kurdish areas during Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005-13, once the PJAK insurgents were effectively militarily defeated, governance in the area once again experienced significant demilitarization under president Rouhani (2013-18) (Entessar 2014). This shows that Iran is capable of managing Kurdish areas without any serious issues while still being able to skilfully continue its double-prone containment policy, mixing co-optation, counterinsurgency, law enforcement activities. It continues to effectively prevent any significant political activity among the Kurds from emerging.

9.1.4 Presence of Active Rivalry

Similarly to Syria, the Kurdish political party palette in Iran is rich. As of 2018, there were six distinctive organizations competing for the same constituency apart from the PKK-linked current, represented by the PJAK. Strong fractionalization and failed attempts at unity result from the absence of strong leaders, personalized disputes, and geographically and socially fragmented nature of Iranian Kurdish areas, which are divided into two by tribal and traditional Zagros mountain range (Gresh 2009). Tribes play a vital role in the Iranian Kurdish society. Yet, tribal leaders are often at odds with political parties, possibly challenging their authority.⁷⁴

While there are many Iranian Kurdish political parties (see MERI Forum 2016), they stem from two distinctive historical traditions – the PDKI and Komala. As Milburn (2017) notes, while they have a range of political views mainly oscillating on the left (from moderate socialist to dreams of class struggle inducing Leninist-style revolution'; *ibid.*), all stress Kurdish nationalism and demand autonomy. Both the PDKI and Komala were militarily defeated. They gave up armed struggle in Iran before 1996

⁷⁴ This pattern was apparent already during the short-lived Mahabad Republic in 1946, when tribal leader were at odds with urban intellectuals, initially the main force behind secessionist aspirations (see Yildiz and Taysi 2007).

(MacDiarmid 2015), arguing in Yildiz and Taysi's (2007, 110) words that such times are “(...) *over and believe that the revolution, or to put it a better way, evolution, won't come from the mountains, it will come from the cities.*” However, the major hurdle in parties' attempts to boost presence in Iran is the fact that they are all illegal and effectively exiled.

The PDKI was established in 1945 and was the main political front governing the short-lived Republic of Mahabad existing in 1946, ruled by Qazi Muhammad (for a comprehensive account, see McDowall 2004, 231-48). The PDKI focused on connecting certain tribes and middle-class urban Kurds in strongholds in Mahabad, Bukan, Urmia vicinity, or Saqqiz (Koohi-Kamali 2003). During Shah's regime, the PDKI was relatively weak, operating only clandestinely. Any serious attempts to undermine the Iranian state were hurdled by active cooperation between Barzanis and Tehran against the PDKI (ibid.). After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the PDKI was again largely exiled to Iraq by the mid-1980s, losing a fight to Iranian troops. Another blow was the assassination of PDKI's charismatic leader since 1971 Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou in Vienna attributed to Iranian operatives on July 13, 1989 (Entessar 2017). His successor, Sadiq Sharafkandi, was murdered in Berlin on September 17, 1992, rendering the PDKI's leadership further in disarray (ibid.). The PDKI was the first of the traditional Iranian Kurdish parties to resume its armed struggle. In 2015, the PDKI mobilized its fighters in the KRI, based in camps alongside the border and its headquarters in the town of Koya, and by September 2015 announced it had resumed its armed struggle (MacDiarmid 2015). The PDKI has estimated 1,000-1,500 fighters as of 2017 (Milburn 2017).

Komala (Organization of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan) was, according to its leader Abdullah Mohtadi, established in 1969 as a clandestine Maoist revolutionary organisation (Hevian 2013). Komala represented a more radical vision calling not only for autonomy but actively opposing landowners and tribal leaders and supporting agricultural reforms. The point of its origin is disputed among Komala members, and Vali convincingly argues that it was established in 1979 (Vali 2020). Komala was since 1979 when it led a fight against tribal leaders' efforts to continue extracting feudal fees from Kurdish peasants (Yildiz and Taysi 2007). Komala fractured over time, and there are five mostly politically irrelevant groups using the same name (for more see Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield 2010). Komala has had stronger standing in the south and southeast in Sanandaj, Marivan, or Paveh (Koohi-Kamali 2003). Although it was led by an older generation of leftist middle-class intellectuals (in 2018, it was still chaired by its co-founder Abdullah Mohtadi), it focused on radical educated youth and lower class Kurds, peasants working class. The fractionalization and the fact they were effectively exiled limited Komala's influence on the ground and eroded their support base. Hevian argued it had close to zero presence and support in Iran (Hevian 2013). Yildiz and Taysi (2007) asserted that Komala's influence was actually on the rise among disenchanting Iranian Kurds due to their use of modern communication strategies and the successful

mobilization of their support base. However, it appears that the PJAK was more successful in mobilizing and recruiting from the poorest groups of Kurdish society.

Theoretically, Komala should be the fiercest rival of the PJAK, tapping on a similar support pool. However, its apparent weakness and inability to maintain both political and armed campaign inside Iran makes it less of a serious rival compared to the more active PDKI. Komala was a bitter rival to the PDKI, which led to bloody confrontations that cost hundreds of lives (Hevian 2013). As a result, Komala was effectively ousted from Iran and exiled to Iraq by the mid-80s, and it arguably never fully recovered from this shock. On September 15, 2015, at the onset of the debate about a renewed armed struggle of the PDKI in Iran, Komala's deputy leader Reza Kaabi criticized any return to violence. He blamed the PJAK operatives for provocation, described it as 'Tehran's *"excuse to militarize the Kurdish areas further."*' (Rudaw 2015) Komala finally renewed armed struggle and mobilized its forces against Iran in late April 2017 (Ekurd 2017). However, it could not maintain the gravity of the armed campaign and engaged in a few border clashes in 2017. Its strength is estimated at less than 1,000 fighters as of 2017 (Milburn 2017).

Both Komala and the PDKI further lost support among Kurds during Khatami's presidency in 1996-2005 when the situation of ethnic minorities, including Kurds, partially improved. During Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005-13, much of the favourable policies diminished, and the PJAK entered the stage with their insurgency. With Tehran facing the PJAK insurgency, Komala, the PDKI, and the KDP (Iran) perhaps hoped the regime would change its stance and accommodate them by allowing the activities on Iranian soil as a counterweight to the radical revolutionary irreconcilable PJAK. The KDP (Iran) even openly engaged in negotiations with Iranian officials in 2007 (Hawramy 2018b). However, even with Hassan Rouhani's presidency since 2013, no such steps were made. After the PKK/PJAK reached an agreement with the regime, it ceased its military activities by the end of 2011. However, the PJAK continued to maintain its presence since and successfully politicized poor layers of society and recruited exclusively from them (Posch 2017). While it is difficult to assess the PJAK's support base among Iranian Kurds, especially among poor youth, it was undoubtedly on the rise in 2005-18. It pushed back both the PDKI and Komala that lacked proper presence in Iran. Losing ground to the PJAK as well as the fear of further accommodation of the Iranian regime with the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 prompted the PDKI, Komala, and four other marginal groups to resume its armed struggle by 2017.

Enemies once engaged in bloody conflict, the PDKI and Komala reached an agreement to pursue a federal model in Iran in 2012 (Gunter 2020). The PDKI and the small KDP (Iran), splintered in 2006 over succession, began unification talks in December 2012 (ibid.). By 2018, they worked closely together, including sharing facilities, yet short of the PDKI absorbing the KDP (Iran). Despite various attempts at cooperation (Rudaw 2017b), the fragmentation continued. As Khalid Azizi, leader of the KDP (Iran) noted, Iranian authorities do not consider them a threat precisely because they are not united (MERI

Forum 2016). The motivation for renewed struggle led to establishing ‘urban Peshmerga’ units of the PDKI (Hawramy 2018) and new armed groups such as Zagros Eagles (PDKI.org 2018). Indeed PDKI chairman Mustafa Hijri asserted in November 2016 that there must be military presence in Iran *“to give hope to the people so they know the Peshmerga are among them.”* (MERI Forum 2016) Resumed armed struggle appears to be motivated by the loss of popular support among Iranian Kurds magnified by the PJAK’s success in expanding its standing, thus pointing to a strong active rivalry, in which, however, the PJAK seems to be a stronger player.

9.1.5 Other Variables: Safe Haven, Geography, External Support

The PJAK has a very suitable safe haven in the form of the PKK’s camps and positions alongside the Iran-Iraq border, where the militants essentially share the infrastructure with other PKK fighters. In July-September 2011, it was where the PJAK fighters retreated after the Iranian offensive and sought shelter. In 2005-18, most of its operations took place in the relative proximity to its safe havens in the KRI (UCDP 2020c). The rugged terrain of Iranian Kurdish areas, lack of quality infrastructure, division created by Zagros Mountains range offer favourable geography for waging rural insurgency campaign, especially since the level of urbanization in Kurdish areas remains low (in 2011, rural population was at 37.2% in West Azerbaijan, 34% in Kurdistan and 30.2% in Kermanshah as opposed to country average of 28.8%; Iran Data Portal 2020b). This is even more so due to the Iraqi border’s proximity, where the PJAK operatives may comfortably retreat and are only rarely targeted in cross-border operations or shelling. Despite a decrease from the stunning 200,000 security forces deployed in the mid-1990s (Koochi-Kamali 2003), the militarization of Kurdish-inhabited provinces, especially Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan, remains high. However, Iran has never been able (or attempted) to exercise full control of border mountain ranges. It has only been trying to do so since late 2018, utilizing drones, heavy armour, and helicopters on a mass scale (Hawramy 2018c).

It does not appear that the PJAK enjoys any significant external support from any state, apart from apparent training, logistical, financial, and material support from the PKK itself. Iranian regime regularly puts the PJAK under the ‘counter-revolutionary groups’ label. The regime considers them as well as the other Kurdish opposition groups ‘terrorists’ supported by the USA, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UK to destabilize Iran (Zambelis 2011). It is true that PJAK chairman Haji Ahmadi (himself German passport holder) visited Washington in the summer of 2007. Reportedly, he met with low level US officials with no practical results (see Elik 2012). Renard (2008) noted that some analysts and ex-US intelligence officials maintain that information sharing occurred at times in order to protect the PJAK from outright Iranian cross-border operations. The PJAK itself denies any foreign backing. They admit a meeting between PJAK commander Akif Zagros and the US officials occurred in Kirkuk in Iraq in 2004. The condition for any further cooperation was a denunciation of the PKK’s ideology, which Zagros refused to accept (Flood 2009). Moreover, the Department of Treasury designated the PJAK as a terrorist

organization in February 2009 *“for being controlled by the terrorist group Kongra-Gel (KGK, aka the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK).”* (US Department of Treasury 2009)

Unlike the PDKI or Komala, the PJAK is a relative newcomer. It is not as active among the diaspora in Australia, Europe, or the US (Hevian 2013). Agiri Rojhilat, PJAK commander, claimed that financing comes from voluntary donations from inside Iran (likely a voluntarily or involuntarily form of ‘revolutionary tax’ usually imposed by the PKK across the region and in diasporas) (Flood 2009). Additionally, he noted that certain Kurdish supporters visit them in Iraq (hinting that these are from the diaspora) and *“They pledge to sponsor maybe fifty or one hundred guerrillas from top to bottom for an entire year. They buy everything for them and it is their way of supporting their own freedom struggle.”* (ibid.)

9.2 Insurgent Behaviour

9.2.1 Armed Conflict

After its 1st Congress held on April 25, 2004 (PJAK.org 2012), the PJAK soon proved to be a capable adversary able to conduct military operations in Iran. Already in 2005, it was rumoured it managed to kill up to 120 security forces members (Stansfield 2014). It quickly moved from proto-insurgency to a small insurgency phase, similarly to the Syrian PYD/YPG benefiting from the influx of experienced PKK cadres, some of them of Iranian origin. Before 2004, the PKK never fought on Iranian soil. However, it maintained contact with Iranian security officials, nurturing this link in the 1990s mainly through Cemil Bayik, one of the co-founders of the PKK (Çagaptay and Unal 2014). However, it had networks capable enough (or overlooked by security apparatus) to recruit a significant number of Iranian Kurds into its ranks. In 2000-03, increased recruitment reflected in HPG’s martyr data, reaching around 10% of casualties fighting in Turkey being of Iranian origin (Ferris and Self 2015). Subsequently, in 2004-06, this number halved coinciding with the establishment of the PJAK as an Iranian wing of the PKK (ibid.). In 2008, a team of the PJAK bombers was detained in Tehran. In 2008-10, more attempted urban bomb attacks occurred and were foiled by the security forces (Posch 2017).

From the geographical perspective, it appears that the gravity of the PJAK’s operations lies in Kurdistan province and certain northern Sunni Kurdish parts of Kermanshah province – mainly around Sanandaj, Marivan, or Paveh, previously strongholds of radical leftist Komala (114 battle-related deaths) (see UCDP 2020c). However, given the PKK/PJAK bases’ proximity, the bulk of clashes also occurs in West Azerbaijan province (218 deaths), mainly around border areas, such as Sardasht (51 deaths). These are mostly rural border areas. There are a few hints that the PJAK would focus on an urban insurgency campaign. It expands to areas where the PDKI used to be strong, including the Urmiya area. Note that casualties (133) resulting from the summer 2011 Iranian offensive on the Iraqi-Iranian border against PJAK bases in the Janosan area (Haji Omaran/Sidakan vicinity) are excluded from the count. The PJAK fighters almost exclusively engage in hit and run attacks. They use light arms, such as Kalashnikovs, RPGs,

Russian-made sniper rifles, and machine guns (Zambelis 2008). On occasions, they utilize various IEDs (Renard 2008). On one occasion, the PJAK managed to bomb a vital gas pipeline to Turkey in September 2006 in West Azerbaijan province. However, unlike in Turkey, attacks on critical infrastructure are not one of the hallmarks of its operations (Brandon 2007b). More spectacular larger attacks, such as the ambush of a military base in Marivan on August 6, 2015, killing 20 soldiers (Brandon 2015), are very rare. Focus is mostly on ‘softer’ targets, such as isolated border outposts or police stations (e.g., April 24, 2009, when a police station in Ravansar was stormed, resulting in 10 killed policemen; Payvand 2009). In 2009, PJAK commander Agiri Rojhilat claimed that they have around 1000 fighters, 80% operating inside Iran (Flood 2009). After 2011, PJAK’s military wing, the East Kurdistan Forces’ (in Kurdish, Hêzên Rojhilatê Kurdistan, HRK) manpower is unknown. The HRK was renamed in 2014 to the Eastern Kurdistan Units (in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Rojhilatê Kurdistan, YRK) and female wing, the Women’s Defence Forces (in Kurdish, Hêzên Parastina Jinê. (Posch argues, it is unlikely stronger than a couple of hundreds fighters (Posch 2016b). Milburn (2017) asserts that the PJAK has around 3,000 fighters; however, these numbers simply vary as the PKK command moves fighters from one franchise to another and deploys them under ‘different flags.’

Moreover, due to the agreed ceasefire, there were only unsystematic ad hoc clashes since 2012, making it a very low-intensity conflict. There were 89 casualties in 2012-18. In 2005-11, it was 480. The vast majority of casualties occurred in Iraq-Iran border rural border areas. Thus armed campaigns in the Urmiya area and West Azerbaijan province (apart from border town Sardasht, with ten casualties) effectively ceased. After the PJAK’s military defeat by the Iranian regime in September 2011 and subsequent ceasefire agreement between the PKK leadership and Iran, reportedly reached with the PUK’s mediation (Hawramy 2018), the PJAK fighters were ousted from Iranian soil. The bulk of Iranian PJAK fighters were subsequently deployed on the frontlines against ISIS either in Iraq (Shingal district and south of Kirkuk; International Crisis Group 2016) or Syria since 2014 (Orton 2017).

Murat Karayılan, the KCK co-chair, said on August 9, 2011, that Iran stopped its attacks on the PJAK positions and announced that the PKK gave priority to Syrian battlefield: *“Our movement doesn’t consider it right to fight against Iran, who is the second target to be besieged after Syria. For the present, we don’t have an agenda to battle against Iran but we will have to take a decision to fight if Iran attacks on our positions and exhibits a hostile attitude to the Kurdish people.”* (van Wilgenburg 2011) The PKK took great care of the ceasefire, with the KCK strongly criticizing the violent clash between Iranian security forces and PJAK fighters on April 24, 2012 (ANF 2012). Regardless, since 2014-15, with the inception of the KODAR (see Chapter 9.2.4), ad hoc clashes have sporadically occurred, and it appears that the PJAK continues to infiltrate Iranian territory and conduct political activities. The PJAK’s presence manifested itself during the May 2015 waves of social unrest in Sanandaj and Mahabad sparked by the death of young woman Farinas Khosravani, working as a chambermaid (Rudaw 2015b). She died after falling out of a hotel window.

Many expected foul play in hand, as according to the common narrative, she committed suicide to avoid rape from an intelligence official's hands (National Council of Resistance of Iran 2015). Upon this, PJAK operatives relocated from ISIS battlefields and tried to capitalize on the events. They began to present themselves more actively as defenders of Kurdish rights on the ground in Iran (Brandon 2018) (which also induced the PDKI to resume its armed struggle).

Regardless of ad hoc clashes and the PJAK's increased political activities, it appears that the 2011 agreement between the PKK and Tehran remains in place. In Staniland's (2012) words, it can be labelled as tacit co-existence. The PJAK is allowed a certain level of operation within Iran, which can be explained as an effort to avoid to be seen as an 'agent of the regime.' That is imperative in Iran's divide-and-rule strategy of containment of Kurdish groups, especially since the PDKI and Komala officially renewed their armed struggle in September 2015 and April 2017, respectively. On May 24, 2015, there was even a short, bloody battle between the PKK and the PDKI fighters on the Iranian border, reportedly to prevent the PDKI militants from crossing to Iran (Ekurd 2015). As Posch (2016b) notes, *"This would mean that the HPG and the Executive Council are so interested in good relations with the Iranians that they will not even shrink from violence to bar enemies of Iran from entering east Kurdistan from regions they control."* However, he adds that there was an escalation of clashes between the PJAK and Iran at the same time (ibid.).

