ANKARA VS. THE PKK: OLD WAR, NEW STRATEGIES

Since the end of July 2015, Turkey has been mired in a spiral of violence. The escalating clashes between Ankara and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have shifted to urban settlements. Some suggest that Turkey is moving towards civil war while others assert that all these clashes can still be understood within the terror/counter-terror paradigm. When analyzing the space of clashes, the actors involved, the level of popular support, and some certain thresholds of violence, the author concludes that the current state of the conflict is in a limbo zone beyond the terror/counter-terror paradigm and below the insurgency/counter-insurgency (COIN) paradigm. Therefore, he argues, Ankara should alter its enemy-centric strategy of fighting the PKK, and instead employ a hybrid approach that draws from both paradigms.

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S ince 20 July 2015, Turkey has been mired in a spiral of violence. During the clashes in which nearly one thousand people lost their lives, the level of violence initiated by both the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish security forces has rapidly increased as the clashes have spread into urban settlements. In addition to the rising death toll, the direct consequence of these urban clashes is socio-economic destruction, which has been getting worse with every passing day. Unfortunately, if the critical violence thresholds that have been crossed are not well analyzed, the spiral of violence in Turkey may turn into a "trap of violence, implying a new wave of prolonged conflict which would be difficult to resolve in years to come."[1]

When the course of events are analyzed in the context of the post-November 1 elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) seemed, on the one hand, to interpret the political legitimacy created by its critical victory as license to be more kinetic against the PKK on the field. The PKK, on the other hand, is relying on its international legitimacy, which it believes has increased due to its fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq, and via the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. The alliances the PKK has established with global actors and the military capabilities it has acquired recently are tempting the PKK to see itself as on a path to victory. Simply put, the post-election setting is a power struggle between two actors who feel empowered. Ankara seems intent on breaking off the international support gained by the PKK, and the PKK's goal of popularizing its base. In turn, the PKK seems focused on eroding the credibility of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP.

The Tactical Situation on the Ground

It is evident that the PKK initiated the clashes that started on 20 July 2015 and was very well prepared both on a political and tactical level. The PKK has been impos-ing upon the state and the security forces the model it calls "self-governance" in Kurdish-majority towns, particularly the ones on the border such as Cizre, Silopi, Şırnak, Yüksekova, and Şemdinli. Self-governance is a bottom-up approach imple-mented through urban guerrilla techniques belittling state authority in those towns, and denying state security forces access to certain neighborhoods through armed resistance. With this approach, the PKK is calling on everyone to establish self-defense forces in his/her neighborhood and resist with force of arms if the state dares to breach those ditches and barricades preventing state access to their streets. This call for resistance made to local civilians provides personnel and preserves re-sources for the PKK while forcing Turkey into a new kind of struggle which Ankara

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[1] Metin Gürcan, "As both sides rattle sabers, Is Turkey on the brink of civil war?," *Al-Monitor*, 14 December 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-clashes-between-pkk-and-security-forces-civil-war.html

is not quite familiar with. As a result, the PKK is retreating into towns; that is, the message publicly sent to the security forces is "come and take me out if you have the strength to do so." The security forces have mastered the fight against rural guerilla tactics, but are having difficulty adapting to this new situation. An important dynamic in the

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PKK's effort to establish "self-defense power" is that it gives initiative to local decision makers within its flanks with regard to action, planning, and execution. We can define this approach as franchising violence to the lower echelons, whereby the PKK maintains the operational pace and shares its struggle and power with the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) militias.

Turkish security forces are, in turn, establishing their field dominance very well in the rural areas thanks to their technology-intensive fighting capabilities, close air support (CAS), direct operations by Special Forces (SF), and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) reconnaissance competencies. Owing to this new package of capabilities, it is not seen as a possibility for the PKK to take hold in the rural areas. But when urban space becomes the sphere of conflict, the police are forced to manage a level of violence for which it is not at all prepared. In October and November of 2015, Ankara was forced to ask itself whether it should militarize the police or make the army more police-like. We understand from the most recent operations that Ankara has decided to form hybrid fighting squads consisting of police special operation units (PÖH), Gendarmerie special operations units (JÖH), commando teams, and armored units from the army and SF teams.

