An Evolution of the Kurdish Issue in Turkey: Beyond a State-Centric Perspective

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Abstract

The left-wing Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) began its violent insurgency campaign against the Turkish state in 1984, claiming that an independent Kurdistan should exist. However, the origins of this conflict can be traced back even further – to the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923. This thesis begins by investigating the history of how the conflict between the Kurdish and Turkish political frameworks escalated, exploring the concept of “Turkishness” as an element of a homogeneous nation-state. The paper then assesses the effects of a range of exclusionary measures adopted by the Turkish state (beyond punitive military responses in southeastern Turkey and cultural discrimination policies). Ultimately, I argue that the ruling Justice and Development Party’s recent push for a more authoritarian style of leadership under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has ostracized the Kurdish population and has created a climate for Kurdish terrorist organizations, such as the PKK and TAK, to prosper and expand recruitment.
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Introduction: A History of State Violence in Turkey

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon for the Turkish state. While the emergence of the Islamic State and the unprecedented flow of refugees resulting from the crisis in Syria have certainly added a new dynamic to Turkey’s fight against terrorism, the Turkish government has been dealing with terrorism for many years. For the past three decades, terrorist activities have been disproportionately conducted by the left-wing Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which began its violent campaign against the Turkish state in 1984. Although the conflict has fluctuated in intensity, as the PKK issued ceasefires in both 1999 and 2013, the “Kurdish issue” still persists and will continue to do so until the Turkish government is willing to make some concessions. In fact, the current political climate in Turkey seems to indicate that the relationship between the PKK and the Turkish state will continue to deteriorate. This is because the ruling Justice and Development Party’s recent push for a more authoritarian style of leadership under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has ostracized the Kurdish population and has created a climate for Kurdish terrorist organizations, such as the PKK and TAK, to prosper and expand recruitment.

However, even before the PKK’s declaration of war against the Turkish state, Turkey has experienced a high rate of turmoil. It is important to examine the relationship

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between state-sponsored violence, the military and the non-state actors (like the Kurds) in order to understand how the “Kurdish question” became one of Turkey’s most controversial topics in domestic politics. In fact, Turkey’s rather turbulent past since the start of 20th century sheds some light on this issue, as well as providing some context for the AKP’s push for authoritarianism.

For the purposes of this thesis, one must recognize that the term “terrorism” can be analyzed through different frameworks in the context of the PKK-Turkish state conflict. The Turkish state and its international allies adopt a state-centric perspective, which means that the implications of the conflict and the various policies employed related to the Kurdish issue are measured by the state. Thus, this framework is fairly limited because the success of any given policy depends on whether or not the state is benefited. This thesis will take a broader view to investigate the history of how the conflict between the Kurdish and Turkish political frameworks escalated, as well as examine the effects of a range of exclusionary measures adopted by the Turkish state (beyond the more apparent counterterrorism measures employed by the state, such as punitive military responses in southeastern Turkey and cultural suppression policies). Ultimately, the aim of this thesis is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Kurdish issue, so that the biases associated with a state-centric view can be reduced, as well as provide some insight into where Turkish politics may be headed in the next decade.

While the formation of the modern Turkish state in the 1920s certainly left some positive marks on society, ultimately allowing Turkey to integrate itself into the broader
global market by abolishing the sultanate (1922) and then the caliphate (1924), adopting a new Westernized alphabet (1928), and instituting secular education (1924) throughout the country’s academic institutions, some of the reforms have directly affected the status of minority groups in Turkey.² From the Turkish Republic’s inception in 1923, the goal of Atatürk was to create an “imagined nation,” which was to be based on “Turkish ethnic identity, history, culture and language.”³ The intent of this project was to create a homogeneous nation-state – a state that would not necessarily accommodate other ethnic or religious groups. Prior to the idea of a nation-state proposed by Atatürk, “Turkishness” was defined culturally and territorially – that is the “primary definition of a Turkish citizen initially comprised all those who lived within the Turkish Republic and culturally defined themselves as Turks, regardless of their ethnicity or religion.”⁴ However, over the course of the Republic, the cultural and territorial Turkish identity became increasingly insignificant, as the ethnic and racial identity became the dominant trait for determining the new Turkish identity. As a result, the non-Muslim populations, including Greek Orthodox, Armenians and Jews, were systematically excluded from Turkish politics under the new Republic. Additionally, even the Muslim minorities, such

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²Birol A. Yesilada, "Tectonic Shifts in Turkey's Domestic and Foreign Policies: How Did It Come to this?" (Speech, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont, January 24, 2017).
as the Kurds and Alevis, were excluded from participating in the social structure of the Republic.⁵

Therefore, from the inception of the Turkish Republic, it became inevitable that some sort of resistance movement would emerge out of these conditions. Kemalism, which was the ideology crafted by Atatürk, set the foundation for the Turkish Republic. The most significant aspect of Kemalism was the idea that the Turkish state needed to be restructured and reorganized in order to create a “Westernized” Turkish nation. The concept of Westernization was ultimately associated with secularization – the notion of restricting the role of religion in society. However, with the implementation of these reforms aimed at secularization, the various minority groups within Turkey, including both ethnic and religious, were directly targeted by the project. In particular, the Kurds found that many of these new principles denied their cultural identity and prohibited Kurdish language in the public sphere.⁶ As result, it is no surprise that internal ethnic and religious conflict exists in Turkish politics and society today.

The relationship between the military and the state plays an important role in the history and evolution of Turkey’s “democracy.” The military, which is often labeled as the guardian of Atatürk’s legacy, has stepped in on four different occasions (1960, 1971, 1980, 1997) prior to the most recent military coup attempt in 2016 in order to safeguard the principles of Kemalism.⁷ In each case, the implications for the government and its constituents have been profound, especially for the Kurdish population. Although

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⁵Ibid.
⁷Yesilada, "Tectonic Shifts.”
Turkey’s transition to a multiparty system in the 1950s provided a glimpse of hope for further democratization, as the Democratic Party triumphed over Atatürk’s Republican People’s Party in the general elections, the 1960 coup hindered the process of further democratization.\(^8\) The military elites behind the coup claimed that such actions were necessary in order to preserve the Republic, but in reality, the coup just supported the notion that the Turkish state was being controlled by a military dictatorship. Ultimately, the military had the power to dispose of the existing government and eventually reinstate a government that would prove to be most favorable to its own interests.

For the most part, the military targeted political parties with strong Islamic ties because it considered these organizations to be a threat to the Republic’s secular principles; however, the Kurdish minority also suffered a great deal from these military takeovers. The immediate result of the 1960 coup was the establishment of the 1961 Constitution, which did provide a foundation for the organization of trade unions and student groups, but this was largely limited to non-minority groups.\(^9\) In fact, the government implemented strict measures to inhibit Kurdish mobilization. For example, Law No. 1587, which was instituted alongside the 1961 Constitution, replaced Kurdish place names with Turkish ones because Kurdish names were “not suitable for national culture, moral values, traditions and customs.”\(^10\) Then, in 1971 and 1980, the military once again cracked down on its political opponents. In the both the 1971 and 1980 military memorandums, many political leftist parties were banned and their leaders were

\(^8\) Aras, *The formation of Kurdishness*, 2.
\(^10\) Ibid.
imprisoned. While the Kurds had made significant progress in mobilizing the Kurdish youth and university students with the establishment of the Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Hearths (ERCH) in 1969, the 1971 coup resulted in strict restrictions against the organization.\textsuperscript{11} Specifically, a purge was issued by the government, which resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of ERCH members on the basis that these individuals were promoting the idea of “Kurdism” – the belief that an independent Kurdistan should be established.\textsuperscript{12}

This sort of polarization between the political right, the military and the leftist Kurdish organizations created a climate in which the Kurds felt ostracized, which ultimately contributed to the emergence of violent left-wing movements, such as the PKK.

\textsuperscript{12}Landis and Albert, \textit{Handbook of ethnic conflict}, 249.
Chapter 1: The Kurds and Birth of the PKK

Although most Kurds identify as Sunni Muslim, they do not associate according to religion or any sort of political orientation; instead they form a community based on a common ancestry and language.\(^\text{13}\) The term “Kurdish” actually refers to any individual who speaks one or more of four closely related Indo-Iranian languages – Kurmanji, Sorani, Zaza or Gurani.\(^\text{14}\) However, even though the Kurds have distinct cultural and ethnic characteristics, within the international community, they are not officially recognized as an autonomous nation.

Today, there are an estimated 24-27 million Kurds living in the Middle East with approximately 13 million of them residing in Southeastern Turkey.\(^\text{15}\) This makes them the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, yet they do not have their own permanent nation state. While many of the Kurds in Turkey have accepted a new Turkish identity, assimilating into Atatürk’s Republic by learning Turkish and embracing Turkish culture, many of them are not willing to forfeit their ethnic identity. Kurdish nationalists claim that an independent Kurdistan should exist, which would include “a narrow neck of land that [gives] access to the Mediterranean just north of Alexandretta, Mosul and the left bank of the Tigris as far south as Mandali, and the eastern side of Lake Urumiya.”\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{14}\) Göçek, *The Transformation of Turkey*, 42.

