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Not Our War:
Iraq, Iran and Syria's Approaches towards the PKK

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Terrorist violence led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is one of the major issues of Turkey since the 1980s. This violence is based upon Kurdish ethnic identity aimed towards establishing an independent Kurdish state in Turkey's southeast, northern Iraq, northern Syria and north-western Iran. Despite this aim, the terrorist campaign of the PKK predominantly targets security forces and civilians in Turkey. However, the existence of a terrorist group such a long time raises a question of the impact of external support on the formation and maintenance of the PKK. While Turkey has criticised constantly its southern neighbours on the PKK's activities and tactics, the regional approaches have been largely neglected in the existing scholarly literature. This article aims to close this gap by focusing on the role played by Iraq, Iran and Syria in the PKK terrorism and Turkey's counter-terrorism policies. The article argues that the major reasons for the unsuccessful result of Turkey's effort to destroy the PKK were the approaches of ignorance of the PKK activities and the use of the group as a trump card by the three neighbours and insufficient policies to keep under control the regional dimension of the conflict. The article critically analyses historical relationships between these three states and Turkey to explore how the regional dimension has affected the resolution of this conflict.

Introduction

The effects of external factors on violent conflicts between sub-state armed groups and security forces of states have always been critical through direct or indirect intervention. These conflicts can be more complicated when the factors or actors affecting them are neighbouring countries. This article analyses a comprehensive case of a violent conflict in which a process of regional perspectives and actions played a critical role to determine the nature of a terrorist threat. Iraq, Iran and Syria's positions towards Turkey's fight against the PKK terrorism have affected the outcome of counter-terrorism policies of the Turkish state.

Terrorism has many forms, which are shaped with the goals of groups. It is argued that sub-state armed groups can organise terrorist attacks by indiscriminating civilians instead of attacking only military and political leaders or targets (Laqueur, 2004, p.13). In addition, terrorism might emerge as a weak way of waging fights by asymmetrical assault to harm and try to defeat an apparently superior power. This type might be used by ethno-nationalists, racist militias, religious fundamentalists and other minorities, such as, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) against the UK, Basque Homeland Freedom (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, ETA) against Spain and the PKK against Turkey. Terrorism is a tactical tool to reach a new order by intentionally devastating the current system (Arquilla et al., 1999, pp.39-40). The PKK embodies these characteristics which is officially called a terrorist organisation as it is on the list of terrorist organisations of the EU, Canada, the US, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and New Zealand (EGM, 2011; Europe, 2002; Kronin et al., 2004; Public Safety Canada, 2010). Therefore, this paper assesses the PKK as a terrorist organisation. This also makes clear that the official approach of Iraq, Iran and Syria towards the PKK is similar with Turkey's perception, as the PKK is on the list of banned terrorist organisations of these states.

When a terrorist group claims to represent an ethnic community in society, it intends to use these claims in international arena in order to legitimise its violent campaign. The ethno-nationalist conflict in Turkey has a similar characteristic as the PKK claims to represent the Kurdish community in Turkey, which in return received limited support for its violent campaign. Although the societal support is an important dimension for its existence, this is not the topic of this paper since it focuses on an overlooked security issue containing the three neighbours' approaches towards the PKK in order to reveal how this conflict affects regional security and politics in the Middle East. While the PKK's claim is to defend the Kurdish people's rights, the PKK's ultimate goal is to establish an independent Kurdish state in south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northern Syria and north-western Iran (Aydınlı and Özcan, 2011, p.449). However, the majority of the targets of the PKK have been security forces and civilians in Turkey (Crenshaw, 2011; Guelke, 1995). The Kurdish question therefore has been investigated as Turkey's internal affair with regards to counter-terrorism issues, identity and ethnicity disputes, constitutional rights, and external support in the existing literature. However, little attention has been paid on the regional aspects regarding the perception of these three states towards the PKK and whether changing trends of this conflict in Turkey have been affected by the approaches of these three states (Barkey and Fuller, 1997; Çiçek, 2011). In order to fill this gap, the article asks the following question: To what extent have Iraq, Iran and Syria affected the PKK terrorism in Turkey?

