



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Kurdish Insurgency (PKK Ocalan Phase) 1984–99

Executive Summary

Kurdish nationalism has been a source of insurgency and brutal political repression in Asia Minor since the early days of the modern state of Türkiye. The Öcalan phase of the Kurdish insurgency began in 1978 when Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan established the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan, PKK), a new Marxist-Leninist separatist group. The Kurdistan Workers' Party launched its phase of the insurgency in southeastern Türkiye in August 1984 in the provinces of Diyarbakır, Hakkâri, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van.¹

The group called for an independent Kurdistan based on ethnic identity. Soon after the insurgency began, in October 1984, the Turkish military launched a counteroffensive. In 1985, the Turkish state established the Village Guard, a paramilitary counterinsurgency force to counter the Kurdistan Workers' Party.² The Village Guard was a village militia system to provide local security and intelligence to the military, but it established a long record of smuggling and human rights abuses. In 1987, the government declared a state of emergency in eastern Türkiye. The intensity of the conflict increased in the 1990s, and the government renewed the state of emergency in 1992. That year, the Turkish Air Force launched a large-scale military operation into northern Iraq to target PKK sanctuaries.³

In 1993, Öcalan declared a ceasefire that broke down after two months, and the conflict intensified in eastern Türkiye, resulting in massive internal civilian displacement. A significant number of Kurds sought sanctuary in northern Iraq. In an attempt to eliminate PKK base areas and reduce cross-border movement by the Kurdistan Workers Party, the Turkish military launched multiple large military operations against the Kurdistan Workers Party inside Iraq, including Operation Steel (1995), Operation Hammer (1997), and Operation Dawn (late 1997). In 1997, Türkiye lifted the state of emergency and declared the Kurdistan Workers' Party a foreign terrorist organization. In 1998, the Syrian government exiled Öcalan, and in 1999, Türkiye captured and imprisoned him. Following Öcalan's imprisonment, the Marxist phase of the PKK insurgency lost its intensity, ending this wave of Kurdish insurgency and resulting in government victory as defined by the Study of Internal Conflict.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. Although there has been a debate about the nature of national identity in Türkiye, the sense of nationalism fostered by Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state, was significantly prevalent. Ethnic Kurds make up about 18 percent of Türkiye's population.⁴

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. During the conflict, most of Türkiye’s citizens supported the government’s actions. The creation of the paramilitary Village Guards primarily from the Kurdish population and the 1987 elections in Türkiye are evidence that the legitimacy factor reached 85 percent. Some of Türkiye’s educated urban population supported Kurdish cultural identity and minority rights but did not support the violent insurgency.⁵

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?

Yes. During the conflict, the Turkish government had control over more than 85 percent of the population. In some southeastern regions of Türkiye, the insurgent group had significant influence. Nonetheless, it did not reach 15 percent of the overall population of Türkiye, given that 18 percent of Türkiye’s citizens are ethnically Kurdish and that a substantial number of Kurds resided in, or sought refuge from, the conflict in Istanbul.⁶

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes → No. The Kurdistan Workers’ Party had (and its more recent incarnations still have) sanctuary in northern Iraq. On the other hand, repeated Turkish armed forces ground incursions into Iraq, aerial surveillance, increased border security, and the expansion of the Village Guard system significantly restricted cross-border movement by PKK guerillas by the late 1990s.⁷

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The Turkish military was a powerful force at the start of the conflict with the second largest army in NATO, and Türkiye had a fully functional national police as well.

Outcome

Government victory. The PKK Marxist/Öcalan phase of the Kurdish nationalist insurgency ended with a government victory. This phase of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party could be considered a “charismatic leadership” model of insurgency similar to the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) in Peru, in which the movement’s viability depended on the presence of its charismatic leader. The elimination of the leader created a temporary lull in violence but did not remove the political reasons for the insurgency. The Turkish government targeted the Marxist/Öcalan PKK external sanctuary in northern Iraq with border control measures, air strikes, major ground incursions, and covert special operations. For several years after the capture of Öcalan, insurgent violence in southeastern Türkiye was reduced to a nuisance. The Kurdistan Workers’ Party, under new leadership and with a renewed focus on Kurdish nationalism, resumed its rebellion in 2015, which continued in Syria and Iraq in 2024. Since 1999, major development programs in southeastern Türkiye have lessened regional economic inequality to a degree, reducing the appeal of the insurgent narrative. Additionally, the immigration of millions of Kurds to Istanbul (making Istanbul the largest concentration of Kurds in the world) has changed the internal political dynamics within Türkiye. The 1984–99 phase of the Kurdish insurgency inside Türkiye supports the Five Factors theory.

KURDISH INSURGENCY (PKK OCALAN PHASE) 1984–99	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES → NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

1. “Turkey/Kurds (1922–Present),” University of Central Arkansas, Government, Public Service, and International Studies, n.d., <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/middle-eastnorth-africapersian-gulf-region/turkeykurds-1922-present>.
2. Clayton Thomas and Jim Zanotti, *Turkey, the PKK, and U.S. Involvement: A Chronology*, In Focus, Congressional Research Service (CRS), CRS Report IF11380 (CRS, December 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11380>.
3. Kelly Couturier, “Turkey Invades North Iraq to Battle Kurdish Guerrillas,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/03/21/turkey-invades-north-iraq-to-battle-kurdish-guerrillas/75b0efbb-a441-4986-9109-26e3c7542cdb>.
4. Seth Robertson Wood, “National Identity in Turkey” (master’s thesis, College of William and Mary, 1999), 65–66, <https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-7q2h-5577>.
5. James Brown, “The Politics of Transition in Turkey,” *Current History* 87, no. 526 (1988): 69–72, 82–83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45316029>.
6. Özlem Kayhan Pusane, “Turkey’s Military Victory over the PKK and Its Failure to End the PKK Insurgency,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 5 (2015): 727–41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24585563>.
7. Hannes Černý, “Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed: The PKK Sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict Revisited,” *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 4 (2014): 328–54.



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