\(^{15}\) McDowall, *A modern history*, 3.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
To put this into context, Kurdistan would encompass parts of southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, northwestern Iran and northern Iraq.

According to Fatma Müge Göcek, the Kurdish issue is currently defined as “the oppression and denial of rights by a majority group (the Turks) of an ethnic minority (the Kurds).”\(^\text{17}\) For the most part, the international community universally accepts this definition. Applying this definition, the Turkish state is identified as the oppressor and the Kurds are viewed as the repressed. However, for the Turkish state, this assessment of the Kurdish issue is not only problematic, but is grossly inaccurate. Consequently, the Turkish state rejects the notion that the civil war (1984-1999) was merely a “national liberation movement” led by the Kurdish population.\(^\text{18}\) Therefore, it should be no surprise that the Turkish government has labeled the PKK, which has led this movement from its inception in 1984 until the present day, as a terrorist organization and an enemy of the Republic. In fact, since the start of the civil war, each ruling Turkish party has encouraged other global actors, as well as the international media to label the PKK as a terrorist group.

The civil war, which involved the Turkish nation-state and the Kurdish population, raged on between 1984-1999, but its origins can be traced back to the political instability of the 1970s. The 1960 and 1971 military coups proved that domestic politics in Turkey were particularly problematic for preserving peace between the political left and right. The implications of these military takeovers were complex, as they affected the political climate in ways that one would not necessarily expect. First,

\(^\text{17}\) Göçek, *The Transformation of Turkey*, 41.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.
while the coups often resulted in nationwide purges, imprisoning thousands of political leaders, these purges often had a disproportionate effect on the left and right. Many of the pro-Kurdish organizations were disbanded immediately following the coups, but overall, the junta suppressed the current government and those politically affiliated with it – this meant the military largely suppressed the right.¹⁹ As a result of this discrepancy, the coups ironically created a platform in which some leftist organizations could emerge. Specifically, a myriad of different leftist publications were created in the wake of the 1960 military coup, including radical populist Yön, Ant and Türk Sol, as well as other Marxist promoters.²⁰ With these new publications, the general public was exposed to new radical ideas, such as those outlined in Marxist ideology. According to Marxism, class struggle is the catalyst for any sort of historical change, meaning “the elite, technocrats (including, in some versions, the students) and officers would lead Turkey independently on behalf of the workers and rural poor.”²¹ This ideology soon became widespread among the disenfranchised class, which mostly constituted the Kurdish population. This inspired hundreds of thousands of students and workers to go on strike and participate in violent demonstrations with police forces.

A product of the turmoil in the 1970s was the establishment of the PKK. Abdullah Öcalan and his friends founded the PKK in Ankara while attending university in 1978. In its first few years, the organization’s scope and targets were rather limited, as

²⁰Ibid.
²¹Ibid.
its initial targets mostly consisted of Kurdish landlords. Ultimately, this program was directly in line with the Marxist-Leninist ideology that gained popularity following the military coups of the 1960s and 70s – the PKK believed that capitalism was to blame for the gross discrepancies between the Southeast Kurdish population and the majority Turkish population; therefore, communism was necessary in order to restore the stability in the region. As one French newspaper, *Le Monde*, depicts the “inescapable” poverty in a Kurdish village in the Mardin province, “each family had a few chickens and possibly five or six goats… rates of pay were US$1 for a child, $1.50 for a woman, and $2 for a man.” Additionally, the PKK created a positive image for itself early on, at least among the Kurdish population who fell into this cycle of poverty – it was seen as an organization that represented the needs of the disenfranchised and those individuals who were neglected by the Turkish government. In this sense, the PKK served as the champion of socialism; therefore, one should not be surprised by the PKK’s majority support in the Southeastern region of Turkey.

However, despite Öcalan’s goal of creating a completely socialist state, he also made it clear from the PKK’s inception that the organization would be committed to the creation of an independent Kurdistan in Southeastern Turkey, Syria and Iraq. This, along with further oppression by the Turkish state prompted the PKK to resort to guerilla warfare tactics in 1984, which marked the official start of the PKK’s campaign of

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24Barkey and Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, 23.
violence against the Turkish state. The transition to more aggressive and less discriminate targeting can be attributed to several reasons. First, the recession of the late 1970s hit Europe hard, including Turkey. Production decreased significantly as businesses could not import the necessary raw materials. Inflation increased to over 85 percent and unemployment continued to rise as companies had to let employees go because they could not pay their wages. Second, following the 1971 military coup, the government demonstrated that it was weak and fragmented. Although the military eventually relinquished its powers to the government again, signaling a return to democracy, the coalition governments that took over were clearly inefficient and unproductive, leading to a growing animosity among the population, especially the left. The inability of the Turkish state to address the concerns of any of its citizens due to the fragmentation at the top encouraged Kurds to adopt a new mindset. The younger Kurds began to assert a more hardline approach, realizing that “[they] needed to be armed to accomplish anything.” Lastly, the 1980 military coup provided the final incentive for the PKK to engage in a full-blown civil war with the Turkish state. For the next four years after the coup, thousands of Kurds and PKK sympathizers were detained, tortured and imprisoned. During these years, the democratic institutions of the Turkish government collapsed, as basic civil liberties were curtailed and martial law reigned supreme. It was at this point that Öcalan and his followers felt compelled to resort to drastic measures.

25 Ibid, 22.
26 Marcus, Blood and belief, 49.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, 40.
29 Ibid, 51.
However, before one delves into the civil war period between 1984-1999, it is important to understand the series of events that took place regarding the PKK’s preparations for military engagement in the early 1980s. Following the military coup and the widespread arrests of PKK militants, Öcalan decided that Turkey was no longer suitable as a ground on which to conduct its training operations. Therefore, the PKK sought a new home – Syria and Lebanon proved to be the most promising locations due to their easy border crossings and their large Kurdish populations.\footnote{Ibid, 53.} Additionally, Öcalan strategically took refuge in these two countries because he wanted to establish a working relationship with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), an organization that had previously trained Iranian leftists, Greek Communists and other Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries in guerilla warfare tactics.\footnote{Ibid, 56.} Ultimately, Öcalan was able to coordinate efforts with DFLP leaders in order to set up training camps for all the PKK militants. The Turkish government was not able to extend its military presence into Syria or Lebanon, so these bases ultimately served as safe havens where the PKK could gradually build up its strength to mount its attack. As Selahattin Çelik, a Kurdish journalist for the PKK, aptly sums up the situation that the PKK faced in the early 1980s, “In reality, we were finished as an organization after 1980. We had no strength in Europe, in Turkey we were in prison. But in Syria we could gather ourselves together.”\footnote{Ibid, 58.} In Syria, the PKK combatants received extensive training in bomb making operations, topography, artillery, and even political training. Once trained, these militants were
moved to the Southeastern part of Turkey where they could launch full-scale attacks on Turkish military forces.

In August of 1984, the PKK’s armed branch launched its first attack on Turkish military forces in the Southeastern districts of Eruh and Şemdinli. Although the PKK had committed acts of violence prior to this incident, this attack represented Öcalan’s transition to a program of violence. As a result of PKK-initiated violence, over 20,181 people were killed between 1984 and 1995. These figures are staggering – the sheer number of causalities certainly has implications for one’s understanding of the PKK as an organization, as well as providing some explanations for Turkey’s counterterrorism policies in more recent years.

When the term “terrorism” is discussed in contemporary times, it becomes difficult to establish a single concrete definition that distinguishes it from other forms of violence, such as guerilla warfare and insurgency. Because these terms are similar in many respects and often employ the same tactics, most individuals only have a vague understanding of what terrorism truly entails. It is important to distinguish between terrorism, guerilla warfare, and insurgency. The three terms differ according to their level of organization and their objectives. Terrorist organizations tend to be relatively small with limited resources. On the other hand, guerillas are larger organizations with some sort of military structure or hierarchy. They may have intentions to exercise some sovereignty over a territory and they often target government or military personnel for

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34 Ibid.
this reason. Insurgents are the largest of the three and are focused on mass mobilization. For this reason, they are considered to be part of a “movement,” directly threatening the legitimacy of the current government or regime.\(^{35}\) In other words, insurgency is just a larger scale of guerilla warfare.

The PKK should be categorized somewhere between a guerilla organization and an insurgent group. The fact that over 20,000 individuals were killed as a result of PKK-led operations is evidence that the organization did and continues to do more than just commit acts of terrorism. Certainly, there is a terrorism aspect involved in many of its attacks, as demonstrated by the total number of civilian causalities – 5,014 civilian deaths between the years 1984 and 1995.\(^{36}\) However, in reality, many of these civilian casualties can be attributed to accidental circumstances, meaning the civilians were not necessarily the targets in the first place. Often times, the victims just happened to be caught in the crossfire between PKK militants and Turkish military forces. Even when the PKK has targeted civilians or civilian areas, there seems to be an ulterior motive behind these types of attacks. Many of these civilian targeted attacks have involved firing squads and roadblocks in which militants stop a commercial bus and execute the passengers. The Tatvan Massacre, which took place on June 11, 1992, is an example of this tactic, resulting in the execution of thirteen civilians.\(^{37}\) Other civilian casualties have been the result of suicide bombings, as in the case of the more recent 2016 Ankara


\(^{36}\)Kirişci and Winrow, The Kurdish question and Turkey, 126.