Moreover, the PDKI fighters managed to cross the border eventually, and it is hardly imaginable that such traversing would be possible without the PKK's knowledge and tolerance. In 2012-18, the PJAK and the PKK maintained that the ceasefire is in place and that they only engage in 'self-defence operations' (for example, Rojhelat 2015) It appears that the fragile modus vivendi between Iranian authorities and the PJAK is often broken by tit-for-tat actions: *"For example, PJAK conducted several attacks against IRGC as revenge after the PJAK member Sirvan Nezhavi were executed in August 2015. PJAK claimed to have killed 12 Iranian soldiers in an attack on a military base in Kamyaran in the Kurdistan province, while Iran confirmed that five soldiers were killed, according to Reuters. Later that same month, another imprisoned PJAK member, Behrouz Alkhani, was executed."* (LANDINFO 2017)

Out of six Iranian Kurdish organizations officially renewing and supposedly coordinating their military activities against Iran since April 2017 (Rudaw 2017b), only the PDKI managed to maintain its campaign, albeit in a proto-insurgency phase. The PDKI started to infiltrate its fighters to Iran in mid-2016 and engaged in clashes with Iranian forces. In 2016-18, there were 76 battle-related deaths, and most of them occurred near the border, across from their camps in Haji Omaran area in the KRI (UCDP 2020c). The PDKI leader Mustafa Hijri asserts that the goal is to infiltrate Iranian soil to conduct political activity among the people, claiming clashes are only results of Peshmerga's self-defence (Homa 2017). The PDKI's campaign additionally prompted Iran to conduct a spectacular precise missile strike on the PDKI headquarters in Koya in the KRI on September 8, 2018, targeting a high-level meeting of the

PDKI and the KDP (Iran), resulting in 18 deaths (van Wilgenburg 2018). It appears that the vision of avant-garde by an armed struggle that would provoke mass insurrections in Iranian Kurdish areas was overly optimistic since most of the fighting occurred in rural border areas (UCDP 2020c; MacDiarmid 2015).

Armed Conflict Intensity of PJAK Insurgency in Iran (2005-18)						
Armed Conflict/Dyads and Period	Intensity	Conflict Consequences			Conflict Means of Insurgent	
		Battle-related deaths (BRD)	IDPs and Refugees	Level of Destruction	Weapons Used	Level of Deployments
PJAK-Iran 2005-2011	Low	480	None	Not significant	Small arms, attempted bombings	Rural warfare, small units, conventional battle in summer 2011
PJAK-Iran 2012-2018	Low (ad hoc clashes)	89	None	Not significant	Small arms	Rural warfare, small units

Table 9.2.1: Armed Conflict Intensity during the PJAK Insurgency in Iran in 2005-18 (prepared by the author; casualty data UCDP 2020c).

9.2.2 Use of Terrorism

There were no reports of the PJAK resorting systematically to outright terrorist acts, including mass casualty bombings. While it is asserted that several planned urban bombings were foiled in 2008-10, including PJAK bombers' arrest in Tehran in 2008, it largely abstains from such tactics (Posch 2017). On September 22, 2010, a bomb went off in Mahabad during celebrations of 'Sacred Defense Weeks' killing 12 (Zambelis 2011). While Iranian authorities blamed counter-revolutionary forces, i.e., including the PJAK. The PJAK itself staunchly denied any role in the incident (ibid.). On January 18, 2009, the assassination of public prosecutor Vali Haji Qoolizadeh in the town of Khoy was carried out (University of Maryland 2020). Reportedly, he received threats from PJAK operatives. An assassination attempt on MP Heshamatollah Falahatpishe in Kermanshah province on July 10, 2017, was later attributed to the PJAK (ibid.). However, reliable reporting is scarce, and the PJAK does not claim such operations. The authorities often immediately blamed the PJAK. However, they may very well be the result of local disputes or even increased activities of Islamist militant groupings among Iranian Sunni Kurds (estimated up to 400 joined ISIS ranks by the end of 2017; Faramarzi 2018).

9.2.3 Violence towards the Contested Population

There is not enough reliable data available to make sense of whether the PJAK resorts to coercive behaviour towards the Kurdish population systematically. There are only sporadic reports that the PJAK

engages in intimidation and targeting of perceived (Kurdish) collaborators with the regime. Zambelis (2011) asserted that the *“PJAK also frequently targets religious and political officials for assassination, including ethnic Kurds who are seen as collaborators of the regime. While PJAK is careful to avoid civilian casualties, civilian collaborators, such as paid informants or others assisting Tebran’s efforts to root out the group—Kurdish or otherwise—are considered legitimate targets.”* This reflects PJAK’s statements lamenting over increased Iranian campaign in 2011-15 disrespecting ceasefire *“to expand politic hirelings such as anti guerrillas, Basij and traitor.”* (Rojhelat 2015) Another instance is an (unclaimed by the PJAK) assassination of a Kurd supposedly spying for authorities in Marivan on July 15, 2018. The attack followed the July 11 and 14 ambushes of PJAK operatives nearby Marivan and Paveh, which the organization blamed on local collaborators of providing intelligence to the state (Hawramy 2018).

9.2.4 Building Political Structures

The PJAK itself was established at its 1st Congress held in the Qandil Mountain on April 25, 2004, as the PKK’s wing for Iran (PJAK.org 2012). It was led by Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi, a former PDKI member who resides in Cologne, Germany, and is one of the co-chairs of the PJAK (van Wilgenburg 2010). The PJAK claims to trace its origins to 1997 when it was founded as a peaceful student movement inside Iran (Gunter 2011). In reality, however, in parallel to the PYD, it is the PKK ‘with a local face’. It was established by the PKK utilizing their Iranian-origin fighters and commanders who form the leadership of the PJAK. As the US Department of Treasury (2009) terrorist designation noted, the PKK *“selected five KGK [author’s note: KGK is Kongra-Gel, at that time the term used to label the PKK] members to serve as PJAK leaders, including Hajji Ahmadi, a KGK affiliate who became PJAK’s General Secretary. KGK leaders also selected the members of PJAK’s 40-person central committee. Although certain PJAK members objected to the KGK selecting their leaders, the KGK advised that PJAK had no choice.”* Hajji Ahmadi continues to work from Germany. Arguably he has little influence over the organisation, apart from occasionally making appearances in the pro-PKK (Rojhelat, undated) and international media (Hudson 2013) and dispelling its ties to the PKK. The PJAK calls for regime change in Iran, *“Moving away from a centralized way of leadership and struggling for the reinforcement and independence of a self-governance for the people,”* and *“Changing of the regime to a democratic system in which all citizens; Iranians, Kurds, Azarites, Baluchs, Turkomans and Arabs and all other ethnical groups within the framework of the democratic system, can govern themselves.”* (PJAK.org 2012)

Ideologically, the PJAK follows the suit of Abdullah Öcalan’s Democratic Confederalism. PJAK leaders regularly deny that they are a part of the PKK. PJAK chair Haji Ahmadi asserted that *“We are two sister organisations, but we are active in different areas (...),”* and that *“We are an independent organisation, we have our program, we decide on our tactics and our strategy.”* (Fuller 2008) PJAK commander Agiri Rojhilat noted in 2009 that *“What the PKK and PJAK have in common is that we both follow the ideology and philosophy of [imprisoned PKK leader] Abdullah Öcalan and we are both Kurdish parties.”* (Flood 2009) He explains that *“there are four parts of Kurdistan since it was divided. Within both the PKK and the PJAK, there are Kurds from the different parts of*

Kurdistan. So within the PKK, there are Iranian Kurds and there are Germans and within PJAK there are Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan, but the PKK and PJAK are different groups with different political objectives." (ibid.) However, due to shared bases and facilities in the KRI, commanders, and fighters of the PJAK are deployed in different PKK's theatres. The mere fact that the PJAK is a member party of the KCK makes this claim moot. Moreover, PJAK Council member Shervin Mazloun maintained in November 2017 that Öcalan is a leader of all organizations within the KCK, including the PJAK (Rojnews 2017).

Following the usual PKK's blueprint, complementary to the PJAK, women's (Free Women Society of Rojhilat) and youth (The Union of Youth of Rojhilat) organizations were also established alongside with its military wing, the HRK which *"(...is working in an autonomous way and parallel with the political goals of PJAK."* (PJAK.org 2012) It is unclear to which extent the PJAK and its women and youth groups got real traction on the ground in Iran. However, it appears it was able to organize at least occasional subversive actions in urban areas, such as the 2008 45-days hunger strike for hailed Kurdish activists or shopkeepers' strikes (Brandon 2008). Nevertheless, one could seriously doubt Agiri Rojhilat's claims about over one million PJAK supporters inside Iran as of 2009, as well as its ability to conduct 'secret elections' (Flood 2009) (instead, it appears it follows the suite of regular congresses with hand-picked delegates who in turn rotate in party's institutions; Rojhelat 2014).

In parallel to the Charter of the Social Contract introduced for Syria in March 2014 and a similar document, KCK Agreement, published for Turkey in May 2005, during the 4th PJAK Congress held in May 2014, a similar document in Persian for Iran was adopted called the Complete Text of the Social Contract of the Democratic and Free Society of the East (KODAR).⁷⁵ It noted that it was *"the beginning of a new chapter of our party campaigns that its content will be further expansion of political, ideological and organize our people."* (Rojhelat 2014) In other words, it is considered a practical step to realize ideas of governance outlined in Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism and adopted by the KCK. As Posch argues, this activism, coined with (unlike other opposition groups) relatively clear political vision of the KODAR, *"Illusionary as it seems, it must still be taken seriously since KODAR is one of the few texts that actually tries to formulate a political alternative for the Kurds of Iran, underpinned by an assertive guerrilla movement."* (Posch 2017, 350)

The PJAK adopted a male and female co-chair system as well as re-organized the HRK into the YRK. Additionally, the female HPJ was founded (Posch 2016b). In a similar transformation of women's organization as in Syria from Yekitiya Star to Kongreya Star, the KJAR also transformed into Women's Union of East Kurdistan (YJRK), intending to assist with realizing the Democratic Confederalism (Rojhelat 2014b).

⁷⁵ The text is unfortunately not available on-line as of June 2020, however, one could refer to Posch's (2016a) insights on the document.

The KODAR is considered a layout for governance and the new political system in Iran, open for participation of all ethnic and religious groups like in Syria. However, there are no reports of the PJAK's success in reaching any other ethnic or religious groups. The PJAK is considered, in a typical 'one-party vanguard' revolutionary manner, *"the forefront of the practical realization of democratic politics in the KODAR system."* (Rojhelat 2018) Realization of its goals is a distant revolutionary dream as it clearly states that is willing to accept *"any democratic solution"* – however, it must be *"within the framework of democratic nation and democratic autonomy,"* i.e., a complete overhaul of the Iranian political system in line with Öcalan's radical leftist revolutionary ideas, therefore, not 'democratization' in a traditional sense (ibid.).

It is apparent that with the organisational shift introducing the KODAR and agreeing to a ceasefire after militarily defeated in 2011, the PJAK tries to focus more on the political side of the struggle. PJAK Council member Siamend Moeini stressed in relation to the KODAR that *"The current type of this system needs intellectual work in the community. At the current stage in Kurdistan, condition of appropriate fields has been provided."* (Rojhelat 2018b) Moeini also lamented that *"Till this moment in relation to peoples request we have not seen any goodwill from the Islamic republic of Iran and no hope of solving people's issues."* (ibid.) In this line, the KODAR argues that the PJAK prefers political struggle to armed struggle (i.e., maintaining a ceasefire with Iran). It continues to note that it may 'lose patience' and as the KODAR's 2nd Congress held on October 22-24, 2016, the final declaration noted it might *"(...) leave KODAR with no choice but to implement the ideology irrespective of the Iranian regime,"* (Rojhelat 2016) (i.e., even through violent means).

It is difficult to make sense of the extent to which KODAR/PJAK's political activity finds support among the Kurdish masses in Iran. I assess that while it is on the rise, it is arguably far from traction that the PKK currents get in Turkey, Syria, or even on Iraqi soil (particularly in areas under the PUK control Shingal district, or Makhmour). There are significant limiting factors in Iran: the strength of the grasp of the Iranian regime over Kurdish areas; lack of support among better integrated Shia Kurds; competition with the rise of Salafist and radical Islamist currents among Sunni Kurds; the perception that it collaborates with Iranian authorities; strong traditional societal structures among Kurds; and arguably the presence of rivals (albeit apparently weak) – the PDKI and Komala. Regardless of these limitations, it systematically tries to pose itself as the leading defender of Iranian Kurdish rights against the state.

The PJAK tries to insert itself into and capitalize on ongoing waves of social unrests in Iranian Kurdish areas, although it is not the force behind them. For instance, after the Mahabad riots on May 7, 2015 (Amnesty International 2015), that subsequently spread to several other Kurdish cities, such as Sardasht (Rudaw 2015c), the PJAK took the opportunity to conduct a retaliatory attack on an IRGC checkpoint (Spyer 2015). However, the PDKI, Komala, and the PJAK failed to exploit the opportunity for political gains (Posch 2016b). In another example, in July 2018, the PJAK continued to 'hijack'

December 2017 protests, interpreting them as an uprising caused people to realize the need for support of its vision. The PJAK highlighted how society organizes itself to that end: “*National uprisings of December 2017 are still ongoing in the form of strikes and protests of corporations, communities, workers, women and youths. It is an important democratic policy and struggle that continued from decades of struggles. The people realized that the mentality of government and opposition as the root of the problem; therefore, people seek to revive society by returning to its true identity.*” (Rojhelat 2018) December 2017-January 2018 mass economic protests across Iran were supported by Kurdish opposition, including the PJAK. However, it did not get much traction in Iranian Kurdish cities (Hawramy 2018d).

At the same time, the PJAK tries to influence the electoral turnout of Kurds. Along with other Kurdish opposition parties, it called for a boycott of both reformist and conservative candidates during the May 2017 presidential elections (Brandon 2018). However, the effort was not successful since the turnout was at 70% in Western Azerbaijan and Illam, 58% in Kurdistan, and 75% in Kermanshah provinces (with a national average of 73%). Kurds overwhelmingly supported reformist candidate Hassan Rouhani as in 2013 (Rudaw 2017c). In turn, however, KODAR pragmatically urged people to vote in local elections held in May 2017 (KODAR 2017).

Simultaneously the KODAR/PJAK attempts to react to the most pressing issues or Iranian oppressive policies, such as Kurds’ executions. The PJAK opposed to Iranian security forces’ practice of killings of kolbars (porters who engage in transporting and smuggling various goods across the border to Iraq), with 51 killed in 2015 (MacDonald 2017) and 56 killed in 2019 (Kurdistan Human Rights Network 2020). The killing of two kolbars and subsequent protests in Paneh, Sardasht, and Marivan on September 5, 2017, prompted the PJAK to engage in a rare ambush of Iranian soldiers as an act of revenge and to call for continuous demonstrations (MacDonald 2017).

9.2.5 Building Governance Structures & Producing Legitimacy

The PKK’s somewhat ambivalent position towards the Iranian state and its authority is also translated into PJAK’s stance towards governance. On the one hand, it seeks to dismantle the oppressive Iranian nation-state and replace it with “*democratic confederacy*” - governance structures going from top to bottom consisted of a council of village leaderships in a certain area, city council, provincial councils, and ultimately the “*Peoples Congress of Eastern Kurdistan*” (PJAK.org 2012). However, there is no report that any such governance structures exist on a broader scale. Moreover, it is plausible to say that the KODAR/PJAK makes little or no attempts to govern the population. Contrary to other PKK-linked insurgencies, it does not propagate any activities to provide services to people, such as having a parallel court-like system. However, it declares it relies on financial donations from the Iranian Kurdish population (Flood 2009).

Unlike in Turkey, the KODAR/PJAK did not openly declare building parallel governance structures as the DTK did in Turkey on July 14, 2011, in a declaration of the ‘Democratic Autonomy’ (Radikal 2011). No such attempts towards building governance structures in Iran, even for pure propaganda purposes, have been mentioned in the PKK-linked media. For example, the final document of the PJAK’s 6th Congress held on March 10-11, 2020, continues in this tradition. It merely states that the “*PJAK considers establishing a self-governing of Democratic Nations as an emancipation of the current crisis.*” (ANF 2020) Furthermore, it notes that “*national unity*” is the priority that must be achieved by “*creation of united front.*” In order to do so, “*PJAK will collaborate with representatives of women, youth, workers, teachers, guilds, social trustees, religious leaders, artists, and intellectuals in East Kurdistan to create a powerful force.*” (ibid.)

Utilizing Schlichte and Schneckener’s (2016) claims of legitimacy of rebel groups, one could see that in the Iranian case, both symbolic and performance-centred claims are lower compared to, for example, Turkey or Syria. Iranian Kurdish Sunni society is rather conservative and traditional with a strong tribal system, rendering abstract ideas of radical leftist revolution and the Democratic Confederalism less attractive, despite earning support, especially among the poorer and less educated (urban) Kurds. Moreover, as Yildiz and Tayisi (2007, 2) note, “*(...) the Kurds of Iran have been relatively less inclined than the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq towards creating an independent Kurdish state, but rather seek a level of autonomy within the Iranian state.*” In turn, claims of established enemy images, i.e., oppressive Iranian theocratic regime, surely resonate among the Kurds. As for the performance-centred claims, the PJAK ceased fighting for the most part by 2011 and is perceived by many as colluding with Tehran. It can hardly claim the ethos of successful warriors or evoke credibility through sacrifice. Given the apparent rudimentary nature of PJAK-linked structures within Iran, it cannot provide any services, and it lacks formal procedures to attract followers – e.g., encouraging widespread political participation, which is indeed limited due to tight space for any such political or even cultural activities in Iran.

10. The PKK Insurgency in Shingal District of Iraq: Capitalizing on Power Vacuum and Failed Incumbent Policies⁷⁶

The presence of PKK-linked armed forces and political structures in the Yazidi social fabric in Shingal district can be divided into three periods: 2004-June 2014, July 2014-September 2017 and October 2017-2018. These periods are marked by significant and abrupt changes in the context of the Shingal district that were followed by alterations in PKK's behaviour.

