

Dynamics of the PKK Terror Organization in Türkiye's Contemporary Security Issues

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ABSTRACT

The conflict between Türkiye and the Kurds has a long history, dating back to the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic. Policies of Turkification and marginalization toward minorities have contributed to systemic injustices against the Kurds, fostering resistance movements, among which Abdullah Öcalan's Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) is the most prominent. Initially advocating for an independent Kurdistan, the PKK later shifted its objective toward securing greater autonomy for the Kurdish people. However, the organization's methods, characterized by radicalism and acts of terror, have posed significant national security challenges for Türkiye. Despite peace negotiations between 2012 and 2015, hostilities resurged, leading to a renewed cycle of conflict and violence. This study examines Türkiye's response to the breakdown of the peace process with the PKK through securitization efforts. The analysis employs the securitization theory, focusing on two key variables: the speech act and extraordinary measures. The study explores how securitization is orchestrated by state actors, particularly President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with the intended audience being Türkiye's citizens and the international community. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Türkiye's security dynamics by assessing the PKK insurgency in the post-peace process period.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the PKK insurgency is deeply intertwined with the long-standing conflict between Türkiye and the Kurdish ethnic group, a struggle that has persisted for centuries. The origins of this tension can be traced to the historical status of the Kurds as a minority group, both before the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye and during the Ottoman Empire's rule over Anatolia. Hopes for Kurdish autonomy briefly emerged with the Treaty of Sèvres following the Ottoman defeat in World War I (Atmaca, 2022). The treaty, brokered by the Allied powers, promised the Kurds an independent state, Kurdistan, spanning southeastern Türkiye and extending into Syria, Iraq, and Iran. However, this promise was never realized, as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's nationalist forces successfully resisted foreign influence during the Turkish War of Independence. Their victory culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923, which not only established Türkiye's territorial sovereignty but also extinguished Kurdish aspirations for statehood (Ibid).

Atatürk's leadership in securing Türkiye's independence reinforced his authority to implement policies of Turkification aimed at culturally assimilating ethnic minorities. Under this policy, even those of Kurdish descent were required to speak Turkish (Demir, 2017). The impact of Turkification was far-reaching: Turkish was institutionalized as the sole official language in education, public spaces, and government administration. Consequently, the Kurdish language was suppressed, reflecting Türkiye's broader nationalization efforts to forge a singular national identity. These restrictions on cultural expression fueled recurring Kurdish uprisings against the Turkish government, as successive administrations continued policies that marginalized the Kurdish population.



These systemic policies and perceived injustices from the Kurdish perspective ultimately gave rise to various resistance movements, culminating in the emergence of *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK) as a radical force following the 1971 military coup (Jongerden, 2017). Abdullah Öcalan, a student activist, formally established the PKK in 1978, grounding its ideology in Marxism-Leninism as an anti-colonial struggle against what it perceived as Türkiye's oppression of Kurdish independence. The PKK rapidly expanded its influence, effectively mobilizing support by highlighting the Turkish government's alleged injustices. Over time, the organization engaged in sustained acts of terrorism in pursuit of its objectives, posing a direct threat to Türkiye's national security. PKK activities escalated significantly after 1984, encompassing armed attacks, civilian massacres, suicide bombings, and even involvement in drug trafficking as a means of financing their operations (Middle East Eye, 2016).

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) has consistently sought Kurdish statehood, alongside demands for full regional autonomy and political rights within the Republic of Türkiye (Yetim, 2015). The group's militant operations and strategic alliances illustrate its enduring commitment to these objectives. In response, the Turkish government formally designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, citing its threat to national security and sovereignty. Military operations against the PKK intensified, particularly after 1984, following a controversial crackdown on expressions of Kurdish language and culture after the 1980 coup. The period between 1984 and 1993 witnessed some of the most aggressive counterinsurgency efforts by Türkiye, marked by widespread arrests and direct military confrontations.