Güvenpark Massacre, which targeted the historic Kızılay square, resulting in 36 civilian deaths and 125 others injured.\textsuperscript{38} Certainly, it cannot be denied that these attacks were ruthless and brutal, but when one looks beyond the graphic images, there seems to be a strategic value to both of these types of attacks. These attacks are not random, uncoordinated, haphazard, and indiscriminate acts of violence. Instead, terrorism is always premeditated, planned, and strategic. One of the goals of any terrorist attack is to gain publicity – the PKK is no exception. In the eyes of terrorists, any publicity is good publicity. This is why many of the organization’s attacks are suicide bombings and hijackings in popular tourist spots because they add a spectacular element to the act. More specifically, terrorism is designed to have a psychological impact on its target audience in that terror tactics are designed to elicit a response and create fear. For the most part, the victims of a terrorist attack are not necessarily the target audience. Instead, terrorists seek to influence the perceptions of a larger audience that extend beyond the immediate target. In both the Tatvan Massacre and the Ankara Güvenpark Massacre, the immediate victims of the attack may not have even been the intended audience; instead, the PKK likely had a greater vision in mind – to force institutional change by creating a climate in which the general population will pressure the government’s leaders to concede to some of the PKK’s demands. This ultimately makes the fight against terrorist organizations, such as the PKK, so difficult because they often can garner the support of a large segment of the country’s population.

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.
However, this only covers a small aspect of the PKK’s agenda. The PKK has launched attacks on key economic targets, such as electric power centers, communication towers, bridges and petroleum factories. Additionally, the PKK has organized large raids against Turkish military bases in Southeastern Turkey. Certainly, these attacks incorporate the psychological component of fear, as they disrupt the daily lives of those living in the affected area, but they also represent a large part of the PKK’s grand vision. The intention behind these attacks is to challenge the state’s ability to maintain security in the Southeastern region of Turkey. Therefore, the PKK will be able to exercise control over a certain amount of territory, which directly relates to the PKK’s goal of creating an autonomous Kurdistan. Ultimately, it is important to recognize this distinction between a terrorist group and an insurgent group, along with their different goals and scopes of influence, because in the case of the PKK, it has shaped the way in which the Turkish state has responded to PKK aggression.

While many scholars often view the PKK through the lens of terrorism, it is also important to recognize that the PKK is a political entity as well. Through its affiliation with various political parties, the PKK has been able to push forward its agenda within Turkey’s political sphere. In the 1990s, efforts to consolidate the Kurds on the national level were made. The first officially recognized Kurdish political party was the People’s Labor Party (HEP), which was founded in 1990 by a group of eleven members of

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40Ibid.
Parliament. This was a significant step for the Kurds in Turkey because it meant that they would have representatives speaking on their behalf at the national level. However, with the emergence of this party, other political parties, namely the far-right parties, expressed a lot of criticism because they believed that the HEP was a “mouthpiece” for the PKK. This concern for the HEP’s close ties with the PKK stems from the fact that its members participated in often radical and volatile demonstrations in an effort to promote Kurdish cultural rights. Due to these charged rallies, the Constitutional Court closed the HEP party in 1993, claiming that the “party’s call for ethnic-based rights contradicted the constitution and the HEP’s aims resembled those of the terrorists.”

However, despite the fact that the HEP party disbanded, a new pro-Kurdish party was established, which was comprised of many of the former HEP members – the Democracy Party (DEP). This party, like the HEP, called for drastic measures to be taken in order to recognize the Kurds cultural identity. Proponents of the DEP’s platform demanded that the Turkish government grant the right to teach Kurdish in public academic institutions, arrange a ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish military, as well as grant a general amnesty for those individuals involved in the civil war between 1984-1999. The fact that the DEP pushed for a pardon on behalf of all Kurdish militants involved in the conflict suggests that some of the PKK’s members were either directly affiliated with the DEP or at least had some connections with elected DEP

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42 Ibid.
43 Marcus, *Blood and belief*, 224.
44 Watts, "Allies and Enemies,” 632.
45 Marcus, *Blood and belief*, 225.
leaders. As the fighting between PKK militants and the Turkish military worsened, the Turkish state became less receptive when considering the DEP’s demands. In fact, there was an outbreak of violence targeted against Kurdish activists, even those who were noncombatants. For example, in the spring of 1993, DEP member Mehmet Sincar was assassinated when he expressed concern for the excessive harassment of DEP officials.46 Eventually, allegations that the DEP was a foothold for the PKK in Parliament surfaced, forcing the Constitutional Court to consider the eradication of the DEP as a representative party in the national Parliament. Although the party never overtly expressed support for the PKK or its operations in Southeastern Turkey, when PKK combatants bombed Istanbul’s Tuzla’s train station and the DEP current chairman at the time, Hatip Dicle, refused to condemn the attack, leaders of the opposing parties took his statement as evidence for the DEP’s association with the PKK.47 As a result, the Constitutional Court closed down the party on the grounds that the party had been radicalized and was a political puppet for the PKK.

The persistence of the Kurdish political activists is reflected in what the DEP supporters decided to do next. Rather than conceding to the far right, the former DEP member established another pro-Kurdish party known as the People’s Democracy Party or the HADEP.48 Compared to its predecessors, HEP and DEP, HADEP adopted a fairly moderate stance in an effort to maintain its position on the political stage. HADEP members distinguished themselves from the PKK, even condemning most of their

46Ibid.
terrorist operations because they realized that the party would be disbanded if the population started to perceive the organization as a PKK sympathizer. However, even with a committed effort to promote nonviolent political engagement, the Constitutional Court decided to close the HADEP’s party after Öcalan was arrested in 1999 and police forces arrested hundreds of HADEP members based on insufficient evidence claiming that individuals had provided financial support to the PKK. Following the demise of the HADEP party, the Peace and Democracy party (BDP) emerged as the prominent pro-Kurdish party in 2008, expanding their power base by winning a majority of the 2014 local elections in southeastern Turkey. While BDP adopted a relatively moderate stance similar to the HADEP, its party members were targeted by the AKP because they were likely perceived as a political threat. Hatip Dicle, a former member of both DEP and BDP, was sentenced to nine years in prison for “membership in a terrorist organization.”

The difficulty these pro-Kurdish parties faced in Turkey’s political arena is surprising if one accepts the notion that Turkey is a democracy. From the West’s perspective, Turkey has served a model for the Muslim world for the past fifty years. This is because, for the most part, Turkey has adopted policies that are in line with the West. Post WWII, during the Cold War, Turkey took a stance that was clearly pro-

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49Ibid, 650.
Western or pro-American. As the Soviet Union made explicit demands from Turkey, including joint military control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, the Turkish government decided to align instead with Western allies. This alignment put Turkey and the rest of the Arab world on opposite sides. Ultimately, Turkey proved to be a key player in the containment of Soviet imperialism, as it was a frontline country with various U.S. bases positioned against the “strategic underbelly” of the Soviet Union. Additionally, Turkey supported the U.S. in the Korean War of 1950, which was an effort to curb communist North Korea from invading South Korea. As a result of Turkey’s participation in both the Cold War and the Korean War, Turkey was granted membership in NATO in 1952. This event marked an important point in U.S.-Turkish relations, as it helped to highlight Turkey’s commitment to Western foreign policies and crisis management.

However, this perspective is skewed because the U.S. considers Turkey to be a valuable asset in the Middle East. The U.S. places Turkey on a pedestal, claiming that the Turkey is a model for democracy in the region, because in terms of foreign policy, Turkey has historically aligned itself with Western interests. In contemporary times, the “West,” including the U.S. and most of Western Europe, is considered to be the gold standard for democracy. Therefore, if the U.S. views another country’s regime favorably or if its foreign policy decisions are seen to be Western oriented, it is easy to make the assumption that the country is pushing forward a democratic agenda. This, as observed

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53 Ibid.
in the case of Turkey, is clearly a fallacy. In order to overcome this skewed perspective, one just needs to examine Turkey’s repressive measures taken against many of its minority populations, specifically the Kurdish population.
Chapter 2: Turkey’s Response to the Kurdish Issue and the PKK

Ever since the PKK turned to terrorist tactics in the mid-1980s, the Turkish government has been engaged in “low-intensity” conflict. When the PKK conducted its first attack in 1984, civilian authorities responded because the government had not yet realized the extent of the PKK’s organization and base of support. The police force was not sufficient in combating the terrorist group, so military intervention became a necessity.

