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UNDERSTANDING THE PKK TERRORIST ORGANISATION: CAPABILITIES, PROPAGANDA, AND SYSTEM

Özdemir AKBAL*

Erkmen, Serhat A., and Burak Güneş, eds. *Anatomy of a Terrorist Organisation: The Kurdistan Workers' Party*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025. 507 pp. ISBN 9781036444884.

Published in 2025 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing and edited by Dr. Serhat Erkmen and Dr. Burak Güneş, *Anatomy of a Terrorist Organisation: The Kurdistan Workers' Party* offers an interdisciplinary perspective on the historical development, ideological transformation, and operational strategies of the separatist terrorist organization PKK. This edited volume serves as a comprehensive reference work for scholars in the fields of security studies, international relations, political science, sociology, and psychology. In addition, it offers valuable insights for policymakers, members of the security bureaucracy, and postgraduate students interested in terrorism and insurgent movements. By integrating multiple disciplinary lenses, the book provides an in-depth examination of the PKK's historical evolution, ideological shifts, and operational strategies, making it a significant contribution to both the academic literature and policy-relevant debates on terrorism.

Over the past five decades, the organizational activities of the PKK have resulted in significant civilian casualties, affecting individuals from various professional and social backgrounds, including children, educators, and technical personnel. Beyond the widespread civilian casualties, the PKK's activities have placed a substantial economic strain on Türkiye's national budget, particularly in terms of security expenditures and lost economic productivity. The inclusion of fallen soldiers, law enforcement officers, and local security personnel further underscores the magnitude of Türkiye's human losses in the context of its counterterrorism efforts. Given the scope

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and persistence of the PKK-related conflict, the literature dedicated exclusively to this organization has expanded to such an extent that it now represents a standalone domain within the broader field of terrorism and security studies. What sets this study apart from earlier works is its integrative approach, which synthesizes diverse analytical perspectives within a political science framework to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Comprising a total of 19 chapters, the volume features contributions from academics who have conducted long-standing research on the specific topics addressed in each section. Thus, the volume emerges as a work capable of addressing the operational dynamics of a terrorist organization from a wide range of disciplinary and analytical perspectives, offering insights regardless of the lens through which the subject is approached. Accordingly, the book offers a wide-ranging analytical framework through which readers can explore the actions, organizational structure, and strategic objectives of the separatist terrorist organisation PKK, spanning fields from political psychology and political economy to theories and strategies of international politics.

Authored by the book's editors, Dr. Serhat A. Erkmén and Dr. Burak Güneş, the introductory chapter highlights that the PKK should not be understood merely as a terrorist entity, but as an organization sustained by a broad financial infrastructure, including narcotics trafficking and human smuggling. Furthermore, the introduction is notable for its detailed examination of the PKK's international organizational network and the support it has received from various state actors.

Building upon the foundational themes set out in the introduction, the first chapter, *Describing the PKK: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Organisation in Terms of Organisation, Ideology and Leadership*, is co-authored by Dr. Serhat A. Erkmén and PhD candidate Hatice Varol. Serving as the conceptual cornerstone of the volume, this chapter explores the ideological evolution, structural configuration, and leadership model of the PKK. In doing so, it reveals how the group's pragmatic orientation over time has enabled it to function as a useful proxy for external state actors.

While the first chapter provides a general overview of the PKK—tracing its ideological transformations and pragmatic foundations to form a conceptual baseline for the reader—the second chapter, titled *Terror, Fear of*

Partition and the Sacred Homeland: Re-Membering Collective Trauma Through PKK Actions, authored by Dr. Akif Bahadır Kaynak and Dr. Deniz Ülke Kaynak, delves into the politico-psychological motivations, origins, and objectives underlying the group's actions. The chapter argues that the PKK's objectives extend beyond conventional military and civilian attacks, aiming also to erode the foundational principles of the Turkish state. Framed through the lens of political psychology, it provides a thought-provoking analysis of how a terrorist organization can evolve into a functional instrument within the systemic dynamics of international politics.

