

**WHEN**

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**COLLAPSES**

**THE PKK'S URBAN  
TERRORIST  
CAMPAIGN**

Murat Yeşiltaş, Necdet Özçelik

SETA



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# ABBREVIATIONS

AK Party	: Justice and Development Party
ANFO	: Ammonium Nitrate and Fuel Oil
ATGM	: Anti-Tank Guided Missile
BDP	: Democratic Regions Party
CHP	: Republican People's Party
DAESH	: Islamic State of Iraq and Sham
DISK	: Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey
DKP	: Revolutionary Communist Party
FSA	: Free Syrian Army
GSM	: Global System for Mobile Communications
HBDH	: People's United Revolutionary Movement
HDP	: People's Democratic Party
HPG	: Public Defense Forces
IED	: Improvised Explosive Device
KADEK	: Freedom and Democracy Congress of Kurdistan
KCK	: Kurdistan Communities Union
KESK	: Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions
KKK	: Kurdistan Democratic Confederalism
KONGRA-GEL	: People's Congress
MANPADS	: Man-Portable Air-Defense Systems
MHP	: Nationalist Movement Party
MKP	: Maoist Communist Party of Turkey
MLKP	: Marxist-Leninist Communist Party

NATO	: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OES	: Operation Euphrates Shield
PA	: Public Affairs
PK	: Plemiyot Kalanikova
PKK	: Kurdistan Workers' Party
PSYOPs	: Psychological Operations
PYD	: Democratic Union Party
RPG	: Rocket-Propelled Grenade
SETA	: Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research
STM	: Defense Technology Engineering Company
SVBIED	: Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
SVD	: Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunova
SVEST	: Suicide Vest
TAK	: Kurdistan Freedom Falcons
THKP-C/MLSPB	: People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit
TKEP-L	: Communist Labor Party of Turkey-Leninist
TKP/ML	: Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist
TNT	: Trinitrotoluene
TOW	: Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wireless-Guided
UAV	: Unmanned Air vehicle
U.S.	: United States
VBIED	: Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device
YDG-H	: Youth Movement of Patriotic Revolution
YPG	: People's Defense Units
YPS	: Civil Protection Units

## FOREWORD

Terrorism has become a global phenomenon over the past two decades. There exists a wide range of transnational terrorist groups that target nation-states and aim to deter national security structures. Unfortunately, Turkey is one of those nation-states that has had its fair share of the terrorism phenomenon. Today, one can name three major terrorist organizations, the PKK, DAESH and the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ), that continuously try to destabilize the Turkish state and instill fear among Turkish citizens. DAESH, which produces so-called religious claims; FETÖ, which appears to be a pro-dialogue and moderate group; and the outlawed PKK, which often manipulates secular and ethnic humanist values for its advantage pose critical security challenges that no other democracy has yet encountered. Among these terrorist organizations, the PKK is perhaps the most abrasive since it has long occupied the public and military discourses on terrorism in the country. Furthermore, the terrorist group views itself as a regional player, pursues a pan-Kurdish agenda and a derailed reconciliation policy on the Syrian civil war. However, thanks to the profound feeling of social unity inspired by the July 15 triumph of democracy, it is important to note that the fight against terrorism has made significant progress in Turkey.

It is no secret that the ongoing violent turmoil in the Middle East has encouraged and inspired many terrorist groups towards implementing fatal action plans. The PKK was among those who saw an opportunity in revising its conventional terrorism strategy. This book is a timely and articulate evaluation of the PKK's failed urban terrorist campaign. It contains a wealth of information and intriguing analyses regarding the terrorist group's changing organizational structure and urban warfare tactics in the post-Arab Spring period. Besides being a much-needed publication that eloquently assesses urban counterterrorism strategies, it constitutes a very informative and intriguing

source for those who are involved in other areas of terrorism studies. Although this work focuses on the PKK's technical and ideological modus operandi between 2015 and 2016, it contains much that will be of interest to those who are eager to gain an in-depth knowledge of the terrorist group's activities, its changing dynamics, and long-term goals in Turkey and Syria.