This new approach to the fight has brought tanks and heavy armored vehicles into towns, something the people of Turkey viewed as a phenomenon from the past. Since early December 2015, Ankara has been trying to besiege the districts in which the clashes are going on from other parts of the towns, and to isolate those towns in which clashes are going on from the rest of Turkey. This strategy can be defined as a long lasting siege, where the operational objective is to cut logistical support off from the PKK members inside and break their determination and will to carry on the armed resistance. Ankara plans to hold those districts with a significant military build-up and establishing posts at the clash zones after the PKK members inside fall. Due to this siege strategy, it is certain that the groups commonly made up of experienced PKK fighters and the youngsters in the YDG-H are going to suffer from scarcity of weapons, ammunition, and logistics. For example, in Cizre

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and Silopi, where the government announced that the operations have ended, there are still structural problems hindering the normalization of everyday life in the embattled cities. In the reconstruction phase, the government seems to prioritize security over freedom in these city centers, and thus curfews preventing people from returning back to their homes, are still in effect. While the government has swiftly constructed well-fortified police stations and placed security cameras on every street in those towns, it has been slow in addressing infrastructure problems such as electricity lines and water systems. On 5 February 2016, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu disclosed a reconstruction package including the economic revival of the southeast, security-related issues, and cultural rights pertaining to the Kurds.[2] This package, however, does not include concrete rehabilitation steps that make a difference in the everyday lives of the hundreds of thousands who have been affected by the clashes. This "security-first" approach does not provide answers to the question of whether or not the western provinces of Turkey will have a peaceful spring as it is directly related to how the PKK responds to Ankara's encirclement strategy. The PKK has only one card it can play to break Ankara's tightening security measures in the region. It can carry the fight to the western provinces of Turkey in order to relieve the pressure it faces in the southeast and expand its front line.[3]

Changing Characteristics of the Clashes

Some in Turkey are inclined to describe this new wave of conflict as regressing back to the state of affairs in the 1990s, based on the cyclical understanding of history.[4] This conflict, however, should be addressed with a linear understanding of history as the space of conflict, actors involved, and the very nature of it have changed. A comparison of this new wave of hostilities with the one in the 1990s would help people understand why this is not the direction the conflict is moving in.

Several factors distinguish the current round of clashes from the violence of the 1990s: shifting the fight to urban centers, the involvement of PKK youth

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[2] "Turkey's 'counterterror' action plan vows to restore bonds amid public skepticism," *Rudaw*, 10 February 2016.

[3] Metin Gürcan, "Are clashes spreading to western Turkey?" *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-kurdish-militant-clashes-pkk-tak.html

[4] Celal Baslangıç, "90'lara mı dönüyoruz? [Are we going back to 90s?]," *Cumhuriyet*, 11 September 2015.

militias, activist violence, the entry of proxies, and the increased importance of regional dynamics.

From rural clashes to urban ones: In the 1990s, the clashes were contained to rural areas away from civilians. Now, however, the PKK has turned human terrain into an arena of conflict, where the clashes are amidst civilians in towns. While being with or near civilians provides both protection and mobility for the PKK, it also increases the risk of civilian losses that exacerbate frustration towards the state. It is likely that, for the time being, rural clashes are of secondary importance. One may argue that although the Turkey-PKK conflict started as a rural one in 1984, it will certainly end in urban settlements. When the clashes spread to the urban centers, the increase in civilian casualties is inevitable. The fact that 80 percent of total civilian casualties were in the city centers or in their vicinity in the five-month period between July 20th and December 20th is a clear indicator of this trend.[5]

The rise of youth militias: The distinction between combatant-civilian, terrorist-militia, and guerilla-sympathizer was more or less clear during the 1990s. In this new setting, however, civilians, particularly youngsters, are the ones on the frontlines. The issue of how much activist and military violence these youngsters are initiating on behalf of the PKK, to what extent they are terrorists or civilians, and how armed or unarmed they are has been getting blurred

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in terms of the law and in domestic politics.[6] The involvement of YDG-H militias under the age of 18 in the clashes is perhaps the most important dynamic affecting the very nature of clashes. The main motivation of those youngsters living in the suburbs of the cities does not, in fact, seem to be primarily ideology. For those youngsters who are devoted to the organization at the level of hooliganism, violence (devastation, street protests, racketeering, etc.) is a source of both joy and living.[7] During my field trips, I observed that many youngsters in the PKK's "Mad Max" generation are inclined to turn violence into the end itself and not just a means.[8]

[5] Metin Gürcan, "Çatışmaların stratejik düğüm noktası: Cizre" [The strategic crucial point of the clashes], *T24*, 20 December 2015, http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/metin-gurcan/catismalarin-stratejik-dugum-noktasi-cizre,13489