Building on the preceding chapter grounded in political psychology, the third chapter, *Continuity and Change in the PKK: An Examination of Evolutionary Dynamics from Foundation to Present*, written by PhD candidate Arman Sert, explores the processes of continuity and transformation in the PKK's trajectory, contextualized through key events from its inception to the contemporary period. Approaching the PKK as a separatist terrorist organization, PhD candidate Sert contends that in the context of the geopolitical power shift from the Soviet Union to U.S., the group has undergone a significant ideological transformation—shifting from its Marxist-Leninist foundations toward a model more aligned with libertarian socialism. Thus, the chapter demonstrates that the transformation initiated in the 1990s reshaped the PKK's understanding of organizational structure, evolving from a rigid Leninist vanguard model toward a framework of democratic confederalism—a shift that is evident in the group's internal configuration and the nature of its actions.

Authored by Dr. Merve Önenli Güven, the fourth chapter—*Radicalization and Indoctrination Processes in the PKK*—focuses on the mechanisms through which the organization fosters radicalization and ideological conditioning. Dr. Önenli Güven contends that the PKK employs a multifaceted indoctrination strategy, grounded in mechanisms that promote the radicalization of individuals within a structurally complex framework. The analysis presented in the chapter draws first on the PKK's official congress resolutions and further substantiates its claims through Abdullah Öcalan's book *Militant Personality in People's War*, which articulates the ideological foundations of militant identity within the organization. After exploring the processes and techniques of radicalization, the chapter shifts its focus to the drivers of recruitment into the PKK, using these motivations as a basis to further analyze the organization's indoctrination strategies.

Building on the preceding analysis of recruitment processes within the context of radicalization, Dr. Muhittin İmîl's fifth chapter, *An Analysis of a Religiousness Without a Kibla: PKK and Religion*, offers a critical examination of the PKK's engagement with religion, framing it as a strategically adaptive element shaped by the organization's evolving ideological and pragmatic orientations. Dr. İmîl's analysis, grounded in the concepts of identity and religious belief, maps out the key dynamics that have shaped the trajectory of Kurdish political life. Building upon this conceptual foundation, the chapter offers an analysis of historical uprisings, interpreting them in terms of identity-based and religious motivations. Following this conceptualization, Dr. İmîl explores the PKK's phases marked by religious ambiguity or secularism, and outlines the internal discursive and ideological mechanisms by which Zoroastrianism has been constructed as a folk religion within the organization.

The sixth chapter marks a departure from the primarily psychopolitical and sociopolitical focus of the earlier sections, directing attention instead to the assessment of the PKK's operational behavior and its capacity for action, analyzed through the lens of organizational effectiveness. The result is the chapter entitled *Analysis of the Transformation in PKK's Actions from the Perspective of Learning Organisations: Drone Attacks*, in which Dr. Selim Kurt critically examines how technological developments have shaped the PKK's operational patterns, framing this transformation within the theory of learning organizations. Although drone warfare has gained considerable attention in contemporary security literature, examining the PKK's use of this strategy from the perspective of organizational learning offers a novel and insightful analytical framework.

Having explored the PKK's drone tactics through the lens of organizational learning in the previous chapter, the reader is next presented with Dr. Gökhan İbrahim Ögünç's analysis, which engages with the argument that organizational survival depends on environmental adaptation—using this framework to assess the PKK's evolving operational similarities with ISIL. In his chapter, *The Effects of ISIS Terrorist Organisation on the Action Strategy of PKK/PYD Terrorist Organisation in Tactical and Technical Aspects*, Dr. Ögünç argues that the tactical and technical similarities between the PKK and ISIL can be explained by the erosion of state authority in Syria and Iraq, which enabled non-state actors to seize control of military capabilities formerly monopolized by state armed

forces. Such cross-organizational fluidity is enabled by militants who act as conduits for the transfer of tactical knowledge and technological capabilities. Dr. Ögünç thus introduces a distinctive perspective by conceptualizing technology transfer as a mechanism that enables the formation of inter-organizational networks, facilitating knowledge exchange and mutual enhancement among terrorist groups.