This research is predominantly a historical analysis due to the nature of the major question. However, in order to assess the influence of Iraq, Iran and Syria on the PKK's actions, it also utilises data from official and NGOs reports. The official reports of the TBMM is complemented by the reports published by NGOs and think-tanks such as The Economic and Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and the International Crisis Group (ICG). The policy briefs and press releases of political actors of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria are also used to understand the official view of these states towards the PKK. For example, the official view of the Syrian government put forward through Syrian Foreign Minister's speeches on the PKK. The research therefore uses data from several sources to comprehend the role played by these three states towards the long-standing terrorist threat in Turkey.

This article is organised as follows. The first section discusses the theoretical analysis in regard to how and why external support is provided by sponsoring states to a terrorist group. The second section explains the background of the conflict from the emergence of the PKK. Instead of a chronological analysis, this section examines the history of the conflict by focusing on major events, which have affected the progress of the Turkey-PKK conflict. The third section assesses the approaches of Iraq, Iran and Syria towards the PKK through four major determinants: safe haven, bargaining strategy, diplomatic pressure and external circumstances. The fourth section investigates other circumstances, which were determined by external issues in the territory of these three states. The last section compares the disregard and deliberative policies of these states to the violent attacks of the PKK in Turkey.

How to Evaluate External Support

External support is vital for terrorist organisations for both formation and maintenance of these groups. As Oots (1898, p.147) argues, few groups are able to develop adequate resources to survive without any outside help. The sources of outside support are generally provided from either other terrorist organisations or states. This article focuses on the support provided by foreign states. The reasons for states to support terrorist groups differ, but the main reason is the sympathisation with the ideology and political aims of terrorists (Collins, 2004, p.2). This phenomenon is called 'state-sponsored' terrorism, which is the active and secret aid, assistance, and enforcement to a terrorist organisation by a foreign state (Hoffman, 2006, p.14).

External support has several different types including financial, training, ammunition, operational and organisational support. While the first three types are the first resort as they provide quick help for a terrorist group to survive, the last two types are more complex since organisational support provides propaganda, and operational support is formed of proxy attacks and joint operations against a state (Alexander and Kilmarx, 1979, pp.40-51). Terrorist groups aim to have a great budget for their violent attacks, which is mostly funded by drug trade. For example, a reliable revenue stream near the source of the drug is aimed by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and Taliban, and located along the trafficking route by the PKK (Freeman, 2011, p.464). Therefore, financial support is not directly related to the approaches of the three neighbours of Turkey. However, safe territories to accommodate terrorist groups and for training camps have been crucial for the PKK militants to survive since its formation. The term 'safe haven' describes secure areas provided by a sponsoring state to an armed group within the territory of this state. It is argued that if a state provides a secure territorial base to a terrorist group, this group's capability to organise violent attacks to the target country is enormously facilitated (Carter, 2012, p.130). The PKK had a safe haven in Syria between 1980 and 1998 (Carter, 2012, p.139). It was evident through the fact that the Syrian government provided bases for PKK camps during this period of time (Marcus, 2007). This time-period will be assessed by examining the PKK's use of territories of the three states.

While states sponsoring terrorism enjoy risk-free means of anonymously attacking designated enemy states and the threat of revenge or punishment, terrorist organisations develop their operational capacity and capability which helped easily facilitate planning and intelligence thanks to supporting state's diplomatic support (Hoffman, 2006, pp.258-9). Therefore, it is not possible to fight effectively with terrorism unless the tie between terrorist groups and sponsoring state is cut (Ganor, 2002, p.301). This raises the importance of diplomatic relations between the targeted and sponsoring states especially if a sub-state armed group aims to establish an independent state over more than one country's territory and/or is supported by foreign states. As Saleyhan (2011, p.719) suggests, although many ethno-nationalist groups have domestic targets, their international links and affiliations are mostly the root causes of their survival. Hence, what is the outcome of Turkey's diplomatic pressure on the three neighbours is a significant question to understand their approach towards the PKK.