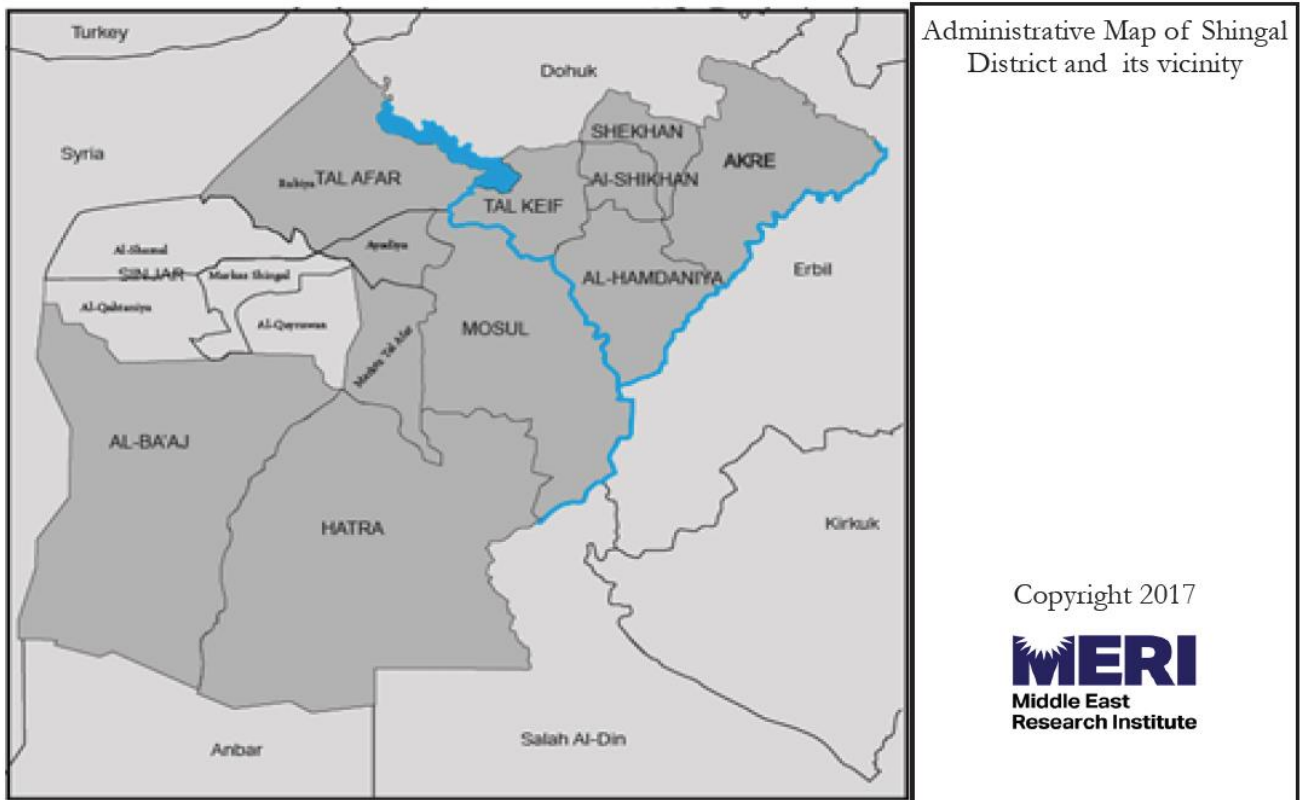
10.1 The Context of Insurgency

The district of Shingal⁷⁷ is divided into three sub-districts: al-Shamal (the North), Markaz Shingal (the district's centre and its surroundings), and finally southeast of the mountain range al-Qayrawan. In the past, the disputed sub-district of al-Qahtaniya southwest of the mountain range belonged to the Shingal district. Yet, it now falls under the al-Ba'aj district (Wing 2011; see Map 10.1). While there are no precise figures, the district of Shingal was inhabited by an estimated 350,000 people before 2014 (International Organization for Migration 2011). The majority of the population of the Shingal district is Yazidi; however, approximately one-third is Sunni Muslim (Arabs or Kurds) (ibid.). Notably, northwestern and southeastern areas are also inhabited by Sunni Arabs and a small number of Sunni Turkmen. The major Arab tribes in the district are Shammar, Mitewait, and Jayaish. Kurdish Sunni tribes residing in the area are called Kermanj (PAX for Peace 2016; see also Map 10.2).

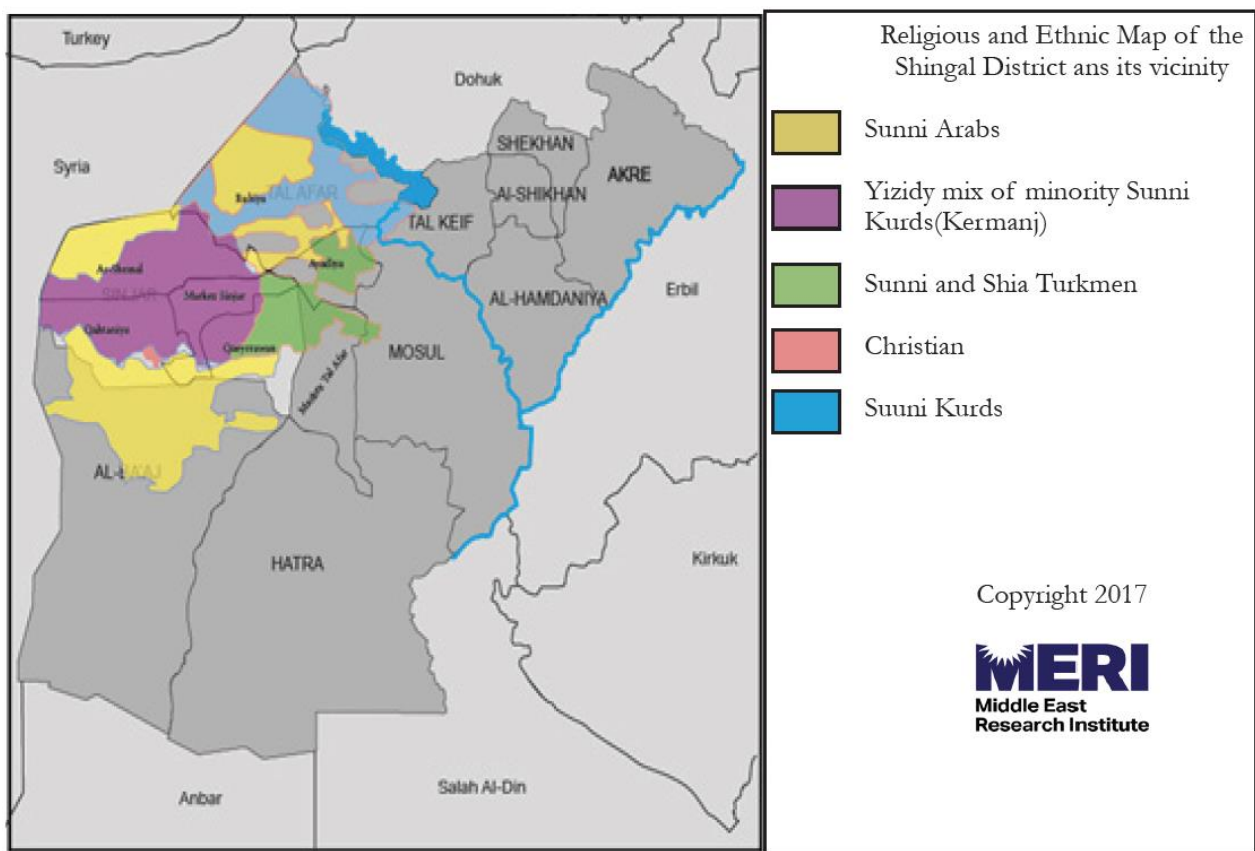
Shingal district is a disputed territory between the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the KRI, according to Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution (Kane 2011). However, since 2003, the KRG has invested a considerable amount of resources in establishing authority over Yazidis in the Shingal district in order to increase the chances of its ultimate incorporation into the KRI. The district was the security control of the KRG since 2003. The PKK's growing presence was met with strong opposition, especially from the KDP. Moreover, there is a long-term rivalry between the KDP and the PKK over their influence among the Kurdish population (see Dalay 2015; International Crisis Group 2015b).

⁷⁶ This chapter is based on author's fieldwork and policy report published while he was a visiting fellow at the Middle East Research Institute in Erbil, KRI in September 2016-April 2017 (Kaválek 2017).

⁷⁷ The district and the town are officially called 'Sinjar' in Arabic, however, in Kurdish, the term 'Shingal' is used and also majority of locals for the area use the Kurdish name and as such it will be used in the text as well.



Map 10.1: Administrative Map of the Shingal District and its vicinity (Kaválek 2017).



Map 10.2: Ethnic and religious composition of the Shingal district and its vicinity (Kaválek 2017).

The territory's uncertain status has been a source of instability, with various actors exercising de facto rule over the Shingal district. In 2003-14, it was the KDP who held de facto control of the area. In 2014-October 2017, the PKK-linked actors exploited the power vacuum and established itself along the KRG. Following October 2017, KRG forces were expelled, and the GoI renewed its authority but leaving the PKK-linked structures in place. Changing and overlapping authorities and the risk of armed conflict have largely prevented displaced Yazidis from returning to their homes on a mass scale. It is estimated that some 250,000 Yazidis, almost the whole Yazidi population of Shingal district, fled the area facing ISIS advance in the summer of 2014 (UN-Habitat 2015). According to the International Organization for Migration (2017), only marginally over 29,000 had returned to the district as of February 2017, which is not a significant increase compared to 24,000 returnees in September 2016 (International Organization for Migration 2016).

According to Khalaf Salih Faris, the director of public relations of the PKK-linked Self Administration Council (in Kurdish, Meclisa Avaker a Şingalê, or the Meclis), as of the beginning of 2017, 50,000-60,000 people lived in the Shingal district in total. Among these, around 5,000 people lived on the mountain range itself, mainly in provisional camps or in small villages in the northern part, such as Kolka or Kursî.⁷⁸ The uncertain situation upon a combination of various Iraqi forces, including Hashd al-Shaabi militiamen taking control over the district, did not contribute to increasing the number of returns. While some people (often KDP-linked) left, Yazidis co-opted by the GoI returned. Consequently, only a fraction of the previous population returned as of March 2019 – 59,214 returned (less than 20% out of estimated 350,000 people living in the district, as opposed to 72% returnees for Nineveh governorate as a whole) (International Organisation for Migration 2019).

Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking ethnoreligious group that is considered the second-largest minority group in Iraq after Christians. However, Iraq has experienced a significant exodus of minorities in the unstable post-2003 period during which both Shia and Sunni radicalism has been on the rise, and the new government has had difficulties providing adequate security for religious and ethnic minorities. Before ISIS coming on stage in predominantly Sunni Arab areas of Iraq in 2014, an estimated 500,000 to 700,000 were living in Iraq, and some 250,000 out of that number were living in the Shingal district (US Department of State 2012). These figures are estimates given by Yazidi community representatives since, during the last census conducted in 1987, Yazidis were forced to register as Arabs. Current precise figures are not available, but surely the number decreased with thousands of Yazidis migrating mainly to Europe (especially Germany, which hosts a significant Yazidi community even from the pre-2003 period), the US, or Australia.

⁷⁸ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht, Shingal district.

The most important source of Yazidi identity is their ancient monotheistic religion, which combines elements of old pre-Islam and pre-Christianity faiths such as Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, or Manicheism, and it is closely interconnected with basic elements, mainly fire.⁷⁹ Yazidism is a secretive religion that prohibits its members from sharing most details about its practices and traditions. During the course of history, the Yazidi community has been subjected to strong prejudices, attempts to eradicate their faith, and, ultimately, even ethnic cleansing. Yazidis maintain that they were subjected to genocidal campaigns, or the so-called ‘firman’ (originally referring to Ottoman decrees and military campaign orders; Kaya 2019) 74 times in history, most recently ISIS atrocities in 2014. In August 2014, ISIS advanced to Shingal town and to the al-Shamal district and engaged in mass killings of Yazidis and abductions of women and children. It is estimated that 5,000 people died and 7,000, mostly women and children, were kidnapped (Kaválek 2017). August 2014 marks an abrupt change in the community’s perception of the KRG (mainly the KDP) and to a lesser extent of the GoI since both actors failed in the eyes of Yazidis to protect the population and fled from the district without facilitating the evacuation of Yazidis.

Yazidis are often viewed as heretics or even ‘devil worshippers’ especially by Sunni conservatives. Yazidi society is strictly divided into social and religious castes with a secular leader for all Yazidis, Mir (Prince) Tashin Said Beg, and a religious leader, currently Baba Sheihk (Domle, 2013). It is a closed society, and it is not permitted to marry outside of one’s caste or outside of the community. Similarly, marriages outside of the Yazidi community or conversions are strictly forbidden. Yazidis of Shingal district are also considered more conservative and traditionalist than those residing in villages nearby Dohuk, Sheikhan district, or in the KRI’s cities such as Erbil and Dohuk itself.

10.1.1 Horizontal Inequalities

Even under Saddam’s regime, the district was tremendously underdeveloped, relatively poor and agriculture-focused, lacking infrastructure and services. Moreover, since the mid-1970s, Yazidis were forced to relocate from their original villages in the mountains into collective villages such as Bara, Sinuni, Khanasor, or the town of Shingal itself. The so-called ‘modernisation project’ was security-motivated and formed part of the anti-Kurdish campaign to prevent Yazidis from potentially supporting the Kurdish rebellion of Mullah Mustafa Barzani (Savelsberg, Hajo and Dulz 2010). In the following years, Saddam’s regime launched a campaign of ‘Arabisation’ - bringing in Arab settlers to Yazidi areas – which continued in several waves up until the 1990s (ibid.). The issue of the land that was confiscated from Yazidis during Saddam’s rule remains to be resolved systematically since the ambiguity in land ownership continues to fuel the conflict until now (UN-Habitat 2015). In the post-2003 period, the district has remained underdeveloped with only minor investment in infrastructure by either the GoI or the KRG.

⁷⁹ For more details on Yazidi religion and society see Açıkyıldız 2014 and Asastrian and Arakelova 2014.

So far, neither the KRG nor the GoI has shown willingness to commit resources that would translate into substantial investment in the development and post-ISIS reconstruction of the district, precisely because its status is disputed. The main reason is that there is no guarantee that the region will ultimately fall under one or other authority. In contrast, in another majority-Yazidi area, Sheikhan – where the Yazidi secular and spiritual leaderships reside – the level of KRG’s investment has been more substantial over the years (International Crisis Group 2009). Sheikhan is also considered a disputed territory. However, due to its geographic proximity to the KRI’s provinces and to the KRG’s de facto unchallenged control, its grasp over Sheikhan is stronger (Kane 2011).

With estimated 6,000 homes thought to be destroyed in the Shingal district, the level of destruction was extensive (UN-Habitat 2015). So far, no systematic reconstruction efforts have taken place (partly due to lack of return among IDPs). The level of basic services such as electricity and water supply remains low and has been mentioned, aside from security-related factors, as discouraging people from returning on a mass scale.⁸⁰

Education infrastructure also remains in shatters with a lack of primary and high schools in the district. For example, larger villages and towns such as Tal Azar, Sibaya, and Khanasor, the area inhabited by some 25,000-35,000 people has only three primary schools and one high school, while smaller villages like Bara or Kursî had none (Yazda 2017). The GoI and primarily the Popular Mobilization Forces (in Arabic, al-Ḥašd aš-Ša‘bî, HS) renewed its presence in the district and prompting the KDP to withdraw in October 2017. Nevertheless, it brought little improvement in terms of stabilization and reconstruction. KRG’s schools have been closed or understaffed as the KRG has less interest in maintaining this infrastructure. The unemployment rate in Yazidi areas in Iraq and the KRG is over 70%, and lack of employment opportunities has made various armed groups, such as the HS units or Iraqi security forces, practically the only stable source of income for locals (ibid.).

In all three periods throughout 2004-2018, the Shingal district remained underdeveloped with lack of infrastructure, employment opportunities, access to education, and crucial services such as healthcare. Since 2014, when ISIS ravaged through the area, the situation even worsened with immense destruction of private property and infrastructure that has so far not been alleviated by the KRG, the GoI or by the international community. Apparently, due to the lack of economic development, the PKK-linked structures could attract popular support and recruits even though their resources to subsidy wages and provide municipal services were relatively limited.

⁸⁰ Anonymous interview with a Yazidi with links to the KDP, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

10.1.2 State policies

Soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the KRG began to gradually build up its armed and political presence in the district, mainly in the form of extensive patronage networks (see also PAX for Peace 2016). According to one interview, at the outset, the KDP relied on Yazidi tribal structures and leaders, such as Mahma Khalil (mayor of Shingal), or Sheikh Shamo (then MP in the Kurdistan Parliament), while trying to commit them to the KDP.⁸¹ Patronage networks linking the Yazidi elite to the KDP were gradually created. The KDP's party branches in towns and villages were established, while the KDP provided incentives through the KRG for Yazidis to join these structures, for example, in the form of public employment opportunities (*ibid.*; Wing 2014).

While Yazidis were rarely recruited into the Peshmerga before 2014, many Yazidis opted to join the Iraqi security forces, either the Iraqi military or the Federal Police, to sustain their livelihood.⁸² As one respondent revealed, with the Kurdish Asayish (internal security service), the situation was slightly different. The KRG gradually recruited Yazidis into the Asayish force, which served as a form of a patronage network. Recruitment was subjected to selection based on affiliation with the KDP and decided largely by KDP's branch leaders.⁸³ Despite the Iraqi security forces based in the district, their role was relatively passive, and they did not interfere in local affairs or challenge the KRG's dominance or the Peshmerga or Asayish presence. The KRG also built a parallel education structure with schools teaching in Kurdish under the KRG curricula, operating alongside schools run by the Iraqi Ministry of Education teaching in Arabic under the Iraqi curricula.

In turn, municipality and mayoral offices and their workers in the district of Shingal were paid by the government in Baghdad. The KRG, however, has kept decisive influence over district and sub-district administration.⁸⁴ The KDP's party branches have a say in choosing public employees and selecting allied mayors through their control over the Nineveh Provincial Council. In other cases, leaders of the KDP's local branches overshadow mayors' authority.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the GoI remains present in the Shingal district, although it generally has not challenged the KDP's influence over the area, and a mutual agreement of coexistence and power-sharing appears to be in place.

⁸¹ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁸² Anonymous interview with two politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁸³ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht.

⁸⁵ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

The KRG was actively promoting the Kurdish ethnic identity of Yazidis living in disputed territories, especially in the post-2003 period (see Wing 2014; Savelsberg, Hajo and Dulz 2010). Consequently, the Yazidi leadership has been increasingly caught between the KRG and Baghdad and ended up politically divided (PAX for Peace 2016; International Crisis Group 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009). For example, in 2005, Ameen Farhan Jijo, with his political party Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress, had already begun promoting the idea of the separate identity of Yazidis (International Crisis Group 2009). In response, the Yazidi secular leader mir Tahsin Said Beg, and the religious leadership represented by the Baba Sheikh family sided with the KRG. As Maisel (2008) notes, one of the principal agents for promoting the Kurdish identity of Yazidis is the Lalish Cultural Center based in Dohuk, which has branches in many Yazidi towns. Its leaders are also tied to the KDP.

However, the issue of which identity is primary for Yazidis (religious or ethnic) is contested. Some argue that being a Yazidi automatically implies that one is a Kurd.⁸⁶ Others promote the Yazidi identity as a separate one, while some claim Yazidis are related to Kurds.⁸⁷ Prior to August 2014, the idea of prioritising ethnic Kurdish identity over religious identity was not entirely rejected by Yazidis (especially in the context of the previous Arabisation policies of Saddam's regime). Also, as one interviewee suggested, being closely aligned with the KRI, possibly even becoming its legal part, was largely not discounted by Yazidis before 2014.⁸⁸ The Yazidis of Shingal district were traditionally connected to Nineveh and Mosul itself in terms of either employment or study. With the deteriorating security situation in Nineveh, particularly in Mosul in the post-2003 period, the rise of Sunni extremists who label Yazidis as 'devil worshippers' and attacks against Yazidis, Yazidis increasingly shifted their engagement towards the KRI (Maisel 2008).⁸⁹ Now many Yazidis study at KRI universities and take on jobs and business opportunities in the KRI.