In the eighth chapter, *PKK Terrorist Organisation's Propaganda Activities (1984–2024)*, Bora İyiat provides a detailed analysis of the propaganda strategies utilized by the PKK over a forty-year period. Advancing the argument that the PKK's propaganda methods mirror Western models—especially those outlined in NATO manuals—İyiat observes that the organization has shown a consistent preference for radio as a primary tool within the realm of conventional media. İyiat highlights that while the PKK has relied on conventional media, especially television broadcasting, to sustain militant morale, it has simultaneously turned to websites and social media networks as tools for expanding its recruitment base and attracting sympathizers.

Authored by Erol Başaran Bural, the ninth chapter—*PKK Terrorist Organisation's Social Media Propaganda*—focuses on the organization's evolving use of social media as a strategic propaganda tool. Building on the general overview of propaganda strategies presented in the previous chapter, the ninth chapter provides a more focused examination of the PKK's use of social media, enabling readers to gain a deeper understanding of both the organization's overarching propaganda logic and its digital execution. Bural begins his chapter with a reference to Dr. Tahir Tamer Kumkale, underscoring the intrinsic connection between propaganda and the tactical methods employed in terrorism. By outlining the PKK's conventional propaganda methods, the chapter maintains a cohesive narrative that complements and builds upon the discussions presented in the two preceding chapters. Bural identifies the intended uses of social media and argues that its widespread adoption for propaganda by terrorist organizations—especially the PKK—can be attributed to the low cost and ease of access associated with these digital platforms. Furthermore, by asserting that social media facilitates the PKK's access to emerging technologies, Bural presents a cohesive analysis that complements previous chapters focusing on the group's technological adaptability and operational evolution. Building on his previous observations, Bural focuses specifically on the PKK's strategic use

of Twitter, emphasizing the platform's affordability, ease of access, and its effectiveness in mobilizing targeted social groups.

Authored by Dr. Fatma Anıl Öztop, the tenth chapter—*Female Militants in PKK*—examines the role and significance of female participation within the organization. Dr. Öztop explores how female militants have moved beyond conventional roles within the organization, adopting what is described as a more innovative and proactive pattern of engagement in terrorist activities. Dr. Öztop argues that women's motivations for joining the organization are shaped initially by socio-economic hardship, perceived persecution and discrimination, and gender-based inequality. These are subsequently reinforced by ideological aspirations such as the pursuit of liberation, shared grievances, familial loyalty, and a strong sense of mission and heroism. The chapter highlights the multifaceted involvement of female militants, emphasizing their roles that span from fundraising activities to active participation in public protests and demonstrations. Furthermore, Dr. Öztop emphasizes that women have assumed a prominent role in the organization's suicide operations, accounting for 71% of such attacks since 1996. Identifying increased social recognition as one of the primary motives behind the PKK's recruitment of female militants, Dr. Öztop underscores the critical role that women play not only in operational activities but also in the organization's broader membership and image-building strategies.

In the eleventh chapter, titled *Child Abuse by PKK Terrorist Organisation*, Dr. Begüm Çardak builds upon the preceding discussion of female militants by presenting a significant study on another inhumane practice of the PKK: the exploitation and abuse of children. The chapter opens with a conceptual discussion of child abuse, outlining its historical development and evolution as a recognized phenomenon. Building on the initial conceptual framework, the chapter traces the emergence of the child abuse concept in international discourse and analyzes the involvement of children in the context of armed conflicts. Building upon her analysis of how terrorist organizations utilize children, Dr. Çardak specifically investigates the PKK's use of child recruits between 1987 and 1991 through its so-called youth organization, detailing the roles children played both in urban operations and in the group's rural (mountain) units. Highlighting that the PKK—partially inspired by the Intifada—attaches strategic importance to child exploitation as a means of acquiring legitimacy and social approval, the chapter, together with the preceding one, provides readers with a

comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the instrumentalization of women and children in terrorist organizations.