What makes this work exceptionally unique is that it embodies the technical expertise of a former TAF member, who has a vast first-hand irregular warfare experience in the Middle East, and the overarching perspective of an academic, whose work has been much cited and celebrated internationally by many in the security domain. The authors, Murat Yeşiltaş and Necdet Özçelik, are distinguished and prominent experts on the PKK discourse in Turkey. The content of their work is divided into five chapters, each providing essential and thought-provoking analyses and assessments regarding the TAF's urban PKK confrontation. The authors, most candidly and compellingly, explain the context and causes of the PKK's urban failure. The final chapter, especially, contains quite valuable remarks as it yields significant lessons learned from the TAF- PKK confrontation in eastern Turkey.

It is unavoidably evident that Turkey's fight against terrorism is a long journey that requires meticulous planning and unyielding commitment. As this work delicately elaborates on the TAF's counterterrorism efforts, we must acknowledge and appreciate the national progress made in the fight against terrorism under the Erdoğan administration. I would like to thank the eminent authors as well as the contributors and editors who made this much-anticipated and eye-opening publication possible. I am confident that their work will make valuable contributions to the understanding of the PKK's terrorist campaign and its truthful publicization worldwide.

Prof. Burhanettin Duran  
*SETA General Coordinator*

## INTRODUCTION



Turkey's latest cross-border military operations in Syria, against DAESH (also known as ISIS) and the PKK/YPG, demonstrate the country's reaction against the changing nature of violent non-state actors' terrorist campaigns. Compared to other world states, unfortunately, Turkey faces a wide range of terrorism dimensions. This variety of terrorist dimensions keeps Turkey busy explaining its righteous causes, such as seeking stability on domestic and regional grounds. The multiplicity in terrorist threats is the first dimension that should be taken into consideration when analyzing Turkey's fight against terrorism. Turkey has been fighting against the PKK/PYD, the DHKP/C and other radical terrorist groups for many years. The second dimension is the diversity in the organizational characteristics of terrorist organizations. The different ideologies, organizational structures and modus operandi of the terrorist groups have diversified the threat range targeting Turkey. The newly emerging security environment, especially due to the post-Syrian civil war period, is another dimension that extends from rural to urban areas, and stretches from national territory to extraterritorial security environments – and it is crucial in examining Turkey's counter-terrorism strategy. Another dimension is the complex relations between different terrorist organizations, and the relationship between terrorist organizations and their external supporters. In the PKK case, direct and indirect sponsorship of foreign states in terms of providing safe haven, political support, military equipment and fundraising opportunities constitute the critical components of sustaining its violent tactics against Turkey. The new partnership trend between terrorist organizations became an alarming case in Turkey's post-2015 political climate when the PKK was forming its new vio-



lent strategy and terror tactics. The last dimension regards Turkey's self-capacity and the international cooperation against terrorism.

Turkey's fight against the PKK has a long history and projects the multidimensional arguments mentioned above. Neither Turkey's reactive approach to PKK violence nor the PKK's protracted rural terror strategy has been able to let either side claim a complete victory in the last four decades. The hope for a diplomatic and peaceful solution to PKK terrorism was also seen to fade amidst the PKK's political exploitation and the government's de-securitized approach during the attempted solution process between 2012 and 2015.<sup>1</sup> The PKK's resumption of armed violence in 2015 raised the bar for Turkey and led the country to fight against terrorism with more decisive and effective means, and in cooperation with all relevant actors. Examining the PKK's resumption of violence with its newly adopted and differentiated strategy serves to better understand the depth of Turkey's current counter-terrorism efforts. The armed program (*modus operandi*) is one of the three important authenticating approaches of identifying a violent non-state organization.<sup>2</sup> The other characteristics evolve around two dimensions: ideology and organizational structure. Despite the fact that violent non-state actors voluntarily publicize their ideology, their armed strategies and organizational structures remain concealed due to the secrecy of their violent actions. However, a close glimpse of the PKK's armed tactics reveals its short-term objectives. The combination of its objectives helps us understand the operational trend, and then more importantly, the master strategy of a particular terrorist organization. Therefore, understanding the armed strategy of