The above-described approach of the KRG to the district accompanied with suppression of dissent among Yazidis, especially during election time, appears to have yielded results gradually. That can be seen from election results, which show a gradual growth of votes for Kurdish parties in the district (Human Rights Watch 2009; van den Toorn 2013).⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Anonymous interview with a Yazidi with links to the KDP, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁸⁷ Anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁸⁸ Interview with Dave van Zoonen, MERI researcher conducting research on Yazidis, Erbil.

⁸⁹ Interview with Jamil Khidher, Yazidi PUK leader in Shingal district, February 23, 2017, Dohuk. Anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁹⁰ Interview with anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI (see also electoral results in Kane 2011).

In 2014-17, the KDP appeared to rely on its pre-2014 strategy of fostering support among Yazidis by communicating its message through the Yazidi elite in combination with utilising its patronage networks short of genuine investment into post-war reconstruction. Simultaneously, it employed a heavy-handed approach to prevent Yazidis from getting engaged with the PKK-linked forces. The KRG's message stresses that the Shingal district's future lies with the KRI (for example, Ekurd 2016). The KDP seems determined to maintain a strong influence over the Yazidi leadership and its actions. Hoshiyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, however, maintains that the KDP's policy is to give the people a choice in determining the administrative arrangements of the district in the form of a referendum.⁹¹

Simultaneously, a heavy-handed approach was pursued by imposing an on-off economic blockade of the Shingal district (Human Rights Watch 2016). One interviewee noted that while some goods arrive at the district, even at the PKK-linked forces'-controlled areas, they are restricted and certain goods, such as medical supplies, are not allowed to go through (Niqash 2016).⁹² One Meclis official also suggested that while there is some dependency on the KRI, trade is very problematic since the decision on who can ship certain goods to the district depends on contacts with and bribery of the KDP officials.⁹³ There have been reports of harassment of people who joined the YBŞ and their families. Also, Meclis representatives are barred from entering the KRI, or their families are harassed if they remain in the KRI.⁹⁴

The hasty withdrawal of approximately 10,000 Peshmerga from the area in August 2014 left the Yazidi population exposed to ISIS' atrocities and subsequently became subject to various explanations (Ekurd 2014c; Barber 2017). Competing explanations usually cite lack of weaponry and preparedness on the side of the Peshmerga or an element of surprise by ISIS as reasons for the Peshmerga forces' initial withdrawal (Coles 2014).⁹⁵ It became a source of grievance among Yazidis toward the KRG and mainly the KDP.

Although the Peshmerga participated in retaking the territory in later months, many among the Yazidi community felt that they were abandoned by the KRG (and in part also by the GoI), which they claim did not make enough effort to protect them from IS' atrocities.⁹⁶ Some interviewees dismissed the criticism of the KRG as propaganda crafted by the PKK-linked actors and/or the Baghdad

⁹¹ Interview with Hoshiyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, March 30, 2017, Erbil.

⁹² Interview with anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁹³ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht.

⁹⁴ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht. Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁹⁵ Anonymous interview with a Yazidi with links to the KDP, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁹⁶ Interview with Dave van Zoonen, MERI researcher conducting research on Yazidis, Erbil.

government.⁹⁷ Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, also concurred that the PKK-linked forces deliberately try to distance the people of Shingal from the KRG.⁹⁸ The underlying fact is that the trust is largely shaken between Yazidis and the KRG, regardless of whether these views are grounded in fact.⁹⁹

Yazidi KDP member, Sheikh Shamo, underlined that the PKK is the “*biggest threat to Yazidis.*”¹⁰⁰ He further added that Yazidis are simple people and believed the PKK, but that they saw their true face and had reservations towards their presence. Moreover, developments during March 2017 further tarnished the KDP’s reputation. An attempt to take Khanasor by force while using the KDP-controlled Syrian Kurdish force the Rojava Peshmerga (RP) was strongly criticised even by politically unaligned Yazidis.¹⁰¹ The RP are viewed by Yazidis as a foreign force, and the move was seen as an attempt (pushed for by Turkey) to dislodge the PKK-linked forces from the district, thus sacrificing the well-being of the Yazidi population in pursuit of the KDP’s interests in northeast Syria.¹⁰²

KRG’s policies towards Yazidis in 2014-2017 were not successful in the re-gaining community’s trust and proved to be rigid in addressing Yazidi demands. For example, Yazidi often demanded that the community is allocated minority reserved seats in the KRG’s parliament, similarly to the Christian or Turkmen community. The demand continued to be discarded since Yazidis are viewed as Kurds by the KRG. The only positive development was the establishment of the Directorate of Yazidi Affairs within the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowment in the post-2014 period led by one Khairi Bozani (Rudaw 2017d).

In 2003-October 2017, the GoI has largely abstained from exercising its authority on the ground in the Shingal district despite military presence. Before August 2014, local police units, elements of the 2nd Army Division, and the 3rd Federal Police Division were stationed in the Shingal district (Abbas and Trombly 2014; Knights 2016). Until October 2017, Iraqi Army bases remained abandoned and damaged. Only a few Federal Police units were garrisoned in the area, such as in the al-Shamal sub-district (in Sinuni area) and the town of Shingal.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Anonymous interview with a Yazidi with links to the KDP, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

⁹⁸ Interview with Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, March 30, 2017, Erbil.

⁹⁹ Interview with Nasir Kiret, Yazidi activist from Shariyah, February 24, 2017, Dohuk. Interview with Dave van Zoonen, MERI researcher conducting research on Yazidis, Erbil.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Sheikh Shamo, Yazidi KDP leader, February 23, 2017, Dohuk.

¹⁰¹ Various interviews with Yazidis in Shingal district, March 2017. On the event itself see Kaválek 2017.

¹⁰² Ibid. Anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

¹⁰³ Author’s observations.

The Iraqi Shia leadership has extended sympathetic messages to the Yazidi community and meets with representatives of the YBŞ and the Meclis.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, PM Haidar al-Abadi ensured the Yazidi religious leader Baba Sheikh in a meeting in December 2017 that the GoI will ensure the safe return of Yazidis and post-war reconstruction of Shingal district (Rudaw 2017e). Baghdad also supported the salaries of some 1,000 YBŞ fighters since June 2015 within the HS framework. However, according to sources from the YBŞ and the Meclis, this support has been withheld since late 2016.¹⁰⁵ The level of communication between the Iraqi Shia leadership and the PKK itself has, in general, increased after the Syrian war started (International Crisis Group 2015). Baghdad's interests regarding the Shingal district are backed by Iran (through Iran-backed HS groups like Badr Corps and Kata'ib Imam Ali) for its own national security reasons (i.e., preventing a break-up of Iraq).

Following the KRI's independence referendum on October 16-17, the Kurdish forces lost control over most of the disputed territories and fled from decisive Iraqi forces advance. This included the Shingal district. However, as of December 2018, there have been no systematic efforts towards the reconstruction of the Shingal district or normalizing the situation by implementing civilian administration. It appears that the GoI, primarily through the HS, relies on patronage networks of selected Yazidi leaders and imposes HS-dominated administration in the area that is done at the expense of PKK-linked structures and their authority since the GoI administration is active in areas such as Bara or Khanasor (International Crisis Group 2018c). Simultaneously, it tried to secure Yazidi loyalty by recruiting them into security forces, especially HS Yazidi units, mainly Lalish Brigade (Fawj Lalish, or Brigade no. 36, tied to Hadi al-Amiri's Badr) (International Crisis Group 2018c).

Ultimately, the HS holds the most sway in the Shingal district regarding governance, day-to-day security, law enforcement, and administration. The ability to deliver security was also bolstered by Badr and the HS's ability to co-opt and continue to work with Sunni tribal leaders in southern parts of the district (those who never worked with ISIS) (ibid.). Little has changed with the new GoI under the auspices of Adel Abdul Mahdi, becoming the PM in October 2018. He failed to implement a roadmap on the return of civilian administration, requiring an agreement between the KRG's administration (exiled in the KRI) and the GoI's administration (International Crisis Group 2018d). Consequently, the administrative vacuum is filled with the HS and its networks that exercise both security and civilian authority in the region (ibid.).

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Jamil Khidher, Yazidi PUK leader in Shingal district, February 23, 2017, Dohuk. Anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. For Grand Ayatollah Sistani's support for Yazidis see for example, Ijtihad 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Sardasht Şengali, senior commander of the YBŞ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

10.1.3 Incumbent's Power

In the first period of 2003-August 2014, the KRG (mainly the KDP) had a decisive influence in the Shingal district that was not challenged by the GoI forces stationed in the area. Apart from successfully dominating the district's administration and establishing KDP branches in Yazidi towns, Peshmerga forces were deployed in the area. Additionally, the rule of law was enforced by the KRG's security force Asayish. The KDP ensured its tight grip over the population on the ground through extensive patronage networks offering significant payoffs to otherwise impoverished agricultural region.

Since August 2014, the situation changed, and the incumbent's (KDP's) power in the Shingal district significantly deteriorated. Firstly, it lost control of the territory due to ISIS advance in the summer of 2014. Although the majority of the district was re-taken by late 2014, it failed to renew its military and administrative presence in these areas. It lost the monopoly to quickly entrenching PKK-linked actors. Moreover, many among Yazidis blamed the KRG for allowing for ISIS atrocities, which prompted it to lose popular support. Relying on existing patronage networks accompanied by a heavy-handed approach of preventing Yazidis from returning (and possibly joining the PKK-linked structures) on a mass scale proved to be problematic. It could not alleviate for broken trust in the KRG.

While the GoI armed forces were stationed in the area, they collapsed and fled after the fall of Mosul to ISIS in early June 2014. Only since May 2017, the Iraqi forces started to re-establish their presence in southern parts of the district, re-capturing it from ISIS. They aimed mainly at re-taking mixed Arab-Yazidi areas south of the Shingal Mountain range. Most importantly, the HS units took the strategic highway 47 from Mosul to Umm al-Jaris crossing with Syria on May 29, 2017 (Frantzman 2017). In the immediate aftermath of the Kurdish independence referendum, the GoI assumed control of the whole district on October 16-17, 2017. It not only renewed its military presence but dominated local administration through with HS, co-opting Yazidis, being instrumental in these efforts.

Unlike the KRG, the GoI forces (the HS, Iraqi Army, and Federal Police) have a presence in previously PKK-dominated areas such as west of Sinuni. Apparently, while YBŞ's presence continues to be tolerated, there is a level of cooperation with the HS. The Meclis and its authority diminished as it was effectively challenged and gradually replaced with the HS administration (in turn also replacing the KRG's administrative structures) (Hesselink 2019), continuing de facto administrative duality (International Crisis Group 2018c). Boundaries of territorial control when it comes to governance further diminished. While there appears to be tacit co-existence between various armed factions, there is a lack of monopoly on violence, with armed groups regularly clashing, often due to competition over smuggling operations to Syria.

10.1.4 Presence of Active rivalry

Before 2014, there was a marginal presence of the PKK sympathetic actors and a PKK-linked political party, the Yazidi Democratic Movement (TEVDA, in Kurdish, Tevgera Êzidiyana Demokratîkû Azad), established in 2004 (Tastekin 2015b).¹⁰⁶ Its ideology did not find particularly fertile ground in the conservative society (see Chapter 10.2.4). Moreover, the KDP's grasp over the area was significant and Yazidis increasingly engaged with the KRG cities since the situation in Mosul started to deteriorate significantly by 2005. The rise of radical Sunni currents made the situation especially unsafe for Yazidis (Maisel 2008; International Crisis Group 2009). The PKK did not even attempt to compete in such an unfavourable context - Yazidis were receptive towards engagement with the KRG. Moreover, Yazidi secular and religious leadership enjoyed strong authority and was in general pro-KRG.

In the second period of 2014-17, the KDP's losing physical dominance in the district as well as popular support among Yazidis opened space for the PKK-linked actors to thrive. The KRG continued to rely on a heavy-handed approach to secure Yazidi consent and allegiance (as argued in Chapter 10.1.2). However, the KRG and especially the KDP were discredited and blamed for not preventing ISIS advance and deliberately leaving Yazidis unprotected (Barber 2017). It appears that reliance on existing patronage networks and channelling the KRG's message through Yazidi secular and religious leadership was not sufficient (Kaválek 2017). Moreover, the KRG did not commit any significant resources to reconstruction and to encouraging the displaced people to come back. (ibid.) A combination of tarnished reputation along with the heavy-handed approach and lack of genuine commitment to reconstruction appeared to downplay the existence of active rivalry largely. It allowed the PKK-linked forces to sway opinion and support of a significant portion of Yazidis in their favour, short of employing systematic coercion, as will be further discussed in Chapter 10.2.3.

One of the more visible manifestations of rivalry between the KDP and PKK-linked actors was recruitment to armed groups. After 2014, the Ministry of Peshmerga resorted to recruiting Yazidi units under the command of a prominent Yazidi leader Qasim Shesho, who led the successful defence of the Sharafaddin Shrine in the northern side of the Shingal mountain range against ISIS. However, the presented blueprint for integrating Yazidi units into the KDP Peshmerga was never fully implemented. Therefore, it can be argued that the KDP's Yazidi Peshmerga were only a modest competition for the YBŞ project, which offered a similar payoff and had no trouble finding enough motivated recruits. The YBŞ and the Asayish Ezidkhan also benefited from championing the idea of self-defence structures for Yazidis and, in general, from the reputation of the saviour of Yazidis (compared to the KRG's Peshmerga who were largely viewed as ineffective and blamed for their withdrawal in August 2014) (Kaválek 2017). The YBŞ and the YPJ comprised of some 3,000 fighters in early 2017; out of that, 500-600 were unpaid

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Haji Hassan, member of the PADÊ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

volunteers.¹⁰⁷ Relative inability to offer material payoff to Yazidis compared to the KDP patronage was alleviated because the Yazidi Peshmerga were under-equipped and underpaid. The KRG was discredited in the eyes of many Yazidis. The Meclis officials disclosed that some of the recruits of the YBŞ left for the Yazidi Peshmerga, but their numbers were not high.¹⁰⁸

To sum up, in the second period of August 2014-October 2017, the KRG (and especially the KDP) was not a successful rival to the PKK-linked actors' efforts to entrench themselves in the Shingal district. Despite having more material resources than the PKK, it did not commit them to significant reconstruction and post-conflict rehabilitation of the communities. Instead, it continued to rely on pre-2014 patronage networks among Yazidis (Kaválek 2017). Moreover, especially the KDP was discredited among the majority of Yazidis due to its hasty withdrawal in the summer of 2014, which led many Yazidis to champion the idea of self-defence and self-administration that the PKK-linked actors were offering.

After October 2017, the KDP ceased to be a relevant actor on the ground in the Shingal district. Although it has kept its district administrators, such as KDP mayor Mahma Khalil in office, they reside in the KRI and have no access to the Shingal district (International Crisis Group 2018; see also Center for Civilians in Conflict 2020). Local KDP branches were also displaced, and especially the HS members and administrators are a suppressing manifestation of allegiance to the KRG. On the ground in Shingal, the HS and Iraqi Army became PKK's principal competitors for the support of Shingali Yazidis.

In the third period, the PKK-linked actors lost monopoly in areas west of Sinuni as the Iraqi forces, mainly the HS are stationed there. Compared to the pre-October 2017 period, the PKK-linked actors were deprived of the sole control of their 'de facto capital' in Khanasor. In general, rivalry with the GoI (with the HS) is higher since it appears to try to erode PKK-linked actors' position in the district, especially regarding matters of administration and border control.

10.1.5 Other Variables: Safe Haven, Geography, External Support

The geographic location of the Shingal district makes it a strategically important area with a mountain range that oversees the border with Syria in the north and the main supply route from Mosul to Syria in the south. The impassable mountains have numerous caves and complex morphology, rendering many areas inaccessible by vehicle, making them a defensible stronghold that could serve as a (back-up) safe haven for the PKK in proximity to its territories in northern Syria.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Sardasht Şengalî, senior commander of the YBŞ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017. Khanasor.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Interview with Jamil Khidher, Yazidi PUK leader in Shingal district, February 23, 2017, Dohuk.

The PKK's leadership, including Murat Karayılan, denied that the PKK was planning to establish a 'second Qandil' in the Shingal mountain range in late December 2016, arguing that it is geographically unsuitable for such efforts (Rudaw 2016c). However, evidence gathered from various interviews¹¹⁰ suggests that significant efforts to build a more permanent presence in the mountain range have been underway, including the construction of bases and caves (author's observations in March 2017).¹¹¹ Secondly, some interviewees noted that the mountain range itself is highly complex, with many parts hard to reach and numerous caves,¹¹² which, as established by classical counterinsurgency theorists such as Galula, indeed make it a suitable safe haven for insurgents (Galula 2006).

For the KRG, it is the westernmost frontier of the disputed territories. Shingal district is thus a highly defensible area providing strategic access to Syria through Rabi'a, Faysh Khabour, and Umm al-Jaris border crossings. The proven oil and gas reserves in the Shingal district are modest, but there are reportedly some 400 unexploited oil wells, mainly in the north. No systematic surveys were conducted since the 1960s, but the unproven oil and gas reserves could be substantially large (International Crisis Group 2009). With this possibility on the table, assuming control over the district becomes even more desirable for the GoI and the KRG.

Its geographic location allowed for channelling fighters, supplies, and humanitarian aid both from Qandil and Syria. In August 2014, the YPG and HPG fighters could arrive at the Shingal area to fight ISIS and establish a presence (Kaválek 2017). Some Yazidis could be easily trained at YPG's facilities in al-Hasaka governorate. The PKK (mainly through Syria) provided the Shingal district with fighters and supplies to sustain its governance project (*ibid.*). The GoI recognized the YBŞ as a local Iraqi force under the HS Committee, and its fighters receive salaries (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2020). However, the YBŞ still maintains a level of organizational and operational autonomy. Thus, the PKK-linked forces in the Shingal district have enjoyed considerable support both from other PKK branches in the region and the GoI.

10.2 Insurgent Behaviour

10.2.1 Armed Conflict Intensity

From 2014, the YPG/PKK and the YBŞ was primarily fought against another non-state armed group – ISIS, rather than against the KRG or the GoI. The PKK-linked forces from Syria, supported by the US-led Coalition airstrikes, managed to break the siege of the Shingal mountain range and re-open the escape

¹¹⁰ Interview with anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Interview with Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, February 17, 2017, Erbil. Interview with Jamil Khidher, Yazidi PUK leader in Shingal district, February 23, 2017, Dohuk.