One of the largest operations against the PKK occurred in 1997 under Operation Hammer, during which Türkiye deployed over 50,000 troops to combat insurgents in Iraqi territories, resulting in the capture of over 3,000 PKK militants and 400 casualties (Fisunoğlu, 2020). The Turkish government achieved a significant victory in 1999 with the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya by Turkish special forces. He was subsequently imprisoned on an island in the Sea of Marmara, yet the PKK's resistance persisted. Öcalan's arrest temporarily led to a ceasefire between the Turkish government and Kurdish separatists, but it did not deter PKK sympathizers or guerrillas from continuing their struggle. His capture triggered large-scale protests among Kurds worldwide, exacerbating tensions between the PKK and the Turkish government (Leezenberg, 2016). Despite intermittent ceasefires in the early 21st century, hostilities between the two sides persisted, with military clashes, terrorist attacks, and bombings continuing to shape Türkiye's security landscape. The conflict's cross-border dimensions, extending into Iraq and Syria, further complicated Türkiye's security policies.

The rise of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) in Turkish politics introduced new dynamics in Türkiye-PKK relations. Initially, the AKP implemented reforms that eased some restrictions on Kurdish culture and language. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government even pursued a peace process between 2012 and 2015, seeking a long-term resolution to the conflict. However, this initiative ultimately failed, and by 2015, large-scale military operations against the PKK had resumed. Türkiye has since intensified its counterinsurgency campaigns, conducting airstrikes and ground operations against PKK strongholds in Iraq and Syria (Englehart, 2016). Meanwhile, the PKK has continued its insurgency, targeting major Turkish cities through bombings and mobilizing support through various means (Ibid).

Given the longstanding and evolving nature of Türkiye's conflict with the PKK, spanning from its early inception to the AKP's rule and Erdoğan's securitization policies. It is evident that the Turkish government perceives the PKK as a fundamental threat to national security. Türkiye's official classification of the PKK as a terrorist organization underscores its broader strategy to ensure national stability and protect its citizens. This study, while recognizing the Turkish government's counterterrorism and counter-separatism efforts, also argues that the PKK issue has been securitized as part of Türkiye's broader policy to eliminate perceived threats to its national identity and interests. By examining the securitization of the PKK issue under Erdoğan's administration, this research explores how Kurdish separatism has been framed as a national emergency within Türkiye's security discourse.

2. THEORY AND METHODS

This study employs the securitization theory from the Copenhagen School, developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde in their 1998 book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. The theory posits that when an issue is framed as a security threat, relevant actors can justify extraordinary measures to address it. Securitization occurs when a designated actor presents an issue as an existential threat to an audience, thereby legitimizing exceptional policies or actions (Buzan et al., 1998). Typically, securitizing actors are entities with significant authority or influence, such as governments, political leaders, or organizations, while the audience consists of the general public or specific societal groups.

To validate securitization, Buzan and his colleagues (1998) outline key components, including the following stages: Speech Act—This refers to the rhetorical process through which an actor constructs

and communicates a security threat to an audience, persuading them to accept the securitization narrative. In the context of this study, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as the representative of the Turkish government, functions as the primary securitizing actor. The PKK insurgency is framed as an existential threat, allowing the Turkish government to deploy national security rhetoric; and Extraordinary Measures—These are actions taken by the securitizing actor, legitimized through the securitization process, to neutralize the perceived threat. This study reflects this stage in the Turkish government's policies and countermeasures against the PKK insurgency aimed at preserving national security. Once these stages are successfully enacted, securitization is achieved. This theoretical framework provides a lens for analyzing the PKK's role in Türkiye's national security discourse and enables a structured examination of the Turkish government's securitization efforts.