The diplomatic and territorial relationships are based on interests of both states. In addition, if a foreign state aims to weaken a competing state, a terrorist organisation can be used as a trump card to reach its goals (Ross, 1993). Thus, states supporting terrorist groups aim to reach their foreign policy objectives by gaining bargaining power against their rivals (Byman et al, 2001). As a bargaining strategy, sponsorship reduces the possibility of the repression of target states. On the one hand, if a state which sponsors terrorism has the same goal with the terrorist group, this state increases its support for this group. On the other hand, when the group reaches a greater portion of its goals thanks to its sponsor, it is more likely to claim more concessions to end the conflict (Bapat, 2012, p.18).

Regional politics is an important dimension to determine external support. As Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier (2012) argue, a regional power not only defines the structure of its regional system, but also drives the order of this mechanism. Therefore, states may have an intention to use illegal force to surpass its rivals in the region. The support for terrorist groups can be used as a strategy for weakening their rival (Ergil, 1992, p.141). This is because regional powers have an opportunity to reach their national interests when they have an advantage in relative power comparing to their regional rivals (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier, 2012, p.6). While Turkey and Iran are assumed to be regional powers, Iraq and Syria aim to pursue opportunities to strengthen their power in the Middle East by weakening their rivals. Therefore, this is a significant assumption to be assessed.

These assumptions are investigated in this paper whether the regional outlook towards the PKK formed a bargaining strategy by Iraq, Iran, and Syria against Turkey. Thus, this paper aims to understand the impact of bargaining strategy on the external support in the PKK terrorism through the analysis of three dimensions: safe haven, bargaining strategy and diplomatic pressure. In addition, the article contributes to the existing scholarly literature illustrating the necessity to consider the influence of external circumstances in strengthening a terrorist group. Before discussing the major issues between Turkey and its three neighbours whether they have affected Turkey's fight against the PKK, the next section discusses the background and evolution of the conflict in detail.

The Background of the Conflict

The PKK was founded by Abdullah Öcalan and his sixteen colleagues in 1978. The first attack organised by the PKK on July 30, 1979 caused the death of one child which was directed to the leader of Bucak tribe, Celal Bucak, who was against the PKK (Milliyet, 2011). The situation was similar with other Kurdish tribes since they were against the PKK and its separatist aims (van Bruinessen, 2010, p.316). Before the military *coup* in 1980, the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*, TSK) began to use force in the south-eastern part of Turkey to banish the PKK which resulted in the leading members of the terrorist organisation (Apo and his colleagues) escape Syria in July 1979. This escape caused growing tensions between the Syrian and Turkish governments on counter-terrorism issues (Mango, 2005, p.34). Turkey's concerns were on the city of Damascus where the PKK militants had been training in the Bekaa Valley of northern Lebanon, which was under the control of Syria. The camp Bekaa Valley had been used as an ideological and military training base until the TSK threatened the Syrian government that Turkey had a right to destroy the PKK camps if Syria did not expel Öcalan and the PKK members.

The subsequent attack of the PKK on 15 August 1984 caused the deaths of a soldier and three civilians, and three injuries, which was then followed by one of the most dreadful attacks of the terrorist group, causing the loss of twenty nine people's lives in 1987. The terrorist violence had its peak between 1987 and 1991. Thirty-three villages exposed to violent attacks that caused many civilians and members of security forces to be killed by militants of the PKK (Mango, 2005, p.38).