¹¹¹ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

¹¹² Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Interview with Sheikh Shamo, Yazidi KDP leader, February 23, 2017, Dohuk.

route for Yazidis to Syria in August 2014 (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2020). The Peshmerga forces were mostly absent from these operations. In the upcoming months, the PKK and the Peshmerga continued to bolster their position. Subsequently, they launched a major coordinated offensive in December 2014, securing the district's northeastern parts and reaching the Shingal town itself (Hawramy 2014). The YPG/PKK forces with local Yazidi recruits got engaged in a bloody urban positional warfare in the streets for the upcoming months. A significant turning point was November 2015, when ISIS forces withdrew from Shingal town's remnants after days of intensive airstrikes.

After ISIS positions collapsed and its militants withdrew, both the PKK and Peshmerga forces arrived at the strategic town on November 13, 2015, latter from the west, former from the mountain range itself. The 'war of flags' between the PKK and Peshmerga forces unfolded with both trying to claim the central role in re-taking Sinjar town (al-Kadhimi 2015; Ezidi Press 2015). Modus vivendi was reached after only a series of negotiations. Both forces were allowed to be stationed in Shingal town along with units of Federal Police (author's observations in March 2017). A verbal battle over influence over the district's administrative centre was largely a symbolic one since few people returned to the city and southern Yazidi settlements, such as Kocho, by the end of 2018.

Between August 2014 and the end of 2015, the intensity of the armed conflict was high. The exact number of battle-related casualties is not known. However, estimates are in many thousands, included murdered Yazidis on the onset of the ISIS offensive. The ISIS advance prompted some 250,000 Yazidis to flee to IDP camps in the Dohuk governorate under the authority of the KRG or to Syria (UN-Habitat 2015). The destruction level was immense: 6,000 houses were seriously damaged or destroyed in the Shingal district (ibid.). In the town of Shingal, 80% of public infrastructure and 70% of private homes were destroyed during months of urban warfare and airstrikes (UNDP 2020). Local economy comprising mostly of agriculture and animal husbandry was vanquished during these two years. People only slowly started to replant their crops or re-open small businesses, such as bakeries. ISIS vowed to eradicate the Yazidi population and its culture from the area and destroyed scores of Yazidi shrines and temples in the Shingal district. The nature of combat operations resembled conventional warfare with trenches and utilizing vehicles with mounted weaponry. The YBŞ, including the HPG and YPG fighters, were 3,000 strong by early 2017, and ISIS units comprised of comparable force.¹¹³

In 2016-17, trench fighting, shoot-outs, and occasional attempts to infiltrate Kurdish positions continued with ISIS holding southern parts of the Shingal district and al-Ba'aj area. Throughout 2016 and 2017, the conflict between the PKK forces and ISIS can be labelled as a low-intensity conflict. While there are no precise numbers of battle-related deaths on either side, the nature of the fighting was less intensive. While frontlines and fortified positions were delineated, only ad hoc and hit and run operations

¹¹³ Interview with Sardasht Şengali, senior commander of the YBŞ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

were conducted. Mainly ISIS attacked PKK-linked forces' positions on such occasions. Gradually decreasing conflict intensity went hand in hand with a rising focus on building governance structures or training additional Yazidi local armed forces and quasi-police. The PKK dedicated more resources and energy to construct overarching political and governance structures in stabilized areas in the north.

While some coordination between the PKK-linked forces and the Peshmerga was still in place by 2015, tensions were running high. Subsequently, KRG officials and a pro-KDP media called on the PKK to withdraw and hand over the area to Peshmerga (Rudaw 2017f). Despite relatively strong enmity between the KDP and the PKK-linked actors, no systematic fighting occurred. The only exception was minor clashes between the PKK-linked actors and the KDP-linked RP on March 3, 2017 (Kaválek 2017b). The RP attempted to deploy in Khanasor and control the border with Syria in areas with the YBŞ and other PKK-linked force monopoly but was prevented from doing so (ibid.). However, despite competing interests and strained relationships, fighting never erupted on a larger scale, especially since the KDP resorted to non-violent countermeasures, such as employing the on-and-off economic blockade of the Shingal district (Human Rights Watch 2016). Kurdish infighting (*birakuji*) between the KDP and the PKK would have been detrimental to both sides since it would be a highly unpopular move with still-fresh memories of bloody Iraqi Kurdish civil war in 1994-97.

In the third period, since October 2017, the tacit agreement of mutual coexistence between the 'new' incumbent, the GoI, and primarily the HS and the PKK-linked forces continues. Despite some tensions, no significant battles have erupted. Similarly to the KDP presence in the district, the rivalry over authority in the area and competition among the population occurs, but short of outright violence.

10.2.2 Use of Terrorism

In all three examined periods 2004-2018, the PKK-linked actors never resorted to utilizing terrorism tactics against the KRG or the GoI even on a small scale. Firstly, the PKK sought to appeal to the Yazidi population and portrayed itself as a saviour of Yazidis, providing security and services. Secondly, the PKK-linked forces were not in a significantly weaker military position in the Shingal district after 2014. It could be argued that it enjoyed a higher level of cooperation with the GoI on the ground even before October 2017, when the Iraqi forces assumed on-the-ground control of Shingal district. In the environment of tacit agreement of co-existence, there was only little motivation to resort to terrorism in order to push the KRG or the GoI (not to mention that attacks against Kurdish forces would create a significant backlash against the PKK's cause).

10.2.3 Violence towards the Contested Population

As noted, the PKK had no substantial popular support among the Yazidi population of the Shingal district, given the unfavourable context before 2014. Therefore, it did not systematically increase its

popular support, and coercion of the population was not utilized. Interviewees¹¹⁴ did not mention any systematic coercion over the population, even in the second period. It appears that other contextual factors prompt the PKK to rely on an approach that aims at winning the hearts and minds of the population. Therefore, the puzzle is why the PKK generally opts for contractual rather than coercive behaviour, even facing the rivalry predominantly with the KDP in the Shingal district. It seems to have considerable popular support among Yazidis despite the KDP being able to provide higher material rewards through its patronage networks in Shingal. Similarly, in the aftermath of October 2017, when the HS forces and their administration was increasingly entrenched and competing with the PKK-linked actors over Yazidi support, there were no reports of systematic coercion of the population (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2020). That is despite a number of YBŞ members defected to the Yazidi HS units with the prospect of a higher material reward (International Crisis Group 2018).

The PKK-linked actors provided the population with humanitarian aid – basic foodstuff shipped in from Rojava - which began in August 2014 and continues.¹¹⁵ It also opened several clinics, one of which operates in Sardasht in the mountain range.¹¹⁶ The aid is not conditional on direct participation in the Meclis structures, membership in a pro-PKK political party, or employment within the YBŞ. It even tries to extend this assistance into the areas under the KRG (or mixed) control.¹¹⁷ The PKK-linked structures also engage in highly symbolic actions such as handing out flowers to Yazidi families, choosing Wednesday as a free day, which is the holy day for Yazidis.¹¹⁸ The Meclis came a long way in providing administrative and public services to the population in a systematic manner, despite, as the Meclis members acknowledged, not having the resources to satisfy all of their needs.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, there are reports of the recruitment of underage boys and girls into the PKK-linked forces' ranks (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). The report also describes cases in which the PKK exercised pressure on families who wished to get their children back to their homes. The recruitment of underage youth is naturally frowned upon by Yazidis.¹²⁰ The PKK's ideology and attempts to spread it leave many Yazidis indifferent and unconvinced by their propaganda since many radical leftist ideology elements are alien to Yazidis (such as attempts to convince people to follow the PKK's favoured faith

¹¹⁴ Systematic coercion was not mentioned by any of the interviewees.

¹¹⁵ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Interview with Hussein Haji Nevso, head of the Meclis in Borik, March 15, 2017, Borik. Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017. Khanasor.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht. Author's observations in March 2017.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht. Author's observations in March 2017.

¹¹⁸ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Zoroastrianism over Yazidism).¹²¹ In one interview, it was suggested that while there is no systematic coercion, there has been a growing feeling of tension and pressure on Yazidis from the PKK-linked forces.¹²² Domle suggested in March 2017, that for the past six months or so, as the situation in the district had become tenser and the Yazidi population had become more ambivalent.¹²³

Some disagree, for example, with imposing the Rojava curricula with the Latin alphabet in schools.¹²⁴ Other interviews suggested that people became uneasy with the plans which the PKK has for the district and the mountain, which could potentially bring more conflict to the district.¹²⁵ Members of the Meclis and the YBŞ suggested that while they respect Abdullah Öcalan's ideology, they do not wish to implement an exact copy of it in the Shingal district (Interviews no. 12 & 14).¹²⁶ The underscored focus in the interviews was indeed on the elements of ideology promoting the creation of self-defence and self-administration and building upon the experience from Rojava in Shingal district (within the scope of Iraqi law, in coordination with the GoI).

As one interviewee noted, a slightly different message is communicated to Yazidis and pro-PKK media outlets such as Ronahi TV.¹²⁷ The message conveyed to Yazidis in meetings and gatherings underlines that the PKK actors are here to help Yazidis with building self-defence and self-administration, nothing will be imposed upon them, and ultimately Yazidis will decide their future political and administrative arrangements themselves. However, the pro-PKK media outlets claim that they wish to implement the PKK's ideology as a whole (ibid.; the consistent message picked up by the author in the PKK-linked written media, such as Roj News, or ANF).

The PKK-linked actors mainly bet on persuasion to convince people to participate in their governance projects, organising meetings and councils at a local level to ensure that their message is actively communicated to the populace. According to Metelits' (2010) theory on insurgent behaviour, the insurgent groups opt for more coercive behaviour if they find themselves in a competition over the same constituency with other actors (whether this is a state or a rival non-state group). In the Shingal district, the PKK-linked actors faced the KDP as their main rival, who tried to renew its grasp over the district and the population. Moreover, the KDP can potentially offer more material rewards and benefits to Yazidis, who (re-)pledge their loyalty to the KRG structures in the district. Additionally, individuals and

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Anonymous interview with a Yazidi with links to the KDP, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

¹²³ Interview with Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, February 17, 2017, Erbil.

¹²⁴ Interview with Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, February 17, 2017, Erbil

¹²⁵ Ibid. Interview no. 7: anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

¹²⁶ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht.

Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹²⁷ Interview with Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, February 17, 2017, Erbil.

their families who joined the Meclis, or the YBŞ and the YJÊ face restrictions on their movement to the KRI (to which many Yazidis turn for advanced healthcare, business, studies, or a more comfortable living) and often even harassment at the hands of the KRG's security apparatus.¹²⁸

At first glance, considering only strictly pragmatic payoffs, it would seem rational for Yazidis to turn to the KRG. Nevertheless, the Meclis, the YBŞ, and other PKK-linked forces seemed to have considerable popular support. Many Yazidis remain pragmatic, and cases where, for example, one family sends a son to the YBŞ, and another serves with the Peshmerga are not uncommon.¹²⁹

Wood (2003) suggests that conventional material benefits alone cannot always explain why a significant portion of the population would support an insurgent group. Based on case studies and in-depth field work, she asserts that if the population largely views insurgents and their efforts as just and, on the other hand, views insurgents' rivals as unjust actors towards which they harbour major grievance, they opt for supporting insurgents even at significant cost (ibid.). This seems to be the case in the Shingal district. Based on various interviews with Yazidis both in the Shingal district and in Dohuk throughout the research, it appears that the project of self-administration and self-defence championed by the PKK-linked structures found fertile ground among a number of Yazidis. This argument can also be supported by the fact that apart from the PKK vision for the area, the KRG offers the only alternative. Its image remains, however, damaged given the shaken trust between the KRG (especially the KDP) and Yazidis and the prevalent idea that Yazidis must from now on rely on themselves.

As for the third period, since October 2017, the KRG (mainly the KDP) was ousted from the district by the GoI's forces. However, it still holds considerable power over the Yazidi population originally from the Shingal district since most of them still based in the IDP camps, mainly in the Dohuk governorate. There is an active rivalry of the GoI, yet no systematic coercion on the side of the PKK-linked actors was reported. Also, the GoI has been discredited and viewed as leaving Yazidis behind in 2014. The HS employs loyalist Yazidis and create their own patronage networks, although the YBŞ is officially on the HS payroll.

The explanation here is that despite the stronger rivalry, the PKK-linked actors abstained from the coercion of civilians and broader confrontation with the HS and Iraqi forces in general. On the contrary, it has maintained a live-and-let-live relationship with the GoI and the HS in Shingal by the end of 2018, despite the HS structures appeared to compete with the PKK-linked structures, in particular when it comes to governance. Such arrangements of co-existence apparently also alleviate for the active

¹²⁸ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht.

¹²⁹ Interview with anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

rivalry mechanism to play out. Relative predictability of the relationship between the incumbent actor and the absence of violent confrontation opens the door to competition over the population in a more or less peaceful manner.

10.2.4 Building Political Structures

In the early 2000s, the PKK began to establish a myriad of political structures in the region, including Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Part of this initiative included establishing the TEVDA in 2004, which marks the first period of the PKK presence in Shingal. As Tastekin asserts, the PKK was the main but not the sole force behind the TEVDA (Tastekin 2015b). Some claim that the PKK was penetrating Shingal since the 1990s, especially after it was expelled from Syria and was bolstering its presence in the mountains of the KRI. Tastekin (2016) notes, building on interviews with the PKK members that there was some PKK presence in the Shingal district since as early as 1993. However, this was an ad hoc presence tied to the need for a logistics connection between northern Syria bases in northern Iraq.

In the first period, the PKK-linked actors' presence and appeal were limited and did not find fertile ground among the Yazidi population, meaning that they remained a relatively marginal force in the district. Domle notes that in the 2005-11 period, the TEVDA lacked substantial popular support among the Yazidi population in the Shingal district.¹³⁰ The TEVDA remained the only structure and was not followed by establishing armed wings, women and youth groups or to advocate for establishing autonomy in line with Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism. Moreover, the TEVDA was never officially a part of the KCK. According to Haji Hassan, a member of the Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy (PADÊ, in Kurdish, *Partiya Azadî û Demokrasiyê ya Êzidiyan*), it was in fact not registered or eligible to compete in elections, which led the leadership of the TEVDA and several other groups to replace it with PADÊ in June 2016.¹³¹

According to Domle, an increased presence of the PKK-linked actors and structures had already begun after 2012 with the Syrian conflict.¹³² A small number of Shingali Yazidis joined the YPG ranks and received political and weapons training, citing the need to protect the Yazidi population in Syria against Islamist rebels. For example, the head of the Meclis, Khidher Salih, is Shingali Yazidi but reportedly went through the PKK training in Syria.¹³³

There were several constraints preventing the PKK from gaining substantial support in the district and construct mature political structures that would attract a significant number of Yazidis or even try to engage in building up governance structures until 2014. First and foremost, the KDP (and to

¹³⁰ Interview with Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, February 17, 2017, Erbil.

¹³¹ Interview with Haji Hassan, member of the PADÊ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor

¹³² Interview with Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, 17 February 2017, Erbil.

¹³³ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

some extent the PUK) managed to establish rigid patronage networks, loyal administration of the Shingal district, and it forged an alliance with Yazidi secular and spiritual leadership residing in Sheikhan. The KRG, especially the KDP, also promoted the Kurdish identity of Yazidis which was not outright refused.

Consequently, the incumbent's power (in this case, the KDP) was substantial in the Shingal district. State policies (KRG's) were also largely favoring the Yazidi population (albeit with constraints, it was still an improvement compared to Baathist rule). The socio-cultural and historical context was also not in favour of the PKK and its leftist secular ideology. Conservative Yazidi society largely respected spiritual and religious leaders and both were aligned primarily with the KDP. Moreover, with the deteriorating security situation in Nineveh, especially in Mosul, Yazidis turned to the KRG's cities for study, employment, and business (Kaválek 2017). Thus, there was little space for the PKK to thrive in the Shingal district. Moreover, at that time, US forces were stationed in the area before 2011, providing a further constraint on PKK's presence.

In the second period in the aftermath of the YPG and HPG forces' arrival to Shingal in August 2014, the region experienced extensive efforts to build additional political structures, including a new political party and a myriad of civil society organizations, as well as governance structures. In June 2016, during the assembly of several political parties of some 700 people, the PADÊ was created under the chairmanship of Qahtan Ali and with some 29 people in its leadership council, which effectively replaced TEVDA (Rojnews 2016).¹³⁴

The PADÊ is dominated by former TEVDA members and embodies the smaller party, the Free Yazidi Assembly, and some other marginal actors. The reason behind the transformation from the TEVDA to PADÊ was the fact that TEVDA was not a legally registered political party in Baghdad. Thus it could not compete in elections. The PADÊ was finally legally registered on April 19, 2018 (Kirkuk Now 2017).

Shingali Yazidis have little say in the strategic decision-making of the PKK-linked structures. Critical decisions are made either by Shingali Yazidis with a long history with the PKK (such as Sa'id Hassan Sa'id, the former head of the TEVDA, and the leader of the YBŞ in early 2017) or by outsiders, often from Syria.¹³⁵ On the other hand, the Meclis and the YBŞ seemed to have gathered significant popular support among the Yazidis for the project of autonomy and self-defence of Yazidis in part

¹³⁴ Interview with Haji Hassan, member of the PADÊ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹³⁵ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI. Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

because the idea of self-administration and self-defence that the PKK-linked actors advocate for strongly resonates with the Yazidi population.¹³⁶

The entrenchment of the PKK-linked political structures and significant support among the Yazidi population was permitted by significant changes in the context of insurgency. State policies were no longer viewed as favourable towards Yazidis, with the increasing feeling of abandonment by the KRG facing ISIS advance, which cost thousands of Yazidi lives. The PKK-linked actors also benefited from the acute deterioration of the economic situation in the district, in which even little resources committed mainly from the DAA to provide essential goods for the poor or provide education and medical facilities were appealing to Yazidis.

In the third period, both the KDP and PUK administration, party branches, and security forces withdrew from the area, leaving the Shingal district in the hands of Iraqi security forces. The relationship between the GoI and the PKK-linked structures in the district, such as the Meclis, PADÊ, or the YBŞ, was comparably better than the one with the KRG. Baghdad registered the PADÊ in April 2018. The YBŞ and PADÊ officials have held scores of meetings with the representatives of the Iraqi government. Similarly, the YBS officials travelled alongside the broader HS delegation to Iran in January 2017 (Goran 2017c).

There were no systematic attempts to dismantle the PKK-linked political or governance structures since October 2017. However, the HS-linked administration's inception created duality in governance, and both of their authorities seem to overlap. In turn, both PADÊ and the Meclis have repeatedly stressed allegiance to the Iraqi government, and PADÊ's political program pursues the idea of promoting the Shingal district's status to governorate under Baghdad's authority (ANF 2018b).