From the PKK’s inception, Turkey identified its actions as “terrorism” and adopted a “no compromise” and “no negotiation” policy in dealing with terrorist organizations. Although in recent years Turkey has been more open to the idea of negotiation with PKK leadership, historically, this has led to fairly aggressive military action taken against the PKK with the aim to increase the costs of the PKK’s activities. The Turkish military’s actions taken in northern Iraq is a prime example of this strategy. Northern Iraq proved to be a critical piece of territory for the PKK, as the first Gulf War resulted in the creation of a no-fly zone in the region. The PKK used this as opportunity to establish a safe haven there where its armed unit, the Public Defense Forces (HPG), could train militants in secure camps. A large part of the Turkish

55Ibid, 143.
government’s counterterrorism program in the 1990s was to weaken the PKK’s influence in this region of Iraq. In order to accomplish this task, the Turkish government did one of two things: 1) Launch air strikes and cross-border operations against PKK bases; and, 2) Enter into agreements with Iraqi Kurdish Groups who were fighting the PKK. The airstrikes helped to destroy many of the camps training the PKK militants and they also forced the organization to move its operations to a more remote mountainous region of Iraq where the PKK struggled to maintain consistent supply lines. Also, the Turkish government was able to establish a military presence in part of the region, making the existing PKK bases more accessible to intervention, as well as limiting the scope of the organization in Iraq. Second, the bilateral agreements established with the Iraqi Kurdish groups, notably the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (IKDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), further limited the influence of the PKK in the region. Members of IKDP and PUK fought along side the Turkish military, helping to neutralize PKK aggressors.

These continued military operations have yielded seemingly positive results for the Turkish government. The sheer numbers of PKK militants killed by Turkish armed forces is evidence of this – the PKK has lost an estimated 25,000 militants since it first declared war against the Turkish state in 1984. By increasing the costs imposed on the militants, the likelihood of carrying out successful terrorist operations is reduced. While

57 Yiilma, “Question of Strategy in Counter-Terrorism,” 143.
58 Ibid.
the PKK’s armed unit is fairly substantial, it still cannot compete with the Turkish army in a conventional war. As a result of military intervention, the PKK has had to conduct operations in smaller groups to avoid being detected by the military, which is expected to have an effect on the severity and frequency of attacks.\textsuperscript{60} However, with that said, military operations will not completely eliminate the threat of terrorist attacks because of the PKK’s adaptability – the smaller groups can avoid detection, so while the attacks may be less severe and less frequent, the PKK still poses as a threat to society.

One of the major concerns for the Turkish state is that the instability of both Iraq and Syria will open up new opportunities for the PKK to establish strong recruitment centers, as well as military training camps. Additionally, while these military actions may limit the PKK’s activity in the short-run, these tactics are not completely effective in the long-run. This is due to several reasons. First, the PKK uses the military actions taken by the Turkish government as justification for its own attacks. Military aggression contributes to the perception that the Turkish state is the oppressor, which bolsters support for the PKK among the Kurdish population. Second, military intervention does not address the root cause of this ethnic conflict between the Kurdish and Turkish populations. In fact, military action only leads to more division between these two ethnic groups. And finally, the PKK operates with an element of “invisibility,” meaning the Turkish government has a difficult time distinguishing between PKK militants and the

\textsuperscript{60}Ibid, 96.
general population.\textsuperscript{61} The PKK typically operates in small groups in the mountainous region along the Southeastern border of Turkey, which makes it difficult to pinpoint their location and launch effective airstrikes. Furthermore, the use of suicide tactics allows the PKK to attack discreetly without any direct confrontation with military units.

As Lieutenant General Altay Tokat states, “military operations are necessary, but not sufficient in fighting terror.”\textsuperscript{62} Instead, the General suggests that Ankara should take a more comprehensive approach to terrorism, meaning the government needs to incorporate a diplomatic, social and political element to the current counterterrorism strategies being employed. While most of the Turkish government’s actions taken against the PKK during its most active years have been characterized by a use of military force, Ankara has adopted some “soft-line” tactics as well.

In the past decade, Ankara has reevaluated some of its more hardline counterterrorism tactics, such as military intervention, because these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. In many cases, military aggression has only prompted the PKK to conduct more suicide mission and attacks on government facilities. Leaders of the PKK – Abdullah Öcalan and Cemil Bayık – have publicly announced that their attacks are simply a response to the state government’s actions taken against the Kurdish population. In recent years, the terrorist group’s objectives seem to be less about territorial acquisition, but instead, more about promoting and advancing the rights of the Kurds

\textsuperscript{61}Karen Kaya, "Turkish Commanders Discuss Counterterrorism Strategies and Lessons Learned from 25 Years of Fighting the PKK," \textit{Small Wars & Insurgencies}, vol. 23, no. 3 (2012): 533.
\textsuperscript{62}Ibid, 535.
living in Turkey – specifically the right to maintain an ethnic identity. This shift in goals among PKK leadership has led the Turkish government to implement various democratic and social projects in an effort to address the democratic demands of the Kurdish population.

In the early 2000s, when the AKP (the Justice and Development Party) came into power, Turkey seriously pursued EU membership. This development has had a profound impact on the state’s policies, as the Turkish government began the process of democratization. As a direct result of this democratization process, Turkey sought to address the Kurdish issue by implementing a series of reform packages “intended to eliminate the Kurdish conflict such as the legalizing of the Kurdish language in public, allowing official and private Kurdish TV and radio broadcasting, Kurdish language courses, and releasing from prison four former deputies of the pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP), including Leyla Zana.” Although these measures did not directly target the organization of the PKK, they were designed to meet some of the demands of the PKK, which would hopefully incentivize the PKK to pursue diplomatic approaches rather than guerilla-warfare tactics.

Ankara’s most significant soft-line counterterrorism approach is highlighted by an initiative, known as the “Democratic Opening,” which was launched by the Turkish

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This democratic initiative, along with the reforms implemented during Turkey’s EU accession phase in the early 2000s, focused on incorporation and integration of the Kurdish population. Also referred to as the “Kurdish Opening,” the initiative is a “comprehensive, multi-tiered policy” that is intended to reduce tensions between the Kurds and the state government. Under the policy’s platform, the Turkish government has agreed to perform a series of different measures over an extended period of time – the objective is to gradually recognize more of the Kurds’ cultural rights, so that the Kurdish population no longer perceives the Turkish government to be an oppressive force. The first phase includes permitting Kurdish prayers in Kurdish mosques. The second phase will grant amnesty to some PKK militants. And the third phase will be to redefine what it means to be a Turkish citizen, meaning citizenship will encompass a broader interpretation and be less focused on the ethnic element. Ultimately, this counterterrorism method is targeted at the larger Kurdish population and the PKK sympathizers, but not necessarily the PKK itself. The motivation behind the “Democratic Opening” is to create an atmosphere in which the Kurdish people feel accepted within Turkish society. As more of the demands of the Kurdish population are met, public support for terrorist organizations, such as the PKK, will likely decline. This will have a direct effect on the overall success of the organization because terrorist

65 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
groups often operate on behalf of their sympathizers. If the organization lacks support from a segment of the general population, it will not be as motivated to carry out attacks.

In addition to the “Democratic Opening” initiative, the Turkish government has recognized “Nevruz” – meaning new day, Nevruz is traditionally a day that celebrates “Kurdishness” and the culture of the Kurdish people. In the 1980s, the Turkish state banned the celebration of Nevruz, which led to serious backlash. The Kurdish population within Turkey participated in violent demonstrations on the day of Nevruz and the PKK used this ban as a way to justify its terrorist activities. The Turkish government realized the effect the ban had on terrorist activities, so in 1995, the government decided to lift the ban and recognize Nevruz as a national holiday. The aim of this policy was to eliminate violent episodes that occurred on the day of Nevruz by giving the Kurdish people an opportunity to celebrate their Kurdish identity. Although the policy was directed at Kurdish citizens rather than the organization of the PKK, the policy was expected to yield positive results by increasing the legitimacy of the Turkish government, as well as reducing the overall number of PKK sympathizers. In a quantitative analysis of this policy, Mustafa Cosar Unal determined that in the period following the recognition of Nevruz as a national holiday (1995-1999), “the aggregate level of violence shows a clear downward trend.” However, it is worth noting that this data takes into account all violence associated with the Kurdish issue, including civilian-initiated

69Ünal, Counterterrorism in Turkey, 66.
70Ibid.
71Ibid, 67.
violence. One cannot isolate the incidents of violence initiated by the PKK. Therefore, one cannot claim that the policy had a direct impact on the PKK’s terrorist activities. However, regardless of whether or not the total number of PKK terrorist attacks declined, the fact that the overall violence related to the Kurdish issue has decreased is promising.

The resolution of the Kurdish issue seems to be an important element, and quite possibly the only action, that will completely eliminate the threat of the PKK. As long as the PKK has something to fight for, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state will persist. The “Democratic Opening,” according to Barkley, is the most “coherent and comprehensive attempt ever made in Turkey” to resolve the Kurdish issue. With that said, the resolution of the Kurdish issue is not an attainable goal in the near future. The Turkish government would likely have to grant the Kurdish population an autonomous region in Southeastern Turkey in order to bring the PKK to the negotiation table, which would mean that Turkey would have to sacrifice its territorial integrity – something the current regime is unwilling to do.