This study also employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze the dynamics of the PKK as a terrorist organization within the context of Türkiye's national security. Qualitative methods facilitate descriptive analysis in exploring social and humanitarian issues. Data collection is conducted through a literature-based approach, utilizing sources such as scholarly articles, books, reports, and other relevant references to develop a comprehensive and holistic analysis (Creswell, 2018).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research builds on previous literature that is relevant to the issues and dynamics between Türkiye and the PKK, which is considered one of the most radical representations of Kurdish ethnic resistance. The literature reviewed in this study includes the following:

First, the journal article “Analysis of the End of the Kurdistan Partiya Karkeren Terrorist Organization in Turkey” by Pradnyana and Rofii (2020) discusses the history of the PKK, designated as a terrorist organization by Türkiye since 1984. This article examines the evolution of the PKK's objectives, particularly after the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan. Initially, the PKK was known for its militant actions aimed at securing Kurdish independence. However, in more recent years, the organization has shifted towards political engagement, advocating for regional autonomy and greater political representation within Türkiye. The article also explores the PKK's involvement in legislative politics, particularly through its support for the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the only major political party representing Kurdish interests in Türkiye.

Second, the journal article “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order” by Oğuzlu (2020) analyzes Türkiye's shifting foreign policy orientation from 2002 to the present. The study highlights Türkiye's transition from a predominantly Western-aligned stance to a more balanced approach with stronger ties with China and Russia. This shift is partly driven by Türkiye's security concerns in the Middle East, particularly regarding the PKK. Given that PKK operations extend beyond Türkiye's southeastern borders into Syria and Iraq, the Turkish government has sought strategic alliances with neighboring states to bolster its counterterrorism efforts and safeguard national sovereignty.

Third, the journal article “The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2009–2015” by Savran (2020) examines the fluctuating peace negotiations between Türkiye and the PKK during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Unlike previous administrations that relied on military suppression, the AKP government initially pursued reconciliation, emphasizing Islamic unity over nationalist sentiment. This diplomatic approach significantly influenced Abdullah Öcalan's stance on Kurdish rights and autonomy. However, the peace process collapsed following a series of events, including the 2014 Kobani protests and the 2015 Surobombing. As a result, hostilities between the Turkish government and the PKK resumed, with military confrontations persisting in the years that followed.

These studies are relevant to this research as they offer interconnected perspectives on the PKK's evolution and Türkiye's response to the Kurdish issue. The literature collectively illustrates the PKK's strategic shift from armed militancy to political advocacy while also shedding light on Türkiye's approach to the conflict, particularly under the AKP government. Although the peace process ultimately failed, the Kurdish issue remains a central concern in Türkiye's national security strategy. Consequently, Türkiye's foreign policy increasingly emphasizes diplomatic alliances to gain international legitimacy in its fight against the PKK.

What distinguishes this study from previous research is its focus on the PKK's role in Türkiye's national security discourse following the collapse of the peace process, specifically from 2015 to 2023. This research Barry Buzan's securitization theory (1998) to analyze how Turkish state actors have framed the PKK as an existential threat. By examining Türkiye's securitization efforts during Erdoğan's leadership, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary dynamics between Türkiye and the PKK.

3.1. Failure of the Türkiye-PKK Peace Process

The PKK has been involved in numerous violent incidents, including bombings and civilian attacks, such as those in 2010 in the Siirt, Batman, and Hakkari regions (Al-Asyura & Basyar, 2022). The conflict escalated further in 2012 when the PKK mobilized forces to attack Turkish soldiers, resulting in the deaths of eight Turkish soldiers in a coordinated assault led by PKK commander Bahoz Erdal. Türkiye responded by deploying additional troops, eliminating approximately 26 PKK fighters.

Despite the ongoing hostilities, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Turkish government sought to negotiate peace with the PKK. Following more than six months of negotiations, Erdoğan engaged directly with Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's leader, leading to the circulation of a letter calling for a ceasefire. On April 25, 2013, the PKK announced the withdrawal of its troops to Northern Iraq, signaling the implementation of the ceasefire (Albayrak, 2013).

The PKK recognized that achieving a military victory over Türkiye was unrealistic given the asymmetry in military capability. Consequently, the group shifted its strategy toward advocating for greater political autonomy and enhanced rights for ethnic Kurds (Pradnyana & Rofii, 2020). Conversely, the Erdoğan administration sought a compromise to address Kurdish demands while maintaining national unity. However, a fundamental flaw in the peace process was the lack of commitment from both sides. The PKK believed that its demands for regional autonomy had not been adequately addressed, while Türkiye viewed these demands as an attempt to create a "state within a state" and thus deemed them unacceptable (Akgül & Görgün Akgül, 2023).