[6] Metin Gürcan, "The PKK's child terrorists," *Al-Monitor*, 21 December 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-child-terrorists-dilemma.html

[7] Metin Gürcan, "Generallerin Başını Okşadığı 'Terörist'," [The 'terrorist' who was patted by the Generals], *T24*, 15 December 2015, http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/metin-gurcan/generallerin-basini-oksadigi-terorist,13442

[8] Metin Gürcan, "PKK looks to the future with the creation of young militias," *Al-Monitor*, 31 August 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/turkey-kurds-pkk-armed-young-militias.html

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New strategies: The PKK thinks that it can further its aim of "democratic autonomy" with a new strategy by setting thresholds it thinks the state cannot exceed. In this sense, the PKK seems to be using new tactics of violence, which are not as extreme as those of the guerrilla war, but whose symbolic effect is strong enough to achieve its political objectives. With ID controls, fireworks, street protests, taxation, provision of justice, and civil disobedience in the Kurdish-majority towns in southeast Turkey, the PKK is trying to prove that it can paralyze the state authority with activist violence initiated by locals without appealing to a full-fledged guerrilla war.

Franchising the violence and the entry of proxies: In the clashes of the 1990s, the PKK and the state both seemed to be highly hierarchical and disciplined actors that made decisions about critical actions/operations at very high levels. But now, one might say that the PKK has been "franchising" armed violence. In fact, the PKK borrowed this tactic from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has utilized it very well. The field commands at the local level are given initiative to make decisions regarding action, planning, and execution. In addition, collaboration with other armed groups espousing radical leftist ideology is being sought to enhance operational effectiveness. Similar to five or ten people coming together and opening up a Burger King branch, the PKK is handing over its monopoly on the use of armed violence to the local field commands or to the groups it considers to be close to itself. The greatest advantage of this tactic for the organization is that it makes the organization hard to pin down at the local level and renders it very hard to defeat. Its greatest harm, however, is that it makes the clashes dirtier and increases civilian deaths.

An example of this franchise model occurred in the last two weeks of 2015. On December 23rd at about 2:00 am in the aircraft parking area at Sabiha Gökçen Airport in Istanbul, four explosions occurred approximately 100 meters from each other, killing one female cleaning worker. On December 26th, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons – *Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan* (TAK), whose founders include former PKK members Cemil Bayık, Duran Kalkan and Mustafa Karasu, claimed responsibility for the attack. Founded during a 2003 PKK meeting, TAK is organizing terrorist attacks in city centers. The organization acts like a completely independent structure and the PKK does not claim responsibility for their attacks.

Why does the PKK not carry out the actions in the west of Turkey aimed at critical targets and civilians directly itself, but instead utilizes proxies (the armed groups close to it)? The answer is that the PKK does not want to tarnish the international reputation it has recently gained thanks to the success of its Syrian affiliate, the PYD, in fighting ISIL, by attacking civilian targets in metropolitan areas. Under these circumstances, the attacks are carried out by proxies, who were formerly a part of the PKK but are not directly and organically connected to it, and whose existence may be easily denied by the PKK. This situation is a new concept Ankara is not familiar with. As Ankara wants to tighten security measures in the southeast, Ankara and Istanbul can be targets of dramatic actions directly targeting civilians for the purpose of shutting down life. More interestingly, Ankara should be prepared for the PKK to condemn these actions as it is turning into an organization whose ability to use proxies both in Turkey and in the region is developing quickly, and who is gaining important means and methods in this respect. The PKK can have the action carried out by its tough radical elements and still condemn the action.

Increasing ambiguity: In the 1990s, the start and end of actions/operations were definite. Now, most of the actions/operations start with ambiguous processes, grow spontaneously, and proceed in an open-ended fashion with the result that the outcomes are mostly obscure. This increasingly obscure process means greater difficulty for decision makers (both locally and in Ankara) in crisis management.

The impact of social media: In the new age, an important dynamic is that the clashes are taking place with intense interest from the media in the form of a "war of perceptions" on social media platforms. In the 1990s when there was no social media, the state media could take news from the field and to some extent bend the truth. At the moment, however, clashes are taking place under rigorous monitoring from the media, and the sides can present their own narratives to the target audience as the truth. Again, the videos and photos (especially, action/operation visuals, dead or seized PKK members) taken by amateur cameras during the clashes are being shared on social media. This situation is very critical in terms of disinformation, manipulation and more importantly, further radicalization of the masses and collective alienation of the Kurds in Turkey.