On the other hand, an administrative vacuum that appeared in October 2017 with the Peshmerga withdrawal persisted and was gradually replaced by administration closely interlinked with the HS, namely elements of Kata'ib Imam Ali and Badr Corps under whose auspices Yazidi HS units like Lalish Brigade are organized. The HS adopts a similar divide and rule strategy by building up patronage networks of co-opted Yazidi leaders (and to some extent Sunni tribal leaders with a history of cooperation with the central government) (see International Crisis Group 2018; Center for Civilians in Conflict 2020). These political structures serve as the main link to the government authority embodied in Nineveh Provincial Council in Mosul and ultimately to Baghdad.

¹³⁶ That was the general message picked up by the author in the vast majority of interviews conducted between September 2016 and March 2017 in the KRI.

10.2.5 Building Governance Structures & Producing Legitimacy

Prior to 2014, there were no efforts to create administrative and governing structures in the district of Shingal. However, in the second period, governance and administrative structures were put in place both in areas solely under the PKK-linked actors' control west of Sinuni and in mixed areas with the presence of the KRG administration, and the Peshmerga such as in Sinuni itself and villages east of it. Established governance structures follow the same suit outlined by Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism, and in practice, it follows a similar pattern found in Turkey, Syria, or Iran (Kaválek 2017).

Policing the Population

The YBŞ and the Asayish Êzîdxan maintain a monopoly on violence in areas under their sole control or where they dominate. In mixed control areas such as in Sinuni, Duhola, Borik, or Shingal town itself, they coexist with the KRG's security structures, and apparently, both sides managed not to engage in violence for the most part (*ibid.*). According to representatives from both the Meclis and the YBŞ itself, they are still existentially dependent on the YPG and the HPG since they fear that if these forces disengage from the Shingal district, the YBŞ and the Meclis will not be able to sustain possible counter-action from the KDP trying to restore its presence and influence in the district.¹³⁷

The author's observations during field trips to the Shingal district in 2017 also confirm that both the YPG/YPJ and the HPG/YJA-Star flags are still frequently flown, especially north of the mountain range and on strategically significant places such as at the top of the Shingal mountain itself, at the former US military outpost, at both southern and northern entrances to the mountain valley, and in a large base in Bara, west of Khanasor. To sum up, even though the YBŞ grew in numbers, training, and armaments, it remains strongly reliant on the YPG/YPJ and the HPG/YJA-Star.

Additionally, the Asayish Êzîdxan was established in the Shingal district to assume the role of an internal security force, with distinctive patches on their uniforms highlighting their allegiance to the Meclis and the Asayish and distinctively marked vehicles.¹³⁸ Also, in January 2017, the Yazidi Special Unit was reportedly established to assume the role of a 'counter-terrorism force' (Rudaw 2017g). As noted in one of the interviews, local police are not present in the area anymore; thus, the Asayish Êzîdxan assumes their role in Khanasor, and partly in Sinuni, Borik, and the town of Shingal.¹³⁹ Only a small number of Iraqi Federal Police had a presence in the town of Shingal or Sinuni. However, they are a stationary force, manning checkpoints and small bases and do not seem to be engaged in the ordinary tasks of policing

¹³⁷ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 14, 2017. Khanasor. Interview with Dijwar Faqir, spokesman of the YBŞ, March 14, 2017, town of Shingal.

¹³⁸ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017. Khanasor. Author's observations in March 2017.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

the population (author's observations in March 2017). In areas under KRG control, the KDP Asayish assumes this role.

There seems to be a division of responsibilities between the military force (the YBŞ and the YJÊ) and the Asayish Êzîdxan. The force is comparatively smaller than the YBŞ and according to the YBŞ commander, Sardasht Şengalî, is only between 100-200 strong.¹⁴⁰ Units of the Asayish Êzîdkhan regularly patrol the streets of Khanasor (author's observations). The Asayish Êzîdxan units oversee the general internal security in towns like Khanasor, and the civilian population turns to Asayish members if needed.¹⁴¹ The Asayish Êzîdxan seems to be in a somewhat embryonic stage, solely assuming the role of policing force, unlike in the DAA in Syria, where Asayish also deals with certain administrative matters.

Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

A parallel court system was not created by the Meclis in the Shingal district. According to Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, such an undertaking would not be easy, and there were no attempts by the Meclis to establish such a court system.¹⁴² People still, therefore, rely on the central government's court system. On the other hand, since the physical access to these courts was severely restricted due to the ISIS presence in Nineveh, there were attempts within the Meclis to provide some form of substituting dispute resolution mechanisms. The central Meclis in Sardasht has a branch dedicated to legal affairs, and similar legal branches are also in place within the local branches of the Meclis.¹⁴³ People then turn to the Meclis structures if they have a dispute to be resolved. Such efforts highlight the Meclis' ambition to deliver an overarching system of services and administration to the population.

Providing Public Goods

Members of the Meclis structures have the ambition to provide various public services spanning from water, electricity, garbage disposal, humanitarian support to bureaucratic activities. However, they also disclosed that their capacity to satisfy all of these needs, not to mention to undertake larger reconstruction projects, is limited due to a lack of resources.¹⁴⁴ Some smaller projects were implemented, such as to support the revival of the agricultural sector, to dig up some 70 wells in the district, to give out sheep to poorer families in the area in order to boost sustainability, and to start-up the local

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Sardasht Şengalî, senior commander of the YBŞ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017. Khanasor. Author's observations in March 2017.

¹⁴² Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht.

¹⁴³ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017. Khanasor. Interview with Hussein Haji Nevso, head of the Meclis in Borik, March 15, 2017, Borik.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht. Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

economy.¹⁴⁵ While conducting day-to-day service provision in the areas administered by the Meclis, coordination between the central and local Meclis branches seemed to be in place in discussing larger projects with the respective committee of the central Meclis and requesting resources, workers, or specific equipment.

Up to 30 schools were opened in the areas dominated by the PKK-linked forces.¹⁴⁶ These new schools brought their curricula from the DAA in Syria and teach in Kurmanjî dialect utilising the Latin alphabet. However, the situation regarding the education system remains highly complex since apart from newly opened schools, there are still schools administered by the Iraqi Ministry of Education, teaching in Arabic and at the same time schools administered by the KRG and teaching Kurmanjî Kurdish (in Arabic script).¹⁴⁷ Aside from Latin schools, an ‘academy’ was opened to provide political and military training within the scope of the PKK’s ideology.¹⁴⁸

According to Khidher Mardos, deputy head of the Meclis, there are 33-35 people in the Khanasor Meclis, which form small groups (committees) responsible for specific issues (such as public services or education). One person is appointed to monitor projects and tasks (such as collecting garbage) and coordinate with the respective committee in the central Meclis in Sardasht.¹⁴⁹ At the local level, the Meclis operates as a municipality office in some instances with paid employees at their disposal. In the case of Khanasor, the Meclis employs about 100 people. Aside from that, a small portion of people (around 10) receiving a salary from the central government.¹⁵⁰ In other words, the Meclis seeks to substitute existing governance structures that no longer operate systematically in Khanasor since the sub-district administration is based in KDP-held parts of Sinuni.

The Meclis also operates in areas of mixed control, such as in Duhola and Borik. In Borik, a town of 3,000-4,000 people, the Meclis seemed to operate on a rather rudimentary level in March 2017. Hussein Haji Nevso, the head of the Borik Meclis, highlighted that their focus is currently on delivering essential municipality services such as fixing the roads, buying and operating public generators, providing water supplies, cleaning the streets, and distributing aid from the DAA in Syria (mainly basic foodstuff).¹⁵¹

Meclis’ ability to satisfy all of the population’s needs or commit to extensive scale reconstruction or infrastructure-building efforts is limited due to the relative lack of resources. However, the administrative system, division of responsibilities, and coordination between local branches of the Meclis

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Interview with 12: Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, March 14, 2017, Sardasht.

Interview with Nasir Kiret, Yazidi activist from Shariyah, February 24, 2017, Dohuk.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Hussein Haji Nevso, head of the Meclis in Borik, March, 15, 2017, Borik.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Interview with Hussein Haji Nevso, head of the Meclis in Borik, March 15, 2017, Borik.

and its centre in Sardasht is already institutionalised. However, in the longer-term, it is at best questionable whether the Meclis could provide a similar level of service to the KRG or the GoI.

Feedback Mechanisms for Civilian Participation

The central Meclis in Sardasht was established in January 2015 by the ‘constituent assembly’ of some 200 people, from which the representatives were chosen to fill the Meclis committees and the Executive Council (Hawar News Agency 2015; Rudaw 2015d). The dominant political force behind this effort remains the PKK-linked political party TEVDA (since June 2016 rebranded as the PADÊ). Meclis flags can be seen flown next to PADÊ flags on the same buildings in the district (author’s observations in March 2017). At the local level, members of the Meclis branch are chosen (non-elected) in town or village meetings by the people living in the area and participating in these efforts.

It is claimed by the Meclis members that their structures are open to everyone, even non-Yazidi figures, which have not in the past fought against Yazidis.¹⁵² The Arab population, which stood against ISIS (mainly the Shammari tribe living in the western part of the district), cooperates with the PKK-linked forces militarily (Coles 2016). According to a YBŞ commander, the Baghdad-backed Arab militia, al-Nawadir Force, maintains a good relationship with the YBŞ.¹⁵³ However, no reports indicated that the Meclis would attempt to exercise its administrative activities in these majority-Arab areas in the district’s westernmost part.

The YBŞ commanders highlighted that they coordinate efforts with the Meclis in monthly meetings and respect the Meclis’ decisions.¹⁵⁴ However, others disclosed that the administration remains rather military-dominated, with the PKK-linked commanders often calling the shots on strategic decision-making. At the same time, some of them are not even Yazidis from the Shingal district or from Iraq itself.¹⁵⁵ In the end, given the strong dependency of the Meclis and the YBŞ on the DAA’s support economically and on the YPG and the HPG militarily, it is no surprise that these actors maintain an influence over the administration and armed structures in the Shingal district. On the other hand, the administration seems to be receptive to the population’s needs regarding service provision. During interviews, the Meclis members were revealing their plan for organising elections for offices in the Meclis administrative structures. This, however, did not happen as of December 2018. Since October 2017, when the GoI renewed its presence, the Meclis and its structures are partially sidelined at the expense of the new HS-linked armed and administrative networks.

¹⁵² Interview with Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹⁵³ Interview with Dijwar Faqir, spokesman of the YBŞ, March 14, 2017, town of Shingal.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. Interview with Sardasht Şengalî, senior commander of the YBŞ, March 15, 2017, Khanasor.

¹⁵⁵ Anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Utilising Arjona's (2016) typology of insurgent engagement with the population, the YBŞ and the Meclis form a rebelocracy in the second period since August 2014, which strikes a social contract with the population, intervenes in the social order, and conducts activities beyond exercising a monopoly on violence. Considering that the Meclis was only created in January 2015, it made significant progress in becoming an institutionalised administration in Shingal district. The Meclis tries to deliver services to the population covering a wide range of issues spanning from food provision to education, healthcare, and municipal services. Considering that investment into reconstruction and providing services has been sporadic at best both by the KRG and the GoI, such efforts appealed to the population. Applying Mampilly's (2011) framework, it can be argued that the governance of the Meclis has become increasingly effective and entrenched despite some continuous shortcomings.

In the third period, after the Iraqi forces and namely the HS drove out the KRG in October 2017, the context altered once again. Mainly the HS was stationed upon the apparent agreement between its commanders and the PKK-linked forces in areas previously solely controlled by the Meclis and the YBŞ west of Sinuni. The HS-linked actors, often members of Yazidi tribes co-opted by the GoI, began to challenge the PKK-linked administration and its efforts. Incumbent's power thus increased, and although there was no outright conflict.

Utilizing Schlichte and Schneckener's (2016) framework of symbolic and performance-based sources of legitimacy, it can be argued that the PKK-linked actors and their administration enjoyed a considerable amount of legitimacy only after 2014. In the first period, the PKK did not enjoy significant legitimacy among the Shingali Yazidis. Its presence was limited to a marginal political party, the TEVDA. Neither did it engage in systematic efforts to increase its popular support or further penetrate the Yazidi social fabric with additional political structures, building governance, or armed groups.

After 2014, the Meclis' efforts went beyond a mere maintaining monopoly on violence and coercion of population both in the areas solely under their control (west of Sinuni) and in mixed areas such as the Shingal mountain range or villages east of Sinuni. This pattern appeared during the second and third periods. Since July 2014, the PKK-linked actors could firmly claim both symbolic and, to an extent, a performance-based legitimacy among the Yazidi population of the Shingal district.

After August 2014, the situation rapidly shifted, and the PKK could claim strong legitimacy stemming from both symbolic- and performance-centered claims. In the realm of symbolic claims, it was revolving around the socio-economic and political aspirations of the local community. One might argue that symbolic claims using communal myths, popular beliefs, tradition, and culture could not be the source of legitimacy since, as thoroughly discussed in the chapter on social and cultural context, the PKK Marxist utopian and rigid ideology in its whole is incompatible with conservative and traditional Yazidi

society. On the other hand, notions of local autonomy and self-defence were largely accepted by the Yazidi population.

Since 2014, the PKK-linked actors could also claim performance-centered legitimacy. The most crucial aspect mentioned throughout the interviews as a source of performance-centered legitimacy was the strong credibility of the YPG and the HPG through sacrifice, fighting ISIS. Moreover, the PKK created Yazidi armed group the YBŞ. The Meclis, despite being in a somewhat embryonic stage compared to the DAA in Syria, also gradually created basic governance structures with some local ownership through the local branches of the Meclis (Local Councils), which partially renewed municipality services, brought dispute resolution mechanism and provided security along with the structure to police the population.

11. The PKK in Makhmour in Iraq: Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı: A Laboratory of the Democratic Autonomy

The Makhmour Refugee Camp, or in Turkish, Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı (Martyr Rüstem Cudi Camp), is according to UNHCR data from July 2011 inhabited by 10,240 Turkish Kurdish refugees who were driven out from Turkey due to anti-PKK military operations in the 1990s (Caux 2011). The Camp was subsequently renamed to Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı as a commemoration to the KCK Executive Council member (Yıldız 2014) killed by the Turkish airstrike in the KRI in October 2011 (T24 2011) but is still widely known mainly as the Makhmour Camp.

The PKK-linked actors have enjoyed decisive control of the Camp that was not challenged by the incumbent actors and, for the most part, enjoyed relative peace and stability. Thus, it may serve as a laboratory of the Democratic Autonomy since the PKK-linked actors could realize their ideological visions practically unconstrained. After August 2014, when ISIS briefly captured the area, governance structures, as well as the armed presence in the Camp, became even more developed.

11.1 The Context of Insurgency

Makhmour is a district located some 60 km south-west of KRI's capital Erbil. Before 1991, the district was a part of the Arab Sunni majority governorate of Nineveh. However, subsequently, it was attached to the Kurdish-majority province of Erbil. Makhmour district is one of the disputed territories between the GoI and the KRG, according to Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, meaning both actors would like to see it ultimately fall under their undisputed authority. However, the destiny of disputed territories, such as the Makhmour district, itself remains unresolved, although referendums over the fate of these areas were supposed to be held by 2007 (Kane 2011). The mostly agricultural and livestock-oriented district is home to estimated 174,000 people in 2009 (Abdullah 2014); 28,000 live in the Makhmour town itself (Gady 2014). The majority of the population is Kurdish (some 65%), but approximately 35% of inhabitants are Sunni Arabs, a number of whom were resettled to the area in 1963, 1988, and 1991 (Abdullah 2014).

Some 40,000 fled the district, facing ISIS advance in 2014 (Gady 2014). Sunni Arab residents who fled the area in 2014 facing ISIS were restricted from returning since they were perceived as a potential security threat due to their alleged support for ISIS. As for the town of Makhmour, residents disclosed that the inter-communal relations were (and are) relatively good, while there were more issues in rural areas where Sunni Arab villages were declared 'security zones' and KRG security forces refused to let Arab citizens back since 2014 and 2015 (ibid.; see also Human Rights Watch 2015). The problem of ethnic engineering apparently persisted in 2018 (Constantini and Palani 2018). In the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum in September 2017, both Kurds and Arabs were fleeing the district expecting clashes between Peshmerga and Iraqi security forces.

Since 2003, the KRG (more specifically, the KDP) exercised de facto authority over the district through its armed forces Peshmerga, security forces (Asayish), and control of the district's administration, which members of the local KDP branches held decisive positions. Similarly, KRG schools teaching Kurdish were established in the district. One could argue that the situation was similar to the Shingal district, where the role of the GoI was limited, and its forces in the area mostly abstained from interfering in local affairs. At the same time, Baghdad largely continued to pay public employees in the district.

By the end of 2014, the majority of Makhmour district was re-taken from ISIS by the combined forces of the KDP Peshmerga and the PKK. The town itself and the Camp nearby fell only briefly into the ISIS hands on August 6-8, 2014 (Rudaw 2016b; Cockburn 2014). Following the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017, the KDP Peshmerga and Asayish forces withdrew from large parts of Makhmour district, stopping on the Dibis-Makhmour town-Qayara line in October 2017. Thus, the control of the district became sharply divided in half between the GoI and the KRG. The town of Makhmour itself and areas south of it, including the Makhmour Camp, fell into the Iraqi security forces-controlled zone, including the HS units. As of April 2018, an apparent agreement was reached between the GoI forces and the KRG to re-open the main Makhmour-Erbil road and the KRG bureaucrats to return to the town of Makhmour and resume their work (Kurdistan24 2018).

The Camp population consists solely of the (Sunni) Turkish Kurdish refugees that fled heavy-handed Turkish operations. The operations started in August 1992 in Şırnak province and went on and off throughout 1993-94 and resulted in forced displacement and destruction of Kurdish villages supposedly providing support for the PKK in peripheral mountainous areas such as Hakkâri, Şırnak, Yüksekova or Çukurca (OFpra 2016). Whole populations of the villages accounting for some 17,000 people fled across the border to a provisional refugee camp in Atrush in the Zakho district in the KRI (ibid.).

A significant portion of the people was already supportive of the PKK. The experience of violence and forced displacement further allowed the PKK's ideology to find fertile ground in Atrush camp. By 1997, it was estimated that 1,000-1,500 people joined the PKK ranks (ibid.). After 1994, the UNHCR took over the camp's administration. However, Ankara applied pressure both on the UNHCR, the US, and the KDP to relocate the camp since it served as a safe haven, a recruitment pool, and a launching pad for PKK's operation on Turkish soil. In December 1996, the UNHCR officially closed the camp. Some 9,000 people (the rest went back to Turkey or managed to live outside the camp) relocated to Makhmour upon the agreement with the GoI and the KDP by 2000 (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2001). As of July 2011, the UNHCR registered 10,240 people living in the Camp (Caux 2011). While 2,200 returned to Turkey in 1997-2004, some 4,000-5,000 people also managed to sustain their living in the KRI's cities such as Erbil or Dohuk (ibid., OFpra 2016).