Lieutenant General Özkök offers several other soft-line approaches that may be more realistic in nature and spark less criticism from hardcore Turkish nationalists who are unwilling to make any concessions to the PKK or the Kurdish population. Özkök’s strategy sees education, or more precisely improved educational facilities in Southeastern Turkey, as a way to minimize the influence of the PKK in the region. In an interview conducted by Turkish journalist Fikret Bila, Özkök cites an important failure in Ankara’s spending towards counterterrorism, stating, “[The Turkish government] has spent a lot of

72 Ciftci and Kula, “The Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Counterterrorism Policies.”
money on trying to develop the southeastern part of the country where most of Turkey’s Kurds live and where the PKK initially started, but any investment in an area must go hand in hand with the corresponding education that teaches how to best use that investment… Due to a lack of proper education, the local population doesn’t know how to leverage the investment and grow it.”

Improved education facilities would not only improve the living conditions of the Kurdish population by giving them the necessary technical skills to participate in the larger Turkish economy, but it would also help to prevent the PKK from recruiting new members. By creating an egalitarian climate in which the Kurds are included, there is less of an incentive to support the PKK. The ethnic conflict in this region is fueled by the stark socioeconomic inequalities between the Kurdish population and the rest of the Turkish population on the European side.

Hüseyin Avni Mutlu, governor of Diyarbakır, is a proponent of this approach, as he believes that the problem of the Kurdish issue stems from a humanitarian crisis rather than the recognition of ethnic identity. He argues, “Cultural identity is not the basic problem. The agenda of the people is economic; the agenda is sustenance.”

This argument does not take into account the PKK’s ultimate goal of establishing an independent Kurdistan nor does it address their ethnic identity claim; however, limited economic opportunities and unemployment rates are often a significant predictor of terrorist activity. Empirical results taken from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict suggest that there is a positive association between youth unemployment rates and the brutality and

73 Kaya, “Turkish Commanders Discuss Counterterrorism Strategies,” 535.
frequency of violence. While data has not been collected for the PKK-Turkish case, the Palestinian-Israeli model could serve as potential model for addressing the Kurdish issue.

While Turkey still claims to be democratic nation, with the rise of terrorist activity in recent years, the government has also taken measures to increase surveillance within society. Specifically, in the last two years, the Turkish state has implemented a series of policies that have enhanced the power of government and security institutions. This has led to criticism from some segments of the population, notably the center-left Republican’s People Party (CHP), because it believes that the government is curtailing civil liberties.

In April of 2014, Turkey’s Parliament adopted the Law Amending the Law on State Intelligence Services and the National Intelligence Organization. Under the provisions of this law, the National Intelligence Agency (in Turkish, Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı or MİT) was granted access to citizens’ personal data without a court order. Additionally, the law provided all MİT agents immunity from prosecution while on duty. This meant that these agents could violate the law without facing any repercussions.

Another important aspect of the Turkish government’s counterterrorism program has been to expand the power of the police, specifically, in its ability to conduct searches, use force, and detain suspects without a warrant. Although this counterterrorism

77 Ibid.
approach is not specific to the fight against the PKK, these measures have disproportionately targeted the Kurdish population and supporters of the Kurdish movement. For example, in August of 2015, the police detained 1,375 members of the HDP (which is the political party that represents the interests of the Kurds) compared to only 205 ISIS or Al-Qaeda members. These arrests were based on claims that HDP members had links to the PKK or that they had played a role in spreading PKK propaganda.

Because most terrorist groups attempt to obtain some level of global or regional recognition, extending their influence across several different countries, it is crucial that the international community cooperate in the fight against terrorism. Specifically, the PKK operates in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, as well having some ties to European countries. Part of Turkey’s counterterrorism program in the fight against the PKK, has been to establish security-based relations with other international actors. Turkey is a member of several international agencies involved in counter-terrorism including NATO, the United Nations, the Committee of Experts on Terrorism, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Through these organizations, Turkey is able to collaborate with other nations’ intelligence agencies in order to share information about potential terrorist threats and develop cohesive plans to combat terrorism. An example of this cooperation is displayed

in MİT’s (Turkey’s National Security Organization) relationship with the CIA. In January 2016, it was reported that CIA Director John Brennan visited Ankara to help assist Turkey in formulating its terrorism watch list and to help upgrade its border security and law enforcement investigations.\textsuperscript{80} Such cooperation has led to more efficient and effective counterterrorism measures; however, with regards to the PKK, this cooperation has not been as effective compared to the fight against the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.

The ineffectiveness of these cooperative counterterrorism measures stems from disagreements over U.S. backing of Kurdish insurgent forces in Syria, notably the People’s Protection Units (YPG).\textsuperscript{81} Turkey considers the YPG to be an affiliate of the PKK, but the U.S. does not classify the YPG as a terrorist organization because Washington considers the group to be a valuable asset in the region. Specifically, the U.S. believes the YPG plays a critical role in the fight against the Islamic State. For example, during the battle for Kobani, the US-led anti-ISIS coalition worked closely with the YPG to direct airstrikes, as well as providing arms to YPG combatants.\textsuperscript{82} As a result of this alliance, this has led to serious strains between Washington and Ankara because “Ankara’s real fear is that the PYD success in Syria will dangerously strengthen the fight

\textsuperscript{80}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82}Ibid.
against Turkey.” The Turkish government believes that the arms provided to the Syrian Kurds will seep over to the PKK’s militant groups. On the other hand, although the U.S. recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, its foreign policy objectives in the region are more focused on regional stability and the elimination of the Islamic State rather than brokering peace between the Turkish government and its Kurdish population.

From these figures, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of these countermeasures because the claims made by the Turkish government are often not supported by concrete evidence. There is also no data available that shows how many terrorist plots were prevented as a result of these arrests. However, one can make the argument that these arrests actually elicit more aggression from the PKK and its splinter groups. After the arrest of HDP leaders, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ on November 4, 2016, a car bomb was reported to have gone off outside a police station in Diyarbakir, which resulted in eight casualties. Although the PKK did not publicly claim responsibility for the attack, the timing and nature of the attack seem to suggest PKK involvement.

The Turkish state has also increased its presence within the realm of the media as part of its anti-terrorism campaign. Given that almost all terrorist organizations, including the PKK, rely heavily on the media and the Internet to disseminate information

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regarding its activities, as well as to spread propaganda to further recruitment, the Turkish government has taken measures to crack down on journalists. Under Turkey’s current Anti-Terrorism Law, the government defines terrorism in “broad” terms, which has enabled Turkish authorities to arrest a number of journalists this past year. In August of 2015, state prosecutors proposed seven-year sentences for a group of 18 journalists charged with “spreading terrorist propaganda.” While some of these actions may inhibit the PKK and other terrorists groups’ recruitment efforts, this type of intense monitoring comes with a cost. Specifically, the “broad” terms outlined in Turkey’s Anti-Terrorism Law grant the government expansive powers, leading to the detainment of journalists and academics not associated with any type of terrorist activity. In April of this year, two journalists from the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* were arrested for publishing a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. Incidents such as these bring up the concern that Turkey may be overextending its jurisdiction in the lives of its citizens, threatening to curtail basic civil liberties typically associated with a democratic regime, such as free speech. Certainly, combating terrorism and violent extremism should be a priority of the government, but it should be equally important to preserve fundamental human rights.

According to the Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights, a casual relationship exists between “violation of human rights, humanitarian law and basic

85"Turkey: Counterterrorism and Justice."
86Ibid.
principles of the (UN) Charter” and terrorism. Therefore, the Turkish government must be prudent when it comes to exerting too much influence within society, as these actions can ultimately motivate and inspire the PKK to conduct more frequent and lethal attacks.

Overall, it is difficult to determine which policy has been the most effective in combating PKK-initiated terrorism in Turkey because many of these policies were implemented at the same time and thus, have a cumulative effect. However, Mustafa Cosar Ünal attempts to examine the overall collective impact of all of the policies by recording the number of violent episodes conducted by PKK militants. The data set is from 1984 until 2008. Ünal shows that violence tended to increase until the mid-1990s and then the violence level followed a decreasing pattern until 2003, suggesting that many of the “soft policy” approaches implemented in the early 2000s may have had a deterrent effect on PKK violence. However, the data indicates that from 2003 until more recent years, violence has once again been on the rise. This has one of two implications: 1) Either the deterrence-based approaches do not have a sustained impact on PKK violence; or, 2) the recent purge by the Turkish government, including the detainment of journalists and pro-Kurdish political leaders, has encouraged more hostility from the PKK. Ultimately, the success of Turkey’s anti-terrorism claim rests in its ability to reduce the total number of attacks and casualties associated with the PKK conflict. While Ünal argues that the Turkish government has made significant progress in its counterterrorism campaign, noting that the pre-ceasefire period from 1984-1999 resulted

89Ünal, Counterterrorism in Turkey, 90.
90Ibid.
in more casualties than the period from 2002 onward, this is not a sufficient measure to make such a claim.\textsuperscript{91} Instead, this may indicate that the PKK is undergoing a transition – the PKK realizes that a large insurgency campaign is no longer effective against the Turkish government, thus it has resorted to less confrontational terror tactics, such as suicide bombings. In some respects, this development is more concerning because suicide bombings are more difficult to prevent and innocent civilians are often the primary targets.

In order to develop a more comprehensive strategy aimed at eliminating PKK-initiated attacks, it is important to reflect on and recognize potential mistakes and mishandlings in Turkey’s counterterrorism campaign, as well as to provide alternative counterterrorism measures that have yet to be employed.