Increased importance of regional dynamics: In the 1990s, violence between Turkey and the PKK was more domestically contained in comparison to today. That is, the determining effect of regional and global dynamics was relatively weak between Ankara and PKK. But now, understanding the dynamics of the Turkey-PKK clashes has become almost impossible without understanding the dynamics shaping the civil war in Syria (particularly the developments in the north of Syria and those connected with the PYD), combat strategies of ISIL, the decisions of the US-led anti-ISIL coalition, and Russia and Iran's strategic vision in the region.

What Happens in the Near Future?

Interestingly, the PKK has not yet brought those combat-experienced fighters and sophisticated weapon systems such as MANPADs (Man-portable air-defense systems) and anti-tank missile systems like Kornet and MILAN from Syria and Iraq into Turkey. The PKK has still been operating in clashes with less-experienced fighters and inexperienced YDG-H militants. If the PKK gets those militants and sophisticated weapons systems into Turkey and puts them to use (if, in that case, we start to read and hear news that the PKK has gained psychological domination in some provinces in the southeast, that it has struck Turkish tanks and armored vehicles with anti-tank missiles, or Turkish aircrafts and helicopters are shot down with MANPADs) this means that another critical threshold has been crossed.

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With regard to the state, we have not yet read news about large scale operations (at the scale of two or three army brigades in or around towns) supported by the Air Force and land aviation units. Nor do we read news about detainment waves targeting KCK, the PKK's armed political branch in towns, or mass-detainment of PKK sympathizers working as government employees or in local municipalities. If we witness some of these above-mentioned incidents, then we may conclude that both Ankara and the PKK are framing the conflict as a battle of survival in which one actor's victory is the other actor's extinction.

Currently, Ankara's overall dilemma seems to be how to neutralize the "terrorists" without increasing the social and economic consequences of the conflict. So far, around 1.5 million people have been affected by the ongoing curfews and around 200,000 civilians, mostly children, have been forced to leave their homes. In view of the snowballing socio-economic costs, the question for Ankara is whether going enemy-centric to neutralize each and every PKK fighter is the right approach, versus following a population-centric approach to win the hearts and minds of the civilians affected by the clashes. If it follows the enemy-centric approach, Ankara may easily win a military victory, but it is worth noting that there is no road map regarding how Ankara will translate this military victory into a political one. The absence of

a political end game in Ankara makes this fight harder to manage militarily. At the moment, the government seems to be happy with military achievements for domestic political consumption. As the conflict drags on, however, the government will begin to feel pressure from the public, particularly from the Kurds living in the southeast.

Going Beyond the Terror/Counter-Terror Paradigm?

Currently, people can be categorized in three different groups based on their stance regarding the conflict:

- People who sympathize with the PKK's approach of armed resistance and the political model of "self-governance"
- Neutrals
- People who support the state and endorse the state's kinetic response

In the terror/counter-terror paradigm, the first target audience is the third category, followed by the second category. The overall objective in this paradigm is first to keep the hearts and minds of the people who support the state united, to gain the support of those who are neutral, and then to deter people who support the terrorist organization. Therefore, victory in counter-terror efforts is primarily constructed for the vast majority consisting of supporters of the state and those who are neutral. The shortest path to victory with this approach is to crush the terrorist organization in a military sense and to have the masses who support terrorism pay a price. The more the enemy is crushed and the higher the price paid by its base, the more power is crowned and the more military victory is achieved.[9]

When contemporary asymmetric conflict zones around the globe are analyzed, however, it is obvious that this logic emphasizing kinetic approaches does not automatically mean that the security forces will receive the support of neutral parties and state supporters. This is why, Ankara, which seems shortsightedly concentrated on military victory, should ask itself these two questions. (1) How much military strength is enough? and (2) How can this expected military victory be translated into a political roadmap leading to sustainable peace in the conflict zones in particular and Turkey in general?