Over time, the camp grew from a temporary shelter to a village with neighbourhoods consisting of brick and mud buildings, shops, and infrastructure providing essential public services such as education, electricity, or simple healthcare. It has become a somewhat isolated enclave where neither the KRG (the KDP) nor the GoI has challenged the PKK-linked actors' undisputed monopoly. Some 2,000 residents of the camp work as daily labourers in the Makhmour town located about one kilometer north-west from the Camp (Caux 2011). Nevertheless, access to the Camp itself was severely restricted to outsiders may it be merchants, the KRG or GoI administrators, NGOs or journalists, especially since early 2017 and even more after October 2017, which coincided with arguably a more visible role and presence of armed PKK militants in the camp and its vicinity (Al-Ghad Press 2017).

11.1.1 Horizontal Inequalities

The Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı was established by the UNHCR in 1997 and was supposed to be overseen and run by it. However, the UNHCR had somewhat limited authority inside the Camp. Its administration and the day-to-day running were dominated by the PKK-linked actors who have over time developed governance and political structures outlined by Öcalan's Democratic Autonomy (see also Geerdink 2009). Since 2014, the UNHCR's role in the area became even more limited. The PKK-linked actors had then an indisputable monopoly in the Camp itself and gradually even outside of it in the adjacent Qarachokh mountains.

Makhmour Camp residents harbour a substantial grievance against the Turkish government, which was also magnified by the PKK's indoctrination over the years. On the break of the ISIS offensive in the area on August 8, 2014, Turkish Deputy PM Beşir Atalay called for Makhmour Camp residents to return to Turkey; however, nobody heeded the offer (Hürriyet 2014). It is difficult to determine whether a significant number of the Makhmour Camp residents genuinely long to return to Turkey. At least nobody says so openly since *"(...) that's not the PKK policy. The PKK has the opinion that the refugees of Makhmur can only return to their villages, or what's left of them, when Turkey fulfils all the demands of the PKK."* (Geerdink 2009)

Some 2,000 residents of the Makhmour Camp work in the Makhmour town or Erbil as daily labourers, taxi drives, or construction workers; women often work as cleaners and support staff for various institutions in Erbil, such as medical facilities (Caux 2011; Petrov 2017). The job market in the Camp itself is not very developed despite the local administration's efforts to support collectives and cooperatives such as bakeries, cafes, or greenhouses. However, these mostly serve the Camp population rather than generate profit or produce goods for trade with the outside world and provide little income to cover basic needs (ibid.). Families usually rely on support from members that find work outside of the Camp to sustain the livelihood.

In general, economic conditions are relatively poor. Given the lack of access to education and the relatively low social status of Makhmour Camp residents (being Kurds from Turkey, perceived as PKK sympathizers), they are usually able to find only unskilled labour vacancies. Estimated 3,500 residents were between the ages of seven and 25 in 2009 (Cewlik 2009), which means that a considerable number of children are born over time, so it actually keeps the population count steady, although some people moved outside to the KRI's cities. These people born in the camp were technically born in Iraq and, as children of refugees, are stateless, which further complicates their access to education, entering legal employment, or buying property. The dire economic situation and the Camp's residents' unresolved legal status create substantial horizontal inequalities.

11.1.2 State policies

Both the KRG and the GoI tolerated the PKK-linked actors' monopoly over the Camp in the 2004-18 period. That is even though the KRG, especially the KDP, periodically curbed PKK-linked actors' political activities and PKK-linked media in Zakho, Dohuk, and Erbil, for example, in November 2007 (Reuters 2007), October 2013 (Ekurd 2013), and May 2014 (Ekurd 2014b). On the other hand, the KDP did not challenge PKK's grasp over the Camp. Its inhabitants continued to be relatively free to get a job in the nearby town of Makhmour or Erbil, albeit only usually only as daily labourers. However, due to their unresolved legal status, limited access to education, and lack of viable long-term options to be integrated 'outside' the Camp indeed persisted.

11.1.3 Incumbent's power

Since 2003, the KRG (mainly the KDP) has become a dominant actor on the ground in the Makhmour district, controlling local administration and having security forces deployed in the area. Similarly to the Shingal district, the GoI has generally did not challenge KDP's influence in the area. The Camp remained a world for itself where the KDP did not try to exert its authority at the PKK's expense.

On the other hand, the PKK-linked actors' presence and activities were, in turn, mostly limited only to the Camp itself prior to early 2017 (Kurdistan24 2017b). No significant incidents were reported apart from episodic violent disputes between the KRG forces and PKK-linked forces, such as during a rare shootout in November 2012 (ANF 2012b). Only since 2014 and more since October 2014 when the KDP's grip over the area weakened have the PKK-linked actors been able to operate even more independently, establishing a military presence outside the Camp. In February 2007, the KRI, on a rare occasion, conducted a weapon search upon Turkish pressure in the Camp, but no arms and ammunitions were reported found (International Crisis Group 2007). In general, until 2014, the Camp was more or less short of having regular armed units or conducting military training on-site. Apparently, youth travelled to Qandil instead to join the PKK ranks and receive training there, most likely as a part of the co-existence agreement between the PKK and the KRG not to provoke Turkey. This changed after 2014. The pro-KDP figures, such as the mayor of Makhmour Rizgar Mustafa, protested military training

facilities and programs (al-Araby 2017). However, no countermeasures were introduced, and the GoI forces since October 2017 apparently also look the other way.

11.1.4 Presence of Active rivalry

The KDP-dominated administration in Makhmour district and its security did not interfere in the camp. In turn, the PKK did not attempt to position itself outside the Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı or engage in local politics in Makhmour town itself. The live-and-let-live model was firmly in place, with both actors knowing the scope of the behaviour expected from the other. This modus vivendi was altered after August 2014, with ISIS coming to the stage. The PKK fought side by side with KRG's Peshmerga forces but subsequently began a military build-up in terms of training more locals to fight within the newly established 'Self-Defence Forces' (Ekurd 2017b). KRG president Massoud Barzani visited the Camp and after it was liberated from ISIS on August 13, 2014, in the first such publicized visit to the PKK-held area since 1992 (Jacinto 2014).

Later on, however, the relationship soared arguably mainly due to the looming dispute over Shingal. In early 2017, the PKK expanded its presence outside the camp to Qarachokh mountains, to which local KDP administrators such as the mayor of Makhmour Rizgar Mustafa strongly objected (Al-Araby 2017). The GoI only moved in force to the district in October 2017. Although not all the KDP-linked actors were driven out, the new authority on the ground in the district became the GoI, including the HS units. Apparently, there is a tacit agreement on co-existence since the HS or other Iraqi actors do not interfere or object to the PKK-linked military build-up even outside the Camp. Thus, the situation resembles the post-October 2017 modus vivendi in Shingal. However, in Makhmour Camp, the HS, and the GoI, in general, respect PKK's unchallenged territorial control and presence in the Camp and its immediate vicinity.

11.1.5 Other Variables: Safe haven, geography, external support

The Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı is located about one kilometer south-west of the town of Makhmour on flat land next to the Qarachokh mountains. The only nearby defensible area is the Qarachokh mountains, which, however, lack the geomorphological complexity of the Shingal mountain range or mountains in the north of the KRI. The Qarachokh mountains served as a refuge for the fleeing population of the Camp in August 2014, and since then, the PKK-linked forces have established permanent outposts and checkpoints there (Al-Ghad Press 2017). The Camp itself is not easily defensible and is relatively exposed to military incursions from the southern and western sides.

11.2 Insurgent Behaviour

11.2.1 Armed conflict Intensity

After 2003, the area of Makhmour remained more or less short of intensive violence that other districts in disputed territories such as Tal Afar experienced due to Sunni insurgencies of ex-Baathist groups and

ISIS organizational predecessors, such as the so-called al-Qaeda in Iraq (Kaválek 2016c). The most devastating attack occurred on 13 May 2007, when suspected Sunni extremists exploded a truck bomb by the KDP office in the Makhmour town, which left at least 50 dead (Reuters 2007b). Kurdish Peshmerga forces maintained security and a tight grip over the area. It was only in August 2014 when the town of Makhmour and the Camp itself experienced intensive periods of fighting between ISIS and the combined incumbent force of Peshmerga and the PKK.

The town and the Camp briefly fell into the hands of ISIS on August 7, 2014, but were rapidly retaken in days (Cumhürriyet 2014). The PKK promptly sent its fighters from the Qandil area to launch a counter-attack from the Qarachokh mountains (ibid.). At that time, there was substantial cooperation between Peshmerga forces and the PKK in repelling ISIS. By the end of 2015, most of the district was back under the Kurdish control, except for some villages in the south in the Qaraj area, where ISIS fortified its position to defend its garrisons in Shirqat district on the eastern bank of Tigris. The PKK forces continued to man frontlines with ISIS in tacit coordination with the KRG. By May 2017, the Iraqi security forces finally cleared the last pocket of ISIS in Shirqat and neighbouring Hawija district in the Kirkuk governorate.

In terms of determining conflict intensity in Makhmour Camp and its vicinity, one could argue conflict consequences were high only in August 2014 when some 40,000 people fled ISIS advance from Makhmour district, including the population of around 10,000 from the Camp. The destruction of the Camp itself was limited due to only short-lived ISIS occupation. Battle-related deaths on both sides are unknown. During the August 2014 Kurdish counter-attack, ISIS casualties varied as much as 8 to 80 fighters, with PKK commander in the area, Tekoşar Zagros, refusing to give official numbers (Gady 2014). In the subsequent period, frontlines with ISIS were on the district's edges, relatively far from Makhmour Camp itself, and casualties reported in the Makhmour area were in tens a month or less since ISIS did not conduct any other significant offensives. Even after 2014, the PKK-linked forces stationed in the area abstained from clashing both with the KRG forces and with the Iraqi security forces when they retook the area in October 2017. Only on 6 December 2017, a base of Makhmour Self-Defense Force in the Camp was hit by a car bomb killing five of its members (The Region 2017). Perpetrators were unclear, but PKK-linked sources blamed Turkey (ibid.). The Camp's People's Council maintained, for an unclear reason, the building was targeted in an airstrike (Kirkuk Now 2017).

Before 2014, the Camp was guarded by armed residents securing the perimeter and entrance. There was no significant presence of genuine armed PKK militants, at least not in the permanent bases in the Camp or its surroundings. Since 2014 and in the years onwards, the situation has changed, with the bulk of PKK fighters deployed on the nearby frontlines against ISIS. Since then, the PKK fighters established a permanent presence in the Camp, including reportedly eight training facilities for residents

to train fighters for the local ‘Self-defence Units’ that were officially established in 2014 as an armed group protecting the Camp (Barakat 2017). The strength of these units, as well as Asayish that oversees the security inside the Camp, is unclear. However, since 2014 the situation in the Camp became more militarized, and the trend appears to continue even with ISIS defeated in the area. In early 2017, there were reports that the PKK-linked forces established a permanent presence in terms of outposts and checkpoints in the Camp’s vicinity, including in the Qarachokh mountains (Al-Ghad Press 2017).

11.2.2 Use of Terrorism

The Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı primarily still serves as a safe haven for the PKK fighters and a place of respite and meeting with their families. It is not used as a launching pad for major insurgency operations or terrorist campaigns (despite pro-Turkish sources often claim so, see OFPRA 2016; Özdemir and Pekgözlü 2018). On the contrary, it appears to keep a low profile in the area. Up until 2014, there were some checkpoints, outposts, and guard towers. However, these were arguably locals and were few in numbers. The situation changed with the ISIS threat, which prompted the PKK to send a significant number of its fighters to the Camp, and as of April 2018, they remained in place and around the Camp operating new checkpoints and outposts in the Qarachokh mountains.

11.2.3 Violence towards the Contested Population

The population of the Şehit Rüstem Cudi Kampı is Turkish Kurdish and was displaced due to heavy-handed Turkish operations, and the PKK held decisive influence inside the Camp, including systematic indoctrination of the population for the good part of the last 20 years. Consequently, there is arguably a high level of support for the PKK. No major coercion was reported. In part, it supports Metelits’ (2009) assumption since the PKK’s dominance over the Camp was not challenged by the KRG or the GoI (or by the UNCHR, which officially oversees the Camp for that matter).

However, according to observers, the Camp “(...) is organised like the PKK: hierarchical, strict, military.” (Geerdink 2009) Nevertheless, given the lack of access, it is impossible to determine whether these practices appeared on a more systematic scale, or to be precise, whether the residents, contrary to the common perception, do not almost unanimously support the PKK. Regardless, the Camp administration ensures continuous mobilization through organizing events, martyr funerals, solidarity gatherings in support of PKK struggles elsewhere, and even sending Makhmour inhabitants, for example, to the various PKK-held (youth) conferences in neighbouring countries.¹⁵⁶

11.2.4 Building Political structures

The PKK’s political wing in the KRI is the PÇDK, established in 2002 (Gunter 2011). The PÇDK serves as the political front of the PKK in Iraq and is the member of the KCK. The PÇDK’s ability to muster

¹⁵⁶ This assumption is based on screening of PKK-linked media such as ANF News, RojNews, or RonahiTV (see also ANF 2013).

support was restricted by the KDP and in part by the PUK since it abstains from intensive political activities in the PUK-dominated areas. The party was allowed to compete in September 2013 Kurdistan elections for the first time but scored only a meager 0.18% of votes leaving far from winning seats (ibid.).

Despite that, its offices were closed down in Zakho in October 2013 (Ekurd 2013). In May 2014 (Ekurd 2014b), it was forced to cease its activities after police raids against pro-PKK media such as DIHA, Rojava Welat, and offices of PYD or the PÇDK in Dohuk, Zakho, and Erbil, which coincided with a failing power-sharing agreement between KDP-linked actors and the PYD in Syria (see also Kurdish Institute 2014). Interestingly enough, the PÇDK has its headquarters in Kirkuk, and its members travel to the Camp only from time to time. In August 2012, 3 PÇDK members travelling to the Camp from Kirkuk to ‘carry out political work’ were even prevented by the KDP security forces from reaching their destination (Ekurd 2012).

The PÇDK remains a minor political actor, unlikely to get substantial support in Kurdish elections. Moreover, it appears that the PÇDK does not serve as a crucial vehicle for facilitating PKK’s influence in areas under its control in the mountains on the borders with Turkey and Iran. It appears that the PÇDK remains rather pro forma political entity rather than an institutionalized overarching political structure compared to, for example, PYD or even PJAK in Iran.

The PÇDK has some influence and perhaps even some stable presence in Makhmour camp, and its representatives visit the camp from their headquarters in Kirkuk regularly. However, the Makhmour Camp’s administration does not seem to refer to itself in terms of being members of the PÇDK. Instead, it presents itself as an ‘apolitical’ structure governing the camp with principles outlined by Abdullah Öcalan, short of referring to specific political party or parties.¹⁵⁷

11.2.5 Building Governance Structures & Producing Legitimacy

The principal power in the Camp is held by a mayor and a co-mayor elected in a popular vote once in two years (ANF 2013b). Governance institutions have to strictly follow women’s quotes that stipulate that women should fill 40% of positions. Similarly, the Council members (12 in December 2013) are elected (ibid.). In 2009, it was noted that some 60 principal administrators were carrying out day-to-day tasks to run the Camp (Radikal 2009). The co-chair system was introduced for the first in elections in December 2013 (ANF 2013b). As of 2012, it was disclosed that the Camp was administered by a mayor and a co-mayor, the Councils which numbered around twenty, spanning from women issues, youth, culture, or health (Krajeski 2012). The role and size of the People’s Council, portrayed as a parliament,

¹⁵⁷ Review of the content of PKK-linked media (ANF and RojNews) and statements from Makhmour Camp administration support this claim.

is somewhat unclear. Although it is supposed to serve as a quasi-parliament, it also wields executive powers.

Interestingly enough for the PKK, there is quite an unusual model of allowing for popular elections rather than choosing co-chairs through the fuzzy process of ad hoc assemblies and people's conferences. For example, in 2013, some 70% of eligible voters attended, and inhabitants of the Camp could choose from a number of candidates while new mayor Bermal Colemêrgî and co-mayor Kendal Hilali reportedly received 1,903 and 1,806 votes (ANF 2013b). In June 2015, new co-chair Haci Kakan disclosed that the governance model transformed into a model similar to the DAA in Syria (ANF 2015b).

The smallest unit is a commune consisting of a small number of households. There is the District Council on the district level, and there are some five of those in the Camp. The District Councils have their co-chairs and respective committees concerned with day-to-day administration, such as dispute resolution, social welfare, and public services (Petrov 2017). The General (or Camp) Council consists of delegates sent from District Councils and their committees. The General Council consists of eight committees of seven to 15 people that concern diplomacy, ideology, social issues, local governance, defence, economy, administration, and justice (ANF 2013b). As indicated, it newly follows the same intricate pattern going from a commune to a district on the neighbourhood level and finally to the town administration level. Similarly, the HPG website disclosed that indeed Makhmour Camp is a 'unit' within the KCK system with executive authority and defence structures as well (Hezen Parastina Gel 2012). It is not to be undermined by Turkish efforts to be disbanded (Hezen Parastina Gel 2012b).

The PKK-linked forces have indeed enjoyed a monopoly on violence in the Makhmour Camp for the whole period. While the Camp did not have its regular military force until 2014 when ISIS came, the internal security force, *Asayish*, was policing the population. Similarly, armed inhabitants staffed checkpoints and the Camp's perimeter. Likewise, a dispute resolution system is in place both on the neighbourhood and the Camp levels, with each having a committee designated to it (Petrov 2017; ANF 2013b). The Camp administration also provides public goods beyond security, such as education, healthcare, and essential services. There are also feedback mechanisms to foster civilian participation in rebel governance. It can be argued that they became more over-arching and developed since June 2015 reform, which introduced an institutional model similar to the DAA in Syria going from the communes to District Council and the Camp Council.

Due to restricted access to the Camp and its residents, it is difficult to paint a clear picture of the extent to which its administration and PKK's ideology enjoy legitimacy (see Schlichte and Schneckener 2016). However, symbolic claims of legitimacy certainly find fertile ground. The entire population of the Camp was displaced from villages in eastern Turkey in the 1990s by Turkish military operations. A considerable portion of these villages provided logistical and material support for the PKK already back

then. The experience of being violently driven out of people's homes razed to the ground provided a sense of solidarity and support for the PKK and its fight against the Turkish state. After all, some 2,200 people from the Camp joined the PKK ranks in 1997-2004, and it remains a significant recruitment pool (OPFRA 2016).