<sup>1</sup> Ali Balcı and Tuncay Kardaş, "Inter-Societal Security Trilemma in Turkey: Understanding the Failure of the 2009 Kurdish Opening", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, *Non-State Armed Groups in the Middle East: Ideology, Geopolitics and Strategy*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

the multilateral, complex and diverse nature of a violent non-state armed group helps reveal its strength and weakness.<sup>3</sup>

This book aims to explain the modus operandi of the PKK, which is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the European Union and the U.S., and to demonstrate how the PKK relies on the manipulation of the physical and psychological impacts of its urban attacks, whose aim is to expand its diverse area of operations.

The PKK, as a pragmatic terrorist group, is capable of adapting itself to different security environments to pursue its ideological and long-term objectives. Its armed strategy shapes the domestic security environment in Turkey and has been reshaped by the developments in the regional security and political atmosphere in the post-Arab Spring era in the Middle East. The PKK has adopted the “Protracted People’s War Strategy” to achieve its strategic goals through several stages.<sup>4</sup> If the PKK’s armed program were to be divided into phases along its history, the first stage is seen between 1984 and 1990 and is influenced by the Iraq-Iran War, the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and the Turkish political and institutional transformation following the coup d’état in 1980. This was the perfect course for the PKK to start its armed campaign to be recognized domestically, regionally and internationally. Contrary to the Maoist *strategic defense* aspect, the PKK acted proactively to develop its armed capacity for a large-scale armed campaign. The Gulf War in 1991 and its aftermath provided the PKK with many opportunities to develop its organizational growth. Even though the PKK aimed to initiate its *strategic balance* and then move to the *strategic offense* stage, Turkish counter-terrorism activities suppressed the PKK’s back-and-forth armed surge during this period. The regional developments such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 paved the

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Nihat Ali Özcan, *PKK (Kürdistan İçiş Partisi): Tarihi, İdeolojisi ve Yöntemi*, ASAM Yayınları, 1999.

way for the PKK to adopt a new character through the formation of the PYD in 2003 and the establishment of the KCK in 2005.<sup>5</sup> The PKK's "democratic confederalism" rhetoric under the KCK organization is the driving force behind the resumption of the violence in Turkey in 2015.<sup>6</sup>

The PKK's strategy of urban warfare started in the third quarter of 2015, and lasted until mid-2016. It brought in the practice of a locally arranged theater of operations, which were carried out, in the initial attempts of the surge, in Silvan, Sur, Nusaybin, Cizre, Yüksekova, and Şırnak. Attempting to isolate certain zones in eastern Turkey, the PKK projected to consolidate its resources in these zones in order to build up military capabilities and gain people's support to spread the surge over other areas. The PKK's challenge in different zones also aimed to force the government to disperse security forces in multiple areas of operations and prevent them from unifying their efforts and operational initiatives. This aim would culminate in a large scale people's war by the PKK and its adjacent elements. The PKK prepared for urban warfare based on a defensive tactic: suburbs were selected where people's grievances could easily be manipulated in order to support the PKK's cause. Moreover, the locally recruited youngsters were used for digging trenches and building barricades across streets to challenge the state authority by physically isolating urban zones.

This book focuses on the PKK's urban surge strategy by particularly underlining the causes, processes and consequences in relation to the changing nature of PKK terrorism in post-2015 Turkish politics. The first chapter examines the PKK's urban strategy within the scope of the PKK's changing terrorism perception by focusing on the domestic and regional political and security contexts.

<sup>5</sup> "KCK Örgütlenme Modeli ve Amacı", Analiz, *Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü*, July 2011.

<sup>6</sup> "Dördüncü stratejik mücadele dönemi-4 Devrimci Halk Savaşı'nın hedefleri", *Serxwebun*, January 2017.