Chapter twelve focuses on the often-overlooked economic impact of terrorism. Dr. Necmettin Çelik, in his chapter *The Effects of PKK Terrorism on the Turkish Economy*, brings attention to a largely overlooked dimension of terrorism by examining the long-term economic repercussions of the PKK's activities over the past fifty years. Dr. Çelik highlights that beyond the immediate effects, the indirect consequences of terrorism have significantly undermined economic activity, leading to broader disturbances in macroeconomic equilibrium. By presenting the direct economic impacts of PKK-related violence in a detailed table, Dr. Çelik demonstrates that the financial losses incurred amount to several hundred billion dollars. The chapter underscores that the PKK's operations have not only targeted military objectives but have also produced significant indirect economic consequences. Dr. Çelik highlights that the organization's secondary objective appears to be economic destabilization, as illustrated by the decline in tourism revenues and the negative effects on private sector activity between 2014 and 2018.

Authored by PhD candidate Yasin Yıldız, the thirteenth chapter—*The Relationship Between the PKK and Radical Leftist Organisations in Türkiye: Continuity or Rupture?*—examines the historical and ideological connections between the PKK and radical leftist movements in Türkiye. PhD candidate Yıldız analyzes the ties between radical leftist movements and the PKK through the lens of radicalism, situating the processes of ideological alignment and rupture among terrorist organizations within a broader historical context. Based on this analytical framework, PhD candidate Yıldız asserts that the PKK gradually distanced itself from its leftist ideological roots and transitioned toward a discourse increasingly shaped by nationalist themes. Yıldız argues that during the Cold War, the groups that formed the nucleus of the PKK were closely aligned with leftist movements, and he critically examines the ideological roots of Kurdish nationalist formations within this leftist tradition. The chapter analyzes how the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent erosion of ideological legitimacy among leftist structures in the post-Cold War era contributed to the PKK's ideological shift. PhD candidate Yıldız introduces the concept of "Türkiyefication" to describe the PKK's shift toward a more localized ideological orientation during this period, effectively linking his analysis to

the broader arguments developed in earlier chapters of the volume. In addition, the chapter examines how the post-9/11 global security environment and the dynamics of the Syrian Civil War have influenced the PKK's ideological trajectory, culminating in a contemporary reassessment of the organization's ideological positioning.

In the fourteenth chapter, *Analysis of PKK/KCK Terrorist Organisation Youth Structures*, Dr. Alper Güneş highlights the organization's strategic attempt to influence social groups as part of a broader revolutionary agenda targeting the transformation of the current socio-political order—an approach that mirrors patterns observed in comparable terrorist organizations. Dr. Güneş argues that from the earliest stages of its formation, the PKK has strategically prioritized youth mobilization as a dual-purpose mechanism—serving both as a recruitment reservoir and a critical tool for ideological propagation. The chapter employs a chronological framework, beginning with an analysis of the Kurdistan Revolutionaries—a group active prior to the official founding of the PKK—as an early precursor to the organization's youth mobilization efforts. After detailing the operations of the Kurdistan Student Association—identified as a major recruitment base for the PKK, especially across Europe—the chapter proceeds to explore additional youth organizations and their strategic role in supporting the Civil Defence Units. Moreover, Dr. Güneş elaborates on the PKK's youth organization by examining its functions through youth camps, street-level propaganda, involvement in public events, and on-the-ground activities, presenting a framework that complements the insights offered in the chapters on female militancy and child exploitation.

Authored by Dr. Emre Çıtak, the fifteenth chapter—*PKK/KCK's Shadow and Shadowing in Syria: The Establishment and Evolution of the PYD-YPG*—examines the formation and development of the PYD-YPG within the context of the PKK/KCK network in Syria. Beginning with its founding, the chapter offers an extensive analysis of the PYD-YPG's operations within Syria, presenting a thorough and illustrative account. Following a description of the PYD-YPG's origins and fundamental characteristics, the chapter offers an in-depth examination of the group's pivotal involvement in the Syrian Civil War. Highlighting the PYD-YPG's acquisition of substantial legitimacy through its anti-ISIL operations, Dr. Çıtak then details the changes brought about by Türkiye's subsequent military actions against the organization. In addition to examining the global implications of these

military campaigns, Dr. Çıtak predicts that the group will pursue strategic alliances and assert influence within Syria's shifting power dynamics.