One of the Turkish government’s most significant achievements in combating the PKK terrorism campaign was the capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In 1999, Turkish authorities captured Öcalan after he took refuge in a Greek embassy in Kenya. The imprisonment of Öcalan was a huge blow to the PKK’s organization because he ruled with an “iron fist,” meaning he believed in overseeing all operations and ultimately no decisions were made without his final approval.\textsuperscript{92} Therefore, the Turkish government believed it was near victory in the fight against the PKK. Öcalan even issued a ceasefire with Turkey in 1999, which suggested that the PKK would finally end its campaign of

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid, 93.
terror. However, this ceasefire did not last, as the PKK returned to guerilla warfare tactics in 2004.

Although the imprisonment of Öcalan certainly disrupted the PKK’s leadership core for several years between 1999 and 2004, Öcalan is still able to exert a tremendous amount of control over the organization. In fact, he is still able to effectively lead and coordinate attacks from behind bars through his network of lawyers. Öcalan communicates commands and other information through his lawyers to PKK commanders on the outside. Ultimately, the belief that the Turkish government was near a decisive victory in 1999 merely proved to be an illusion.

As PKK violence has continued to escalate since the 1999 ceasefire was called off, several military leaders have publicly criticized the Turkish government’s handling of Öcalan after his capture. Lieutenant General Altay Tokat states, “Not executing Öcalan was a mistake… The death penalty should apply to terrorists.” Because Turkey was attempting to join the EU at this time, the death penalty was lifted in order to meet the EU’s requirements outlined in the Copenhagen criteria. The pardoning of Öcalan from a death sentence ultimately allowed the PKK to survive – Öcalan continues to inspire and generate support for the PKK while in prison.

Although the Turkish government has taken political, economic and military countermeasures against the terrorist organization, it has yet to completely eliminate the threat of this rebel group. The PKK remains one of the most important actors in the

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93 Ibid.
94 Kaya, “Turkish Commanders Discuss Counterterrorism Strategies,” 534.
Southeastern region of Turkey and the group’s activities ultimately threaten the overall stability of the nation. Therefore, the Turkish state must always continue to reevaluate its approach to counterterrorism and adopt new strategies to weaken the PKK’s influence in the region.

Any terrorist organization requires extensive financial resources to fund their operations. The PKK is no exception. The PKK has been able to successfully execute terrorist attacks, including car bombings, suicide mission and attacks on European diplomatic buildings due to its ample funds. Specifically, the PKK acquires most of its funding from “foreign aid, drug trafficking, smuggling and extortion,” which creates an expansive network of reliable and consistent financial resources. 95 A 2016 narcoterrorism report conducted by Turkey’s Interior Minister found that the PKK earns approximately $1.7 billion dollars per year through its involvement in cannabis, heroin, opium and cocaine smuggling. 96 This is no surprise given that Turkey is located in a strategically important region – Turkey essentially serves as a bridge between the East and the West, so all of the narcotics going into Western Europe pass through the Turkish interior. As a result, the PKK has been able to capitalize on this opportunity, controlling most of the drug market in the region.

It is imperative that the Turkish state construct a strategy that targets the flow of terrorist financing. Because most of the PKK’s financing seems to come from drug trafficking, the Turkish government needs to implement a strategy that specifically targets these drug networks. First, it is important that Turkey engage in multilateral cooperation with its neighboring states. Turkey does not have the capabilities or resources to combat all of the drug networks in the Golden Crescent, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, so it will be necessary for Turkey to increase dialogue with these countries. For example, in order to limit the amount of opium that flows across the Turkish border, the Turkish state will need to coordinate efforts with the government of Afghanistan. Because there is a lack of effective security organizations and government control in several Afghan provinces, such as Uruzgan, Farah and Kunar, Turkey should provide the necessary military and security personnel in these unstable regions to target opium cultivation at its source. Additionally, in Afghanistan there is no legal framework for controlling “precursor chemicals” — chemicals that are used in the production of the illicit substances. This ultimately makes Afghanistan an ideal location for setting up drug laboratories because individuals can easily transport these precursor chemicals across the border. Therefore, the Turkish government should encourage Afghanistan to implement a strict legal framework, imposing harsh punishment for anyone in possession of such chemicals. This will disable many laboratories in the region — laboratories that the PKK heavily rely upon.

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97 Kanmaz, "Countering Terrorist Financing," 60.
Certainly, these countermeasures will require that the other state actors agree to the terms outlined by the Turkish government. However, in the case of Afghanistan, it is likely that the government will respond positively. This claim is based on the fact that historically, there exists a strong relationship between Ankara and Kabul. Over the past five years, the Turkish government has spent more than $200 million on reconstruction in Afghanistan, building over fifty different schools and hospitals throughout the country. Consequently, this will contribute to the likelihood of future cooperation between the two nations.

Furthermore, the employment of an advanced border security system, including a professional security organization, would likely limit some of the trafficking activities. The Turkish state must combat the smuggling of goods on two fronts – both the land and the sea. Much of narcotics coming through Turkey exit out of the Mediterranean Sea; thus, it will be critical for the Turkish government to employ more Coast Guard personnel to help cut off this route.

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100 Ibid, 61.
Chapter 3: The Arab Spring, The Rise of ISIS and Erdoğan’s Vision

In an act of defiance and what one might consider desperation, young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after a police officer banned him from selling fruit in his rural village. This drastic public act attracted the attention of others in the village, as well as a large segment of the Tunisian population. By the end of the week, protests had erupted across the country demanding that President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali relinquish his powers and a new government take his place. This event, which was referred to as a catalyst for an “Arab Spring”, proved to be start of a revolution that would have far-reaching implications for the Middle East.

When more anti-government protests erupted throughout the rest of the region, including Egypt, Libya and Syria at the start of 2011-12, some scholars believed that the Middle East was on the verge of a “democratic transformation.” These massive demonstrations calling for democratic reform offered some individuals hope that the authoritarian regimes explicitly supported by U.S. alliances would be destroyed, which would ultimately undermine U.S. influence in the region and open the door for other regional actors. The response of the U.S. to the Arab Spring reveals the hypocritical nature of its involvement in the uprisings. For example, two years prior to the downfall

of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, the Obama administration welcomed the totalitarian leader to the Oval Office, praising the success of his leadership in the region.\(^{103}\) However, after the uprisings started to break out in Egypt, the U.S. government quickly adjusted its stance, pledging its support for the revolution after Mubarak declared his resignation. Ultimately, the U.S.’ unwillingness to support the existing regimes, as well as its lack of support during the rebuilding process after the uprisings destabilized the region contributed to the array of problems that would follow in the years to come.

Turkey was one of the countries that initially viewed the Arab Spring through a lens of optimism because President Erdoğan believed that this movement would enable Turkey to serve as the bridge between the West and the Arab World. As a result, Erdoğan’s hope was that he would be able to achieve his neo-Ottoman dream in which Turkey would reassert itself as a prominent regional leader.\(^{104}\)

Even before the Arab Spring, Turkey had been working towards this vision of a neo-Ottoman state. Between 2002-2007, the Turkish government, under the leadership of the AKP, adopted the doctrine: “zero problems with neighbors.”\(^{105}\) This policy essentially emphasized the reengagement of Turkey with Middle Eastern affairs, including expanding trade networks with several Arab countries. For example, during


\(^{104}\) Ibid.

\(^{105}\) Kilic Bugra Kanat, "AK Party’s Foreign Policy: Is Turkey Turning Away from the West?," Insight Turkey, 2010, 205.
this five-year stretch, Turkey attempted to establish a more productive relationship with the new Iraqi state, including signing bilateral agreements with Iraq in an effort to strengthen cooperation between the two countries. Additionally, as tensions between Iraq and Syria worsened in 2009 after frequent insurgency bombings occurred in Iraq, Turkey stepped in and organized indirect talks between the two disputants. Ultimately, the AKP has consistently emphasized the use of “soft power” because according to Ahmet Davutoğlu’s “strategic depth” perspective, Turkey is a “central” country; therefore, it needs to become a “security and stability provider for neighboring countries” in the Middle East, Europe, the Balkans, and Central Asia. These measures reflect Turkey’s broadening scope to appeal to more countries in the Middle East.

The Arab Spring seemed to be the final stage in Erdoğan’s grand vision – Turkey would lead the rest of the Middle East as the Arab world transitioned to democratic rule. However, in reality, this transition was largely unsuccessful. In fact, the Arab Spring proved to be one of the many newly defined destabilizing factors in the region, leading to the proliferation of problems that are ongoing today.

The notion that Turkey would become a regional hegemon soon became a distant reality after the initial protests of the Arab Spring broke out. While Turkey had been committed to its “zero problems with neighbors” policy throughout the early 2000s, the Arab Spring forced Erdoğan to suspend this policy indefinitely. Part of the policy’s

106 Ibid, 212.
107 Ibid, 211.
failure has to do with Turkey’s “willingness to put sectarianism before the principles of
democratization and self-determination.”  