The following hard-to-digest facts for Turkey force Ankara to go beyond the kinetic (hard power) cognitive templates offered by the counter-terror paradigm:

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[9] Metin Gürcan, "Bir Önceki Savaş İçin Hazırlanmak: Değişen Küresel Güvenlik Ortamının Geleneksel Savaş Olgusuna Etkisi," [Preparing for the Previous War: The Impact of the Changing Global Security Environment on Traditional Warfare], *Bilge Strateji Dergisi*, Vol. 2, No. 5, p. 119-67, http://bilgestrateji.com/makale/BS2011-2/Bir-onceki-savas-icin-hazirlanmak-degisen-kuresel-guvenlik-ortaminin-geleneksel-savas-olgusuna-etkisi.pdf

- The PKK's increasing global visibility and legitimacy mainly due to its fight against ISIL
- The process of political negotiations between Ankara and the PKK between 2009-2013, starting with the Oslo Process in 2009[10]
- The PKK's popularity in Turkey's southeast between 2012-2015 thanks to the "peace process" that resulted in a more consolidated Kurdish political identity and promoted Kurdish nation-building efforts in Turkey[11]
- Expansion of the conflict to towns and into human terrain

This article suggests that the conflict at hand goes a little beyond the traditional terror/counterterror paradigm, but it has not yet reached the level of the insurgency/counter-insurgency (COIN) paradigm.[12] That is why both counterterror and COIN paradigms cannot alone inform the state's efforts against the PKK, meaning that Ankara should look for new avenues to foster a hybrid approach that eclectically include ways/means from both of these paradigms. The master plan announced by Davuoğlu in Mardin, dubbed the "Counterterrorism and Rehabilitation Action Plan," is a step in the right direction for the implementation of this hybrid strategy, although locals affected by the ongoing clashes have some serious concerns about the viability of the plan. The "actions speak louder than words" mentality is prevalent in southeastern towns and people have been waiting for differences this plan can make on the ground at the local level.

The question of who should be Ankara's target audience in this hybrid approach is a tricky point. In the traditional counterterror paradigm, the very first target is the hearts (emotive components) and minds (cognitive components) of the majority at the national level. The overall objective is to disseminate a strategic message of assurance to the majority implying that the terrorists are to be deterred at any cost and by all means available. Then kinetic approaches to deter/punish the terrorists and a strategic communication strategy to assure the majority at the national level would be the perfect way to achieve this objective.

In the COIN paradigm, however, the level of analysis is not national, but local. The overall objective is, at the local level, not killing the bad guys and blowing things up, but preventing the insurgency from becoming more and more popular. To achieve this, winning the hearts and minds of the local people supporting the

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[10] In 2009, the "Oslo process" involved Turkish state representatives, especially the Turkish National Intelligence Service (MIT) and the PKK elites negotiating secretly with the help of diaspora representatives.

[11] Zeki Sarıgil and Ekrem Karakoç, "Who Supports Secession? The Determinants of Secessionist Attitudes Among Turkey's Kurds," *Nations and Nationalism* (*Forthcoming*).

[12] Metin Gürcan, "PKK ile mücadelede hangi 'zafer?'" [Which 'victory' in struggle against PKK], *T24*, 25 October 2015, http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/metin-gurcan/pkk-ile-mucadelede-hangi-zafer,13046

insurgency is the first priority and then those of local neutrals come second. That is why, in terms of the target audience, what Ankara needs in this new hybrid approach is a population-centric strategy which first targets those coerced by the PKK, followed by willing civilians and innocent bystanders at the local level. Ankara should not employ an enemy-centric approach that is focused solely on killing terrorists and marketing these killings to the general population. To win support from the local populace and gain legitimacy, Ankara should first persuade locals living in the conflict zones that the victory it seeks to gain will best serve their long term interests, and therefore, that siding with Ankara is the better choice for them (winning minds). Ankara should also look for venues on how to accommodate with rising Kurdish ethno-nationalism and demands for collective rights among those ethnically and politically awakened Kurds in Turkey (winning hearts).

Ankara's current and obvious ambivalence between an enemy-centric approach to influence the majority at the national level and a population-centric approach to gain hearts and minds of those at the local level is the very first reason why the current conflict is in a *limbo* zone between the counterterror paradigm and the COIN paradigm.

In conclusion, as the clashes become more urban in nature in this new era, the sphere of the struggle between Ankara and the PKK will not be the physical terrain but human terrain. In human terrain, as suggested in this article, dominance on physical terrain is no longer relevant, it is the dominance of the hearts and minds of those locals living in the conflict zones that will be the primary factor directly determining the outcome. Currently, Ankara is like a man with a hammer who views the PKK-initiated urban violence as a nail to be nailed. Cases from the contemporary global security environment, however, show that the more you nail an urban problem with a kinetic approach, the more unintended consequences you may have to face. Therefore, it is high time to problematize and critically engage with the enemy-centric kinetic solution to the current cycle in the Ankara-PKK conflict.