In the sixteenth chapter, Dr. Mehmet Çağatay Abuşoğlu offers an analysis of the PKK's organizational framework in Iran, contributing to the volume with his study titled *PKK's Organisation in Iran*. Following a broad historical introduction, Dr. Abuşoğlu situates his study within the context of Iran's political landscape starting from the era of the Mossadegh government. Emphasizing the post-9/11 era, Dr. Abuşoğlu assesses PJAK's operations within Iran, revealing the significant degree of U.S. backing that the group has received. After outlining the extent of U.S. backing, Dr. Abuşoğlu examines PJAK's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, including a detailed account of the organization's early operations originating from Iran and targeting Türkiye. In his chapter, Dr. Abuşoğlu demonstrates the convergence of U.S. and Iranian interests via their respective backing of proxy groups associated with the terrorist organization.

Authored by Dr. Özdemir Akbal, the seventeenth chapter examines how U.S. and the Russian Federation formulate foreign policy strategies by supporting terrorist groups, with a particular focus on the PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the PYD. In his study, which adopts a structural realist perspective, Dr. Akbal elucidates how alliances formed between primary actors—states—and secondary actors such as terrorist organizations function to maintain the status quo. Observing that both U.S. and Russia endorse the PYD in pursuit of their strategic objectives, Dr. Akbal emphasizes how the organization has leveraged this support to enhance its legitimacy.

Building on the discussion of global powers, the eighteenth chapter—*Russia's PKK/PYD/YPG Policy*—authored by Dr. Sabir Askeroğlu, provides an in-depth and nuanced analysis specifically centered on Russia's approach to the PKK and its Syrian affiliates. By revealing the direct nature of Russia's backing for the separatist terrorist group, Dr. Askeroğlu exposes the gap in analyses that typically consider such support exclusively within the context of U.S. policy. Starting with the historical roots of Russia's support, the chapter offers an in-depth analysis of relevant actions from late Tsarist Russia through the Soviet era, followed by a comprehensive overview of the backing provided to separatist terrorist groups in the post-Soviet context. Addressing the conflicts between Türkiye and Russia within the context of the Syrian crisis, Dr. Askeroğlu contends that the Russian Federation backs

the PYD as a strategic proxy to sustain its influence and control in the region.

The final and nineteenth chapter, titled *The US Grand Strategies' Consequences for the Evolving PKK Threat to Türkiye*, is authored by Dr. Özgür Uğurdan. Dr. Uğurdan's chapter complements Dr. Akbal's analysis of the major powers and, subsequently, Dr. Askeroğlu's study of Russia, thereby completing the volume's examination of great power dynamics. Building upon the works of academics like Mackinder and Spykman, Dr. Uğurdan's chapter offers an in-depth examination of the Heartland theory as it applies to the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. Drawing on the strategic importance derived from the region's geography, Dr. Uğurdan illustrates how, beginning with World War II, Washington has actively backed separatist movements to advance its interests in the Middle East. The chapter clearly addresses how this U.S. policy became even more pronounced in the post-Cold War period. Focusing on the Bush and Obama eras, the chapter offers an in-depth analysis of separatist movements, highlighting the PKK's historical presence in Syria and the extent of U.S. backing with clarity and detail.

Beyond offering a multifaceted analysis of the PKK's organizational complexity, the book extensively explores the group's developmental trajectory, its involvement in human rights abuses—including the exploitation of women and children—and its relationships with key international stakeholders. The study's integration of distinct disciplinary approaches is particularly valuable. Through this nineteen-chapter volume, readers are provided with a comprehensive resource capable of addressing a wide array of inquiries within the field, effectively consolidating essential knowledge into a single edition. The deliberate organization of closely related perspectives throughout the volume underscores the careful and thorough editorial effort behind the work. This characteristic further establishes the volume as a standout reader within the discipline of terrorism studies.