In 2013, it was disclosed that there were some 1,600 families in Makhmour and almost every family had at least one relative in the PKK ranks (Rudaw 2013). The Turkish state is perceived as an existential threat to the Camp population since Ankara is periodically calling for its dissolution and threatens even with military action. Some 2,200 people returned to Turkey between 1997 and 2004 (OPFRA 2016). However, for many, the possibility of a return remains problematic either because their villages and properties are destroyed or because they might face prosecution in Turkey. After all, when in October 2009, 34 people, most from Makhmour Camp, and some of them previously active militants, re-entered Turkey through Habur border crossing, they were subsequently detained and prosecuted or fled back to Iraq (International Crisis Group 2012b). In August 2014, nobody heeded the call of Turkish Deputy PM Beşir Atalay to return to Turkey when the Camp faced ISIS offensive (Hürriyet 2014). However, it is difficult to determine whether the people are genuinely not interested in returning even if Turkey would provide guarantees.

The PKK in Makhmour also enjoys performance-centred legitimacy since the PKK provided security and essential services (Schlichte and Schneckener 2016). It also indeed sacrificed itself in 2014 while re-taking the Camp from ISIS and its cadres fighting in the following years. In the environment in which neither the GoI nor the KRG tried to challenge PKK's authority or deliver substantial services to the Camp, even inadequate service provision is naturally perceived as welcome since there is no active rivalry. The PKK-linked structures also encourage a wide range and over-arching participation of the population in the political and administrative processes.

12. Conclusion: PKK Insurgencies in Comparative Perspective

Following the capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan by Turkish authorities in February 1999, the organization underwent significant changes. In the ensuing years, the PKK repeatedly experienced organizational overhauls, ruptures and modification of its goals and the pathways to attain them. Öcalan from then on maintained that independent Kurdistan is not the organization's ultimate goal. Instead, creating of a bottom-up complex system of institutions pursuing his vague notion of the decentralized governance structures (Democratic Autonomy) should be pursued without breaking up the borders.

The KCK became the principal body pursuing these goals. It is an umbrella organization directing and encompassing struggles in Turkey, Syrian, Iran, and Iraq. Contrary to the PKK's notion, it effectively remains true to its radically leftist Marxist-Leninist and authoritarian legacy. After all, as a party, the PKK remained the sole guardian and enforcer of the organisation's ideological premises throughout all the linked organizations, political parties, and associations within the KCK system. Moreover, the vagueness of Öcalan's Democratic Autonomy and the Democratic Confederalist model does not convincingly argue it indeed abandoned the notion of independent Kurdish entities.

The KCK says it strives to create a highly decentralized system where people are politically organized and govern themselves following Öcalan's ideology from the level of a small local commune, through towns and neighbourhoods, districts and regions all the way up to the KCK as an umbrella within the existing state borders. In reality, however, it remains strongly top-down, centralized and enforces the adherence to Öcalan's overarching ideological premises. In fact, it wishes to create a network of geographic entities autonomous on the nation-state, whose system it perceives as hostile, but under the control of the KCK.

The PKK newly focused not only on its campaign in Turkey (albeit it is arguably still a priority), but also became more active in other Middle Eastern countries with a significant Kurdish population. When the PKK renewed its armed struggle in Turkey on June 1, 2004, the KCK had already established overtly or covertly-tied branches in Syria (PYD), Iraq (PÇDK, TEVDA), and Iran (PJAK). Despite frequent claims, these franchisees and their armed wings remain under close scrutiny from the KCK/PKK leadership residing in the mountains of the KRI. PKK's fighters and commanders traverse battlefields in various countries and the 'kadros,' senior PKK commanders and militants have an ultimate say in strategic decisions, although the political and military structures in said countries maintain a strong appearance of a local agency.

Consequently, the KCK/PKK can be analytically understood as one organization that wages several more or less geographically separate insurgencies. The central question is what explains substantial variations of PKK's behaviours across campaigns and even geographically within one insurgency and over time in 2004-18. The concept of insurgency encompasses both violent and non-violent behaviour,

arguing that each insurgent organization opts for a specific mix of it. The elements of insurgent behaviour are violent: the intensity of armed conflict, use of terrorism tactics, and coercive behavior towards the contested population; non-violent behavior, in turn, included building political and governance structures.

Insurgent's preferences and specific goals certainly play a role in shaping the behavior, but in the case of the PKK, as one organization waging more than one insurgency, this variable is controlled for. This study argues that it is the context. The conditions PKK insurgents find themselves in have a profound influence on insurgent's choices. The scrutinized elements of the context of insurgency include the existence of horizontal inequalities, the shape of state policies, incumbent's power, presence of active rivalry, and finally residual element, the existence of safe haven, geography and external support. All of the elements' influence on insurgencies' success and insurgent choices have a strong grounding in the existing literature. The question is how the shape of these specific conditions affects the PKK's behavior and which play the most crucial role. State policies and incumbent's power appear to account for the most profound changes in PKK's behavior across cases.

Kurdish populations are traditionally considered second-tier citizens in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. They face a varying degree of discriminatory political, social, cultural and economic policies from the hands of the central governments, which view them, due to their potential centrifugal tendencies, as a threat to national security. Consequently, these long-standing horizontal inequalities stemming from discriminatory policies provided a sounding and deep-seated root for the PKK to exploit. When the government attempted to address these inequalities, it met with a reaction from the PKK.

For example, in Iran, where Shia Kurds are comparably more integrated into Iranian politics, the PJAK was the most successful in recruiting, mobilizing and conducting operations among Sunni Kurds. In Turkey, the KCK/PKK reacted to new state policies during the AKP governments in 2004-14 aimed at alleviating for horizontal inequalities. In Syria, although the state did little to improve the situation of the Kurds in 2004-11 and relied on heavy-handed repressive measures to keep the Kurdish aspirations in check, new policies such as granting citizenship to Kurds in 2011 were considered too little too late. Yazidis were facing discriminatory policies too. Shingal district lacked infrastructure, educational facilities and overall economic development. Yazidis were in general considered second-tier citizens. When the KRG pursued the political and economic co-optation of Yazidis, arguing they are part of the Kurdish ethnicity, the PKK had a hard time penetrating the area. In Makhmour, in turn, the PKK enjoys considerable support among the disenfranchised refugee Turkish Kurds, lacking integration into Iraqi society,

Existing horizontal inequalities mainly allow for the sounding root cause for insurgents to occur. However, to account for variations of insurgent behavior, such as the decision to build governance

structures, different components of the context of a shorter-term nature play a more important role. These are primarily changing state policies, where the PKK reacts to attempts to introduce favourable and unfavourable policies towards the Kurdish constituencies as well as to increasing space for political (legally) participation due to the overall liberalization of the regime (most notably in Turkey).

Secondly, the incumbent's political and military power has a profound influence. Sudden changes, mainly instances of weakening of the incumbent, meet with a change of PKK's behavior accompanied by a rush to bolster political, governance and security structures (Syria post-2011; the Shingal district post-2014). When the incumbent's power and counterinsurgency capabilities increase, the PKK reacts by focusing also on non-violent political activities to mobilize popular support or using the terrorism tactics as opposed to the previous focus on armed struggle (Turkey 2004-14).

In Turkey, when the AKP government introduced more favourable policies towards Kurds as a part of the EU harmonization efforts after 2000, the PKK resumed its armed struggle in June 2004. However, the intensity of the armed struggle did not reach the 1990s level and the organization was unable to conquer and hold any liberated territories under its control. Due to increased incumbent's counterinsurgency capabilities, it also shifted to softer targets such as the police forces, operated in smaller cells or utilized IEDs. The PKK also flexibly reacted to the new favourable state's policies towards Kurds, such as the Democratic Opening since 2009, or indirect peace talks with the AKP by periodically declaring ceasefires not to appear as a spoiler of peace. Simultaneously, it utilized periodic renewals of violence or utilization of terrorism tactics through its proxy the TAK to maintain pressure on Ankara.

Moreover, it utilized the increased political space to create and bolster its political and governance structures, focused on operating also in urban spaces in majority-Kurdish cities. These included legal KCK/PKK-linked political parties such as the DTP, the BDP/DBP, or the HDP. Additionally, a myriad of associations, human rights and women groups, educational institutions all under the KCK (in Turkey it was the DTK) umbrella were created alongside the parallel governance structures. In Turkey, the PKK utilized increased space to participate in legal politics to create grass-roots organisations and governance, maintaining influence both through legally elected municipalities and KCK-linked parallel governance structures. These could operate freely in particular in 2013-mid-2015. The PKK subsequently attempted to spark a mass revolution by fighting in urban spaces, which met with the decisive Turkish state's response. Since mid-2016, the PKK has returned to rural fighting. Its legal and illegal political structures and associations were disrupted by the state, which was increasingly introducing authoritarian measures.

In Syria, in 2004-11, the state continued its heavy-handed security-driven policies towards Kurds despite previous hopes for liberalization after Bashar Assad came to power in 2000. The regime maintained a firm grip over Kurdish areas, which allowed very little space for the PYD to conduct any activities. However, when the Syria war erupted in 2011, Damascus decided to withdraw from the bulk

of the Kurdish areas by mid-2012. As the incumbent's power decreased, the PYD quickly moved in to control the areas and embarked on building overarching and mature governance structures and expanding its political activities and entities. These processes even hastened after 2015, when the immediate threat of ISIS to core PYD-controlled areas was pushed back by US-led Coalition-backed offensives. Moreover, the ensuing DAA maintained pragmatic cooperation with the Syrian regime and decided not to engage in an armed struggle with Damascus' forces. In turn, in Afrin, following the Turkish invasion in January 2018, the PYD and the YPG could not withstand the Turkish military action, lost the territory and since then engaged in low-scale insurgency, including utilizing terrorism tactics such as bombings.

In Iran, the growing intensity of armed conflict the PJAK waged against the state since 2004, caught Tehran by surprise. The initial nuisance of rural conflict turned into a potentially significant issue as the PJAK was also trying to expand its political activities among the Kurdish population. Iran, with considerable capabilities and a tight regime, decisively defeated the PJAK insurgency militarily in 2011. Since then, the PJAK conducts only very limited violent activities, mainly as an immediate response to certain government's measures (e.g., executions of the Kurds). In terms of building political and governance structures within the KODAR system, the PJAK, facing strong incumbent, had only minimal success.

Iraq's Shingal district experienced expansion of the PKK-linked governance and armed structures only after August 2014 as the incumbent's power (the KRG) decreased. Its policies tarnished the reputation among the previously relatively support the Yazidi population. As the KRG forces withdrew from the district facing ISIS advance, it lost its credibility of Yazidis it claimed to protect. In turn, the PKK-linked forces quickly moved in and established themselves by championing the idea of autonomy and local self-defense for Yazidis. The Meclis and the YBŞ then maintained a strong presence in the district, which continued even after October 2017 when the KRG forces withdrew and the GoI forces moved in. While this sparked yet another competition with new actors, due to the GoI's policy of recognizing the YBŞ as a part of the HS, it led to a tacit coexistence.

In the Makhmour Camp, the PKK enjoys almost undisputed authority, which was largely tolerated both by the KRG and the GoI. Yet, in 2014, when ISIS attacked the area, the PKK initially cooperating with the KRG forces in defending the district, fall off with Erbil as it embarked on expanding its military presence outside the Camp, chiefly to the Qarachokh mountains.

Metelits (2010) argues that if the insurgents face active rivals competing for the same constituency, they are more likely to employ coercive behaviour against the civilians. The PKK employs violence towards the civilians very carefully and in a planned manner. There are no instances of indiscriminate violence, although at times, the PKK faced considerable rivalry either from the incumbent regime's trying to attract Kurds' support or competing Kurdish political currents. In Syria, since 2011, the PYD faced

an increased rivalry from the concurrent Kurdish political parties who also tried to expand its influence, benefiting from the Syrian regime's increased power in the Syrian Kurdish areas. The ENKS was arguably the staunchest rival and its demonstrations and gatherings were regularly violently dispersed. Similarly, ENKS's political cadres faced detentions, arrests, forced disappearances and eventually, it was banned from conducting any activities altogether in March 2017. Simultaneously, the DAA maintains a strong grip over the population and any possibly dissenting political activities. Political plurality also remained very limited. Yet, the coercion is always carefully targeted and not indiscriminate.

In Turkey, the KCK/PKK competed chiefly with the AKP government, which enjoyed considerable support among Kurds due to the more favourable Kurdish policies compared to the previous cabinets and was pro-Islamist, which appeals to many Kurds. Consequently, the PKK at times (which followed the wider dynamics of the state's repressive measures and armed conflict), engaged in assassinations, intimidations and kidnappings of the AKP-linked local figures. The competition also continued with the Kurdish Islamist actors, such as the Hûda-Par, or the Islamist Gülen Movement. With Hûda-Par the competition turned violent in 2014-16. However, at most times, the enmity towards competitors translated into propaganda efforts, traitor-labelling and introducing competing non-violent activities, such as social programs tied to the KCK/PKK-linked actors and municipalities. The PKK in the 1980s and the 90s frequently attacked supposed 'traitors,' i.e., those working for the state, including targeting their families. Nevertheless, this practice has diminished and the PKK's coercion is more subtle and episodic. When it comes to civilians, it, for example, translates into enforcing declared closures of businesses during the PKK-declared strikes or levying a 'revolutionary tax.'

In Iran, the PJAK presence is comparably less overarching despite facing rivalry from other Iranian Kurdish political parties. Nevertheless, this competition rarely turned violent, except when these parties renewed their armed struggle on Iranian soil since 2015 and became a more credible competitor. The PJAK also resorts to occasional assassinations of the perceived traitors among Kurds, but these appear to be rare. In turn, in Shingal district, both the KRG (chiefly the KDP) and the GoI lost their credibility in the eyes of the Yazidi population since 2014. Thus, the PKK-linked actors did not have to resort to systematic coercion as they did not pose a serious threat to its influence. Lastly, in the Makhmour Camp, the PKK was the dominant actor on the ground in 2004-18. Therefore, there was no active rivalry in play.

The PKK has its ultimate safe haven in the mountains in northern Iraq with strong bases and villages under its control. The rugged terrain on the Iraq-Iranian-Turkish border allows for militants' movement and logistics at leisure, particularly across the border to Turkey's Hakkâri and Şırnak provinces. Similarly, the KRI and the GoI allow the PKK to conduct logistics operations from its mountainous safe havens to Syria and Shingal district. The terrain in the southeast of Turkey allows for insurgents'

movement. It is ideal for waging rural guerrilla warfare as much as it is in Iranian Kurdish-majority border areas. In contrast, in northeast Syria, the terrain is flat and unsuitable for insurgency. Consequently, the PYD could only flourish there once incumbent's power significantly decreased.

To sum up, in the comparative perspective of the PKK insurgencies in the Middle East in 2004-18, the single most important pair of the elements of the context of insurgency appears to be the shape of the state policies and incumbent government's power. Major changes in state's policies and the changes in incumbent's power (both increasing and decreasing) induced changes in PKK's behaviour across the cases. The PKK proved to be a highly flexible actor, particularly in very quickly seizing the presented windows of opportunities to expand the insurgent activity, in particular non-violent.

In Turkey, it grabbed a chance to expand legal and illegal political structures and build a vast system of non-governmental organisations to expand KCK/PKK's political support among Kurds. State's policies allowing more space for such activities created by the gap. This gap started closing following the mid-2015 renewed armed struggle and after the July 2016 coup attempt as Ankara returned to heavy-handed measures to dismantle the KCK/PKK-linked networks and actors during the overall regime's authoritarian turn. In Syria, it deployed scores of fighters in a matter of months following the regime's withdrawal from the north in mid-2012. It promptly assumed monopoly over violence and built the administration. In Iran, the PJAK insurgency flourished until the Iranian state decided to vastly increase military effort to defeat the militants in 2011. Since then, the PJAK did not manage to resume the armed campaign in full and focused only on limited non-violent activities. In Shingal, it exploited the vacuum by fleeing KRG forces and moved in with force to fight ISIS in August 2014. Subsequently, it established a strong permanent presence, trained a local force and created (albeit rudimentary) governance structures. Lastly, in the Makhmour Camp, the security uncertainty created by ISIS and tacit cooperation between the KRG and then the GoI since 2014 allowed for expanding the Camp's administration and armed presence even in its vicinity.

Kalyvas (2006) maintains that we should expect more indiscriminate violence in areas of mixed control between the incumbent and the insurgent. However, the PKK is generally very careful with employing coercive behaviour towards the contested population. It opts for grass-roots political mobilization and winning the hearts and minds primarily. If coercion is employed, it is when there is an active rivalry present (Metelits 2009). Interestingly, it seems to be more prone to employ violence and coercion against competing Kurdish actors (the ENKS in Syria, or the Kurdish Islamist currents in Turkey) than the state. Nevertheless, the PKK insurgencies maintain a tight grip over the population and curb on any political or civil society dissent wherever they attain monopoly (a chief example is Syria). However, the coercion is more subtle and usually does not employ outright indiscriminate or mass violence, such as collective punishment.

The PKK uses terrorism tactics very sporadically, even when it is weak. The utilization of terrorism is in line with Stanton's (2016) argument that more democratic governments are likely to subdue terrorism demands. At the same time, rebels seeking appeal to a broader constituency would not risk the public backlash by unleashing a large-scale terrorism campaign. In Turkey, arguably the most democratic country among the examined cases, the PKK utilizes terrorism the most. However, since it maintains a careful image, it employs proxy, the TAK, to conduct the most violent terrorist attacks with which it denies any connection. Contrary to Crenshaw's (1981) argument, the PKK insurgencies do not resort to large-scale terrorist attacks against civilians even when weak or in an embryonic stage.

When conditions are favourable, chiefly when the incumbent's power weakens, the PKK always opts to create overarching governance structures and mature governance in line with Arjona's (2016) rebelocracy and Mampilly's (2015) effective rebel governance. An example is the post-2011 Syria, where the PYD established a robust administration and maintained monopoly over violence, including expansion beyond core Kurdish areas in the northeast to the Arab-majority territories. Similarly, in the Makhmour Camp, it could develop mature governance, unchallenged by the incumbent.

In Turkey, efforts to create governance structures faced strong centralized state power, which prevented them from developing fully. The KCK/PKK-linked actors thus resorted to exploiting the dual strategy of combining influence through officially elected posts, mainly on the municipal level with a network of other KCK-linked actors and organisations. This was arguably allowed due to liberalizing state policies allowing for this kind of political activity and participation of the insurgents, which the PKK jumped on and exploited. In turn, the AKP government resorted to mixed strategy of periodic political marginalization of the PKK, including by curbing the KCK/PKK-linked elected actors and attempts to appeal to the Kurdish population.

The crucial question is whether the findings concerning what prompts the changes in PKK's behaviour could be applicable on other cases as well. In the case of the PKK in the Middle East in 2004-18, state policies and incumbent's power appear to be the main drivers shaping the insurgent behaviour. Further research could explore whether the changing state policies and incumbent's power are as important elements of the context of insurgencies as in the case of the PKK.

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