Turkey, along with the rest of the international community, kept silent when the Sunni autocracy in Bahrain violently repressed protests from its Shi‘i population. This nonintervention by Turkey contrasted significantly with Erdoğan’s vision of Turkey being a hegemon in the region. However, this blunder or lack of decisive action in the Gulf was only the start of Turkey’s problems with its neighbors. In 2011 and 2012, Turkey only focused on cultivating a relationship with Saudi Arabia, while neglecting relations with other regional actors. Specifically, Turkey denounced the 2013 military coup in Egypt, expressing support for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and further isolating itself in the region. For the first five years of AKP rule in Turkey, Erdoğan attempted to cultivate a strong and positive relationship with Syria. However, Turkey’s relationship with Syria deteriorated when a full-blown civil war broke out in 2011. This is because Turkey expressed support for the Muslim Brotherhood, believing that Bashar al-Assad’s government would be quickly disbanded and that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would take control of the country.

To Turkey’s dismay, Assad’s regime was not dismantled so easily, and by siding with the rebel forces, Turkey put itself at odds with the Syrian government. As a result,

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109 Cihan Tuğal, The fall of the Turkish model: how the Arab uprisings brought down Islamic Liberalism (London: Verso, 2016), 188.
110 Yaşar Yakış, “Turkey after the Arab Spring: Policy Dilemmas,” Middle East Policy XXI, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 98.
111 Tuğal, The fall of the Turkish model, 188.
112 Ibid, 189.
113 Yakış, "Turkey after the Arab Spring," 98.
President Erdoğan was forced to cut diplomatic ties with Syria – in 2012, the Turkish embassy in Damascus was closed down and latter the Turkish consul general was pulled from his position in Aleppo. The lack of consistent communication channels between Turkey and Syria made it increasingly difficult for Turkish armed forces to combat PKK operations because Syria has remained a pivotal base for the PKK militant branch. The Syrian government had previously cooperated with the Turkish state and had even aided in Turkey’s effort to limit Kurdish influence in the region, but this bilateral cooperation broke down when diplomatic ties were cut and Syria itself descended into civil war.

One of the most significant developments that occurred as a direct result of both the on-going turmoil in Iraq after the U.S. invasion of 2003 and the Arab Spring was the emergence of an invigorated Islamic State (also referred to as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). The civil unrest that followed after the immediate protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria created an ideal climate for terrorist organizations to prosper and expand recruitment. A 2012 report by the United States Intelligence Agency confirmed this claim, stating, “the growing chaos in Syria’s civil war was giving Islamic militants there and in Iraq the space to spread and flourish.” Additionally, it seems as though the uprisings across the Middle East inspired many young Islamists to become radicalized – more radical in the sense that these individuals endorsed violence as a means to accomplish their goals. This radicalization of the youth can be attributed to several different factors. First, the brutal

114Ibid, 99.
crackdowns by the governments in the region led to a violent backlash from its citizens. In Syria, Assad quashed protestors’ efforts to demonstrate in a peaceful manner. As a result of these repressive tactics, “protest groups morphed into fighters.”\(^{116}\) Initially, these individuals likely only had an interest in promoting democratic ideals and protecting their own families, but as they were subjected to the violence of their own government’s forces, many of these men and women looked to non-state actors that had the capabilities to defend themselves against such violence. ISIS and other insurgent groups of similar nature provided these individuals with security and a sense of belonging, while the state was being labeled as the enemy. Also, the U.S.’ mishandling of the 2003 Iraq invasion contributed to the widespread radicalization that took place at this time. While Saddam Hussein was considered to be a brutal tyrant, his oppressive rule had maintained stability within the nation. When the U.S. deposed of Saddam as a result of the invasion, the sectarian tensions that had been suppressed by Saddam’s brutal rule resurfaced. This, along with the U.S.’ attempt to “remake Iraqi society by pushing an American-made constitution,” created an atmosphere in which terrorist organizations could capitalize on.\(^{117}\)

Certainly, the Arab Spring has had an immense impact on the politics and overall stability of the Middle East, transforming it into one of the most volatile and hyperactive regions in the world today. While the effects of this revolution have mostly reverberated throughout the Arab world, exacerbating the sectarian divide between the Sunnis and the

\(^{116}\)Ibid.

Shi‘i, one must also recognize the effect the Spring had on Turkey and its minority Kurdish population there.

The rise of ISIS and the central government crackdowns have presented new obstacles for the Kurdish populations in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, but interestingly enough, the Arab Spring has provided Kurdish political actors with significant opportunities to change the regional status quo that has been in place for decades.\textsuperscript{118} The power vacuums that have been created as a result of the Arab Spring uprisings in Turkey’s neighboring states, Syria and Iraq, have allowed the Kurds to acquire some political influence in the region. At the start of the Syrian civil war, Assad was forced to withdraw government forces from the northern part of the country where most of the Kurdish population was concentrated. As a result, the Kurdish parties that had been previously inactive due to Assad’s intensive surveillance of the region now had the opportunity to enter the political scene. Specifically, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed branch (People’s Protection Units or YPG), which are both closely affiliated with the PKK, immediately took initiative in the wake of the Arab Spring chaos.\textsuperscript{119} With the support of the PKK’s armed unit, the PYD was able to secure control of three Kurdish districts in northern Syria, including Afrin, Kobane and Jazira.\textsuperscript{120} This represented a significant step in achieving Abdullah Öcalan’s original vision of establishing an independent, autonomous Kurdistan. While the geographic layout of these controlled regions is much smaller than Öcalan’s envisioned Kurdistan, this development has allowed the Kurds to advance their

\textsuperscript{118}David Romano, "The “Arab Spring’s” Effect on Kurdish Political Fortunes," \textit{Insight Turkey} 13, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 53.
\textsuperscript{119}Ibid, 54.
\textsuperscript{120}Ibid.
goals of self-determination and recognition of their own culture without any government interference. For example, in both the PYD-controlled districts of Afrin and Kobane, Kurdish officials constructed numerous schools where Kurdish language is now taught.\textsuperscript{121} Even though Turkish and Syrian government officials have attempted to prohibit the use of the Kurdish language through the various state policies they have employed, the PYD’s efforts in northern Syrian have contributed to the revival of Kurdish culture.

When ISIS took the center stage in 2014 in the world of international politics, the Syrian Kurdish combatants received recognition for their efforts to eliminate the threat of ISIS. Although the Turkish state labels the PYD and YPG as terrorist organizations, claiming that the PYD has engaged in undemocratic practices and ethnic cleansing of non-Kurdish populations, President Erdoğan’s efforts to create a negative image of these organizations have been largely unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{122} In fact, the U.S. and other European actors continue to view the PYD in a positive manner. This is because the PYD is considered to be a valuable asset in the fight against the Islamic State. As noted in Chapter 2, the YPG has played several critical roles in the airstrikes by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. In addition, the international media has contributed to this favorable attitude towards these particular Kurdish organizations. Images of YPG women combatants fighting against ISIS soldiers were displayed on various news outlets, which have contributed to international sympathy across the Western world.\textsuperscript{123} While some of the YPG’s actions may fall under the category of terrorism based on the conventional

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
definition of the term, the media has effectively spun many of their actions, so that they are considered to be heroic. In an interview with the *Times*, President Obama claimed that the Kurdish regional government in Iraq is “functional the way we would like to see,” referring to its “largely democratic, largely secular and economically prosperous” qualities.\(^{124}\) Ultimately, without support from the international community, Turkey will find it more difficult to lead any sort of coalition against Kurdish militant groups.

For many years, the various Kurdish groups in the region have competed for power with one another even though many of the different organizations have similar goals. The emergence of ISIS as a common opposition has been a significant unifying force in the past decade. In the fall of 2014, ISIS launched a major attack against the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). Immediately following the assault, the PKK, PYD and PJAK (the Iranian Kurdish militant group closely related to the PYD) came to its aid as ISIS soldiers advanced towards the Kurdish dominated city of Kirkuk.\(^ {125}\) While most of the Kurds consolidation efforts have been primarily confined to Iraq and Syria due to the close proximity to the ISIS frontline, this sort of trans-border unity among various Kurdish groups give Ankara a legitimate reason to be concerned.

As the Kurdish expert, Aliza Marcus, aptly describes Turkey’s concern with the Syrian civil war, “the real fear is not that Syria is dividing, it’s that the Kurds are unifying.”\(^ {126}\) Despite the fact that Ankara and Turkey both have a vested interest in

\(^{125}\)Romano, "The ‘Arab Spring’s’ Effect," 55.  
limiting the expansion of ISIS’ influence in Syria and Iraq, Ankara seems to be more invested in the fight against the Kurds to ensure that they cannot connect the three Kurdish controlled zones – Afrin, Kobane and Jazira – and establish one completely autonomous region.127 This fear has led the Turkish state to conduct several cross-border operations on Syrian Kurdish bases this past year.128 However, it is worth noting that the U.S. does not support these operations or even condone such activities because the Kurdish militant groups are viewed as strategic military allies. In the past few years, several U.S. political interests groups led campaigns to remove the PKK from the U.S. State Department’s terror list.129 Such efforts directly contradict the actions taken by the Turkish state to label more of the Kurdish nationalist groups as terrorist organizations.