The absence of a clear consensus between the two parties led to the stagnation of the peace process. Additionally, Türkiye's insistence on the immediate withdrawal and disarmament of Kurdish forces contributed to the breakdown. The PKK, wary of being deceived, was prepared for the possibility of renewed conflict. Ultimately, in June 2015, the ceasefire collapsed, coinciding with the conclusion of Türkiye's elections. In an effort to strengthen its legitimacy in combating the PKK, Türkiye sought international support. Notably, the U.S. Department of State affirmed Türkiye's right to securitize and combat the PKK as a terrorist organization (Bagheri, 2017).

The PKK's resurgence remains a significant concern for the Turkish government, as the group's actions have inflicted substantial national losses. The security of Turkish citizens is particularly at risk due to bombings in public areas, infrastructure destruction, and acts of violence. Türkiye bears the responsibility of ensuring the safety of its people. Moreover, heightened security measures are being implemented, particularly in the eastern and southeastern regions, which are vital for Türkiye's energy projects and pipeline networks (Savran, 2020).

3.2. Türkiye's Securitization of the PKK

The breakdown of the peace agreement with the PKK has had significant consequences for Türkiye in its efforts to protect itself from terrorist threats. A series of PKK attacks continued, culminating in a major incident in the capital, Ankara, on 17 February 2016 (Çelikkpala & Erşen, 2018). The tragic attack resulted in at least 28 fatalities and approximately 65 injuries. During this period, 75 fatalities were reported among state security forces, while 107 PKK militants were also killed. The 17 February attack marked the deadliest single event in the conflict between Türkiye and the PKK from 2015 to 2023. In addition to targeting civilians, the PKK has also attacked government officials, as demonstrated by the assassination of Orhan Mercan, Deputy Regent of Diyarbakır, who was shot in front of his home by PKK militants on 1 July 2017. Furthermore, a suicide bombing occurred in İskenderun on 26 October 2020 during a police raid, just before the perpetrator, identified as a PKK member, could detonate an explosive device.

The protracted conflict between these two parties continues to inflict significant human suffering. According to a report by the International Crisis Group, the hostilities between Türkiye and the PKK from 20 July 2015, to the end of 2023 resulted in approximately 6,922 deaths. Of these, 622 were civilians, 1,467 were military personnel, 226 were individuals of unknown affiliation, and 4,607 were PKK militants (International Crisis Group, 2024). The high casualty figures, national security concerns, infrastructure damage, and disruption of public facilities have reinforced Türkiye's perception of the PKK insurgency as a significant threat, prompting the state to adopt securitization measures. This is not the first instance of Türkiye securitizing the PKK issue. Before the AKP came to power in 2002, the Turkish government had already undertaken securitization efforts through military operations, diplomatic initiatives to designate the PKK as a terrorist organization, and other related measures (Hama, 2020).

According to Buzan's securitization theory (1998), securitization follows specific stages, beginning with the "Speech Act." In the context of the PKK insurgency, even after the failure of the peace process, the key securitizing actor was the Turkish government, represented by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. His rhetoric played a crucial role in framing the PKK insurgency as a national security threat. In August 2015, President Erdoğan announced on national television his intent to launch a military

campaign against Kurdish militants, stating, “We are going to continue the resistance until the PKK disarms and there is not a single terrorist left in our homeland” (i24 News, 2015). This declaration served as a direct mandate for the Turkish government to deploy military force against PKK militants in defense of national security.

Given the historical pattern of conflict and ceasefires between Türkiye and the PKK, Erdoğan's rhetoric resonated strongly with Turkish citizens. His speeches consistently condemned the PKK and reinforced the government's commitment to eradicating the perceived terrorist threat. Following the 17 February 2016, Ankara bombing, President Erdoğan stated, “We, as a sovereign state, will never give up our right to self-defense against all terror threats” (Way & Akan, 2017). Over the following years, he continued to employ security rhetoric and nationalist sentiments in response to PKK attacks.