The second chapter describes and categorizes the PKK's violent tactics and its target selection methods within the framework of the urban conflict between 2015 and 2016. The correlations of the attacks and the target and security environments are explained in the third chapter, which suggests how the PKK's strategy can be categorized during implementation. The causes of the PKK's strategy are explained in the fourth chapter by focusing mainly on the vital parameters of the PKK's capacity-handling skills. The fourth chapter also discusses the main factors that shape the failure of the PKK's urban tactics. The fifth chapter suggests how to study the nature of the PKK and the lessons at tactical, operational and strategic levels for Turkey in the fight against the PKK.

The 817 attacks conducted by the PKK between July 20, 2015 and December 31, 2016 were analyzed to bring an empirical perspective to this study. Information about the attacks was obtained from open sources such as the media, official statements and other local sources. The information was grouped according to the attack type, target selection and the security environment; each had different variables and required a correlation to better understand the logic of the violence patterns. Thus, each variable was coded in order to be evaluated through computer software. The Terrorism Analysis Platform (TAP) developed by SETA and STM contributed greatly to the study by outlining the interrelations between the attack categories and the geolocations of terrorist attacks. In the second chapter, the methodology of the study is explained; the study is presented in the third chapter. The book does not contain casualty analyses.



## CHAPTER 1

# MAKING SENSE OF THE PKK'S URBAN TERRORISM: DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

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In order to make sense of the PKK's urban terrorism and its changing nature, it is necessary to look at how the domestic, regional and international dynamics in the post-Arab Spring era has shaped the PKK's overall terrorism strategy against Turkey. The post-2011 regional security environment determined by the Syrian crisis transformed the PKK's strategy towards Turkey.<sup>7</sup> The conflict environment carved out by DAESH's expansionism in Syria has brought an explicit change in the character of the nationalist Kurdish politics on a regional scale and helped to constitute a new "public enemy" among Kurds. This also yielded a fracture of the PKK's strategy towards Turkey. The first sign of this development was Abdullah Öcalan's statement during an interview with his lawyers in prison on İmralı Island, which was published in February 2011. In this statement, drawing on the incidents in Tahrir Square in Egypt, Öcalan said, "If the solution is not realized [in Turkey], Diyarbakır could be ten times Tahrir Square... If Diyarbakır desires so, it could make that happen easily." This led to the claim that Öcalan emphasized 'action.'<sup>8</sup>

Within the framework of the new period's strategy, the PKK felt the need to establish a strategic organization that would be political in nature and based on "urban force" and, at the same

<sup>7</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, "Global Politics of Image: The Making of Kurdish Geopolitics, The ISIS and 'The Secular West' in the Middle East", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, December 2017; Galip Dalay, "Kurdish Politics amid the Fight against the ISIS- Can a Common Cause Surmount Old Rivalries?", *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 7 February 2016; Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics across the Middle East", July 2015, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, "Önümüzdeki günlerde açıklama yapacağım", *Rojbaş*, February 20, 2011, <https://rojbas.wordpress.com/category/abdullah-ocalan/page/3/>.



**T**his book is the result of a research project organized by the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Arařtırmaları Vakfı, SETA) born out of the need to understand the context-specific dynamics of the violent radicalization of the PKK and its urban strategy between 2015 and 2016. The aim is to explore the causes, new dynamics, and effects of PKK terrorism, and to explain the failure of its urban warfare tactics in Turkey.

Such an exploration is timely in two significant ways. First, the Middle East is witnessing an appreciable rise in terms of the violent rhetoric and terrorist actions of certain violent terrorist organizations. While the unfamiliar dynamics of this new radical extremist trend may differ from country to country, and from region to region, the PKK case is a textbook example regarding the question of how a terrorist group devastates the daily life of ordinary people, and destabilizes the nature of the regional order. Secondly, understanding and addressing the PKK's violent tactics require comprehending how the newly emerging regional geopolitical antagonism and disorder transform the strategy of a terrorist organization, and affect the nature of the conflict, especially in the post-Arab Spring period in the Middle East.