The effects of the Arab Spring and the increasingly prevalence of ISIS-initiated attacks have altered the political landscape within Turkey. When Öcalan and the Turkish state declared a bilateral ceasefire in 2011, the Justice and Development party attracted a large number of Kurdish voters because these individuals believed that the government was at least attempting to resolve some of the tension surrounding the Kurdish issue.130 However, this sentiment vanished almost immediately when the Turkish military refrained from assisting the Kurdish city of Kobane from a major ISIS offensive. As a result of Erdoğan’s lack of action and seemingly indifferent attitude toward the attack, many Kurdish voters who had supported the AKP, pledged their allegiance to Kurdish

127 Ibrahim Zabad, Middle Eastern minorities: the impact of the Arab Spring (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).
128 Ibid.
129 Romano, "The ‘Arab Spring’s’ Effect," 55.
130 BBC News, "Who Are Kurdistan Workers' Party.”
nationalist parties.\textsuperscript{131} The results of the June 2015 national elections in Turkey are evidence of this trend. For the first time in the AKP’s history, the party failed to achieve a majority in parliament. Meanwhile, the Peoples’ Democratic Party or HDP, a leftist liberal party that predominantly represents the Kurds, exceeded the 10 percent threshold required to obtain seats in parliament. The June 2015 election yielded approximately 80 seats for the HDP out of 550 total seats, while the AKP failed to acquire the 276-seat majority.\textsuperscript{132} While the AKP still led the election by receiving the most votes, the HDP considered this showing to be a significant victory for them and their Kurdish constituents. President Erdo\u011fan’s recent vision of Turkey entails a regime change from a multi-party parliamentary system to a presidential system that would expand the powers of the executive. This sort of regime change would require that the AKP call a constitutional referendum, meaning it would need to achieve at least 330 seats in parliament.\textsuperscript{133} While Erdo\u011fan has been slowly consolidating political power since he first took the executive office in 2002, the June 2015 election inspired hope for the disenfranchised Kurdish population that the balance of power may be shifting in their favor after decades of oppression.

However, as Turkish history has shown in the past, this power struggle between the Kurds and the Turkish state continues to oscillate with a high frequency. In

\textsuperscript{131}Romano, "The ‘Arab Spring’s’ Effect," 59.
November of 2015, another national election was called after President Erdoğ an failed to form a coalition government after the election in June. This time the AKP was able to regain the 276-majority in the Turkish Parliament by acquiring 316 seats. \(^{134}\) Although this number still falls short of the 330-seat mark required to call a constitutional referendum in order to establish the presidential system that Erdoğ an aspires to see, this is evidence that the balance of power within the Turkish political arena is changing once again. These changes will certainly have a significant impact on the ongoing conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, as the PKK will perceive the November election results as a substantial blow to their own agenda. Ultimately, one should anticipate renewed violence between the PKK insurgents and the Turkish government, especially if the AKP continues to perpetuate its image as an authoritarian regime.

\(^{134}\)Ibid.
Conclusion: With Authoritarianism Comes Peace?

Just a couple hours before midnight on July 15, 2016 Turkish troops set up barricades on the bridges over the Bosphorus strait, which connects the European side and the Asian side of Istanbul. Several military jets were spotted surveying the airspace above the capital, Ankara. Gunshots could be heard on the streets, as hundreds of civilians frantically sought shelter. It didn’t take long before people realized what was happening – Turkey was once again experiencing a military coup attempt. This marked the fourth military coup since the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

While the 2016 military intervention was unsuccessful, the ramifications of this event will surely help dictate the future of Turkish politics. For the coup to succeed, the army faction that went rogue, needed to capitalize on public support in both Ankara and Istanbul. Ultimately, the plotters failed to persuade the civilian population to back their efforts to oust President Erdoğan and the rest of the AKP’s top officials. Erdoğan, who was conveniently situated at a resort in Marmaris when the violence erupted, appeared on social media sites and local news channels using FaceTime to denounce the military coup attempt and urge civilians to take to the streets to oppose the coup.

136 Ibid.
Because the plot was not organized well and had not been communicated properly to the rest of the Turkish Armed Forces, the instigators of the coup had no choice but to surrender after several hours of intense fighting.

The fraction that orchestrated the coup attempt cited the erosion of democracy and Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies as the primary motivators for the military intervention, but evidently, the civilian population either 1) did not believe the military’s intentions or 2) civilian interests diverge from the interests of the military. Given Turkey’s turbulent history involving military coups and the subsequent developments following each one of these military interventions, it is not surprising to see Turkish civilians expressing reluctance to support the military. The AKP’s opposition parties even shared this sentiment regarding the coup. For example, the leader of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, publicly denounced the coup attempt, stating, “It should be known that the CHP fully depends on the free will of the people as indispensable of our parliamentary democracy.” From his statement, it seems as though the CHP, as well as the other political actors, were hesitant to pledge support for the coup because of the Turkish military’s history of establishing authoritarian rule following an intervention such as this.

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138 Drew Kinney, "Civilian Actors in the Turkish Military Drama of July 2016," Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs 1, no. 10 (September 19, 2016): 2.
139 Ibid, 6.
However, although the civilians and the CHP are adamant about preserving democracy in Turkey, their lack of support for the coup may in fact have the opposite effect. The Turkish government has blamed Fethullah Gülen, a U.S.-based Muslim cleric, for inspiring the coup attempt. In response to the foiled coup, President Erdoğan has adopted several measures to ensure that another situation such as this does not arise again. His first course of action was to issue a three-month state of emergency, which involved an extensive purging process – imprisoning thousands of military personnel, university professors, journalists, judges and police officers, as well as enhancing the government’s media surveillance policies. Ultimately, despite some political actors’ legitimate concerns for human rights abuses and infringements on basic democratic liberties, Erdoğan has been able to justify this crackdown by arguing that these sorts of measures are necessary for maintaining political order. Yüksel Sezgin describes the effect the military coup attempt has had on Erdoğan’s image:

Erdoğan is now more popular than ever… It is most likely that the government will want to capitalize on its rising popularity and call for early elections in a few months. It will not be a surprise if his party wins a supermajority in an early election that would allow Erdoğan to move from amending the constitution to rewriting it — leverage this failed coup as a way to turn Turkey into a full-blown civil dictatorship.

When Sezgin first made this claim, he was likely stating what he considered to be the worst possible scenario for the future of Turkey’s democracy. In this sense, he may not have realized that his prediction would actually have the potential to materialize. However, on April 16, 2017, Sezgin’s prediction became a reality. In the constitutional

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140"Turkey's coup attempt."
142Ibid, 11.
referendum, the majority of Turkish voters agreed to grant expansive powers to the executive, ending the current parliamentary system of government. Under what is being referred to as a “super-presidency,” the position of the prime minister will be abolished; Erdoğan will be able to dismiss members of parliament, nominate judges, and exert complete control over the national budget; and the five-year presidential term limit will no longer be enforced, meaning Erdoğan will be eligible to stay in office until 2029.143

Given the aggressive nature of the AKP’s campaign efforts, one based on intimidation and fear, it is somewhat surprising that the proposal only passed narrowly. This reflects the polarizing dynamic of Turkish politics, which has only continued to intensify over the years with the Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Turkey and the conflict in neighboring Syria. For approximately half of Turkey’s 75 million inhabitants, including the AKP’s main opposition parties and the Kurdish nationalist groups, the outcome of the referendum is catastrophic. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu adamantly protested the proposed constitutional changes as votes were being cast on Sunday, arguing, “We will put 80 million people… on a bus with no brakes.”144 Without the checks and balances of other presidential systems, such as the United States and France, Erdoğan will be able to achieve his aspiration of a one-man rule. This will ultimately enable him to achieve some of his more controversial political goals because he will no longer be accountable to members of parliament or the general populace. One of Erdoğan’s long-term objectives

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has been to resolve the Kurdish issue (or at least he crafts his policy agenda in this manner; in reality, it is likely that Erdoğan just wants to suppress the Kurds and their various militant groups to the point that they can no longer influence Turkish politics).

For more than thirty years, the Turkish state and the PKK have been entangled in conflict with one another – and for these thirty years, a victor has yet to be determined, as the balance of power has continued to fluctuate every few months. Although the outcome of this referendum may jeopardize the last vestige of democracy in Turkey, it may provide some clarity on the Kurdish issue and the conflict in Southeastern Turkey. For one, a decisive victory for President Erdoğan may present an opportunity for peace. The Kurdish movement will likely experience a profound shift. The PKK’s initial goal of a “national democratic revolution” and the establishment of a completely autonomous nation-state is no longer a realistic objective now that the balance of powers have been tipped in favor of Erdoğan. Instead, it seems as though the Kurds, even the militant factions, may be open to a “solution within Turkey,” – a solution that does not require the rearrangement of existing borders. To some hardcore Kurdish nationalists, this move may seem like the Kurds are accepting defeat, but to others, they are just accepting the new geopolitical realities of the region. If Erdoğan can at least be willing to acknowledge some of the Kurds more modest demands, then it is possible that the violence that has plagued the nation for the past three decades could come to an end. Democracy in Turkey may be on its way out, but with the emergence of authoritarianism, peace may finally be within reach.

145 Steele, "Turkey and the Kurds.”
146 Ibid.
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