As the securitization process advanced, the Turkish government leveraged public support to justify the implementation of “Extraordinary Measures.” The most notable aspect of Türkiye's securitization strategy was its military operations against the PKK. Following the collapse of the peace process, the Turkish military intensified its operations, deploying troops and fighter aircraft. Between August 2015 and March 2016, the government expanded the scale of its military campaign, resulting in the deaths of at least 4,000 PKK militants. These operations extended beyond Turkish territory, targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq and Syria, aligning with Türkiye's broader foreign policy objectives of assisting neighboring countries affected by civil conflict (International Crisis Group, 2024, p. 9).

In 2018, Türkiye launched Operation Olive Branch in northern Syria to confront Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) militants, whom it considers closely linked to the PKK. Although the PKK's presence in Syria was beyond Türkiye's borders, the Turkish government deemed its eradication essential to national security. Under the command of Ismail Metin Temel, 6,400 Turkish troops, in collaboration with the Syrian National Army, launched an assault on Afrin, ultimately capturing the city. This operation was part of a broader effort to weaken the PKK's influence, despite ongoing security challenges posed by groups such as ISIS (Smoleń, 2019).

Military operations continued in 2019 with Operation Peace Spring, aimed at securing the strategic cities of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad in northern Syria (Aktürk, 2020). The offensive, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 508 PKK militants, drew criticism from Western nations and Middle Eastern neighbors, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Nonetheless, Türkiye remained resolute in its counterterrorism efforts, even conducting cross-border airstrikes. In June 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Türkiye launched Operation Claw-Eagle and Tiger in northern Iraq, followed by Operation Claw-Lightning and Thunderbolt in 2021, targeting PKK strongholds in Metina, Avaşin-Basyan, and Zap. These operations resulted in the deaths or capture of at least 387 PKK militants (Anadolu Ajansı, 2021).

An analysis of Türkiye's counterterrorism measures from 2021 to 2023 reveals a geographic shift in PKK activities, with attacks increasingly occurring outside Turkish territory. This suggests that each military operation aimed to push the PKK further away from Türkiye to enhance national security. In addition to military action, Türkiye has conducted mass arrests of individuals suspected of PKK affiliations since the collapse of the peace process. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has faced potential dissolution if its members are found to have PKK ties. Furthermore, Türkiye has sought to extradite PKK-affiliated individuals from European Union countries. For instance, in June 2023, Sweden agreed to extradite a man suspected of supporting the PKK, aligning with its broader interest in NATO accession while facilitating Türkiye's extraterritorial securitization efforts (Le Monde, 2023).

These developments illustrate the key stages of Türkiye's securitization of the PKK, which is perceived as a terrorist organization posing a significant national security threat. The state's securitization measures have been pursued alongside efforts to address broader challenges such as inflation, natural disasters, and domestic instability, all aimed at ensuring comprehensive national security.

4. CONCLUSION

The conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish state has a long and complex history that dates back to the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. Over time, this conflict has led to waves of resistance, with the PKK emerging as a radical entity advocating for Kurdish rights in response to perceived injustices. However, the PKK's methods, characterized by violent insurgency and acts of terrorism, have posed significant threats to Türkiye's national security and territorial integrity. Efforts to combat the PKK have persisted since the organization first engaged in acts of terrorism in the 1980s. While a peace process was initiated between 2012 and 2015, it ultimately failed due to the absence of a binding consensus and irreconcilable demands from both parties. As a result, hostilities resumed in 2015 and have continued to the present.

Following the breakdown of the peace process, Türkiye has intensified its securitization efforts to counter PKK insurgency and protect national sovereignty. This securitization process follows distinct stages, beginning with the Speech Act, in which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has consistently framed the PKK as a terrorist threat that must be eradicated. The second stage, Extraordinary Measures, involves direct state actions, including large-scale military operations and the arrests of individuals suspected of affiliation with the PKK. As the securitization process has evolved, it is evident that Türkiye perceives the PKK insurgency as a critical national security issue requiring decisive intervention. However, despite these efforts, the conflict remains deeply entrenched, reflecting its broader complexities and the enduring challenges of achieving a lasting resolution.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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