The PKK had contact with not only the Syrian government, but also various Kurdish organisations in northern Iraq during the turmoil of Turkish *coup*. Two of these contacts were significant as they were very influential in northern Iraq: First, the PKK built contact with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of

Mesut Barzani. This contact resulted in the KDP to give permission the PKK to build camps in northern Iraq in 1982 (Bruinessen, 1988, p.44). Although this party declared an end to co-operation with the PKK four years later, this help was critical for the PKK to build its military capacity. Second, Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) had been in a good relationship with the PKK and the Syrian government, which helped the terrorist group to use both territories and survive in the region in the early 1980s (Mango, 2005, p.37). The PKK's use of the Iraqi and Syrian territories to train thousands of militants both militarily and ideologically provided a unique opportunity to learn guerrilla tactics to the members of the terrorist group, which was unfamiliar for Turkish security forces.

After the PKK increased the number of lethal attacks, the Turkish state applied a new strategy by forming the paramilitary village guard system under the military service's control through the Village Act to hire and organise village protectors known the 'Temporary and Voluntary Village Guards' in 1985. This was followed by the declaration of the State of Emergency Rule (*Olağanüstü Hal*, OHAL) by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) in 1987 in the southeast of the country for the sake of the immediate use of martial law and the response of the PKK's attacks immediately (Barkey, 2007, p.357). After the government introduced martial law and state of emergency in Kurdish populated cities, political liberalisation of the region was made impossible, as a governor-general was responsible for the entire southeast region whose authority was extended after the conflict had been de-escalated (Taspinar, 2011, p.100). The violent attacks of the PKK deteriorated in the 1990s. Therefore, the TSK organised a cross-border operation in 1995 (Culcasi, 2006, p.698).

Another fundamental issue was the Iraq-Iran War between 1980 and 1988, which has had two effects with regards to the Kurdish issue. The first factor is to create an authority gap in the region, which resulted in strengthening of the PKK. During the war, the Iraqi government could not pay attention its northern borders. Therefore, the PKK militants were easily accommodated in northern Iraq. Besides, a 'hot pursuit agreement' between Iraq and Turkey that allowed Turkish security forces to cross the Iraqi-Turkish border if PKK militants took refuges. In return, Baghdad turned a blind eye to Turkey's cross-border operations in the border (Özdağ, 1999, p.82). The second factor is related to the perception of the Iraqi and Iranian leaders. Firstly, President of Iraq Saddam Hussein attacked his Iraqi Kurdish citizens with deadly gas attack as part of his Anfal campaign. Subsequently, thousands of Kurds sought asylum from Turkey, escaping from the tyranny of Hussein (Barkey and Fuller, 1997, p.66). Consequently, the population of Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin dramatically increased in the south-eastern region of Turkey which caused Turkey's Kurdish issue to deteriorate. Secondly, Turkish officials claimed that the Iranian government aimed to use the PKK as a policy to weaken Turkey's military power in the Middle East (Barkey, 2007). While Iranian officials rejected the existence of the PKK militants within their border, the PKK's lethal attacks by using Turkey's southern neighbours claimed thousands of people's lives and jeopardised Turkey's economy.

In the 1990s, the high-intense conflict resulted in the change of the opinion of political actors towards the resolution of the Kurdish question. Süleyman Demirel, then President of Turkey, was the first politician to recognise the existence of Kurds in Turkey as he said that 'we should admit Kurdish reality' (Cumhuriyet, 1991). However, this historical speech did not change the perception of Turkish army as the violent conflict remained. This was followed by Atilla Ateş, then commander of the Turkish Army General, since he threatened Syria to attack if they did not deport Öcalan and brought its support for the PKK to an end through the following speech on September 16, 1998:

> Some of our neighbours, especially Syria, are misinterpreting our efforts and goodwill for having good ties. By supporting the bandit Apo they have helped plunge Turkey into the trouble of terrorism… Our patience is exhausted (Ateş, 1998, quoted in Yavuz, 2001, pp.14-15).

After a confrontation from Turkey, Syria was obliged to banish Öcalan from Damascus and began to close the PKK camps in its region in 1998 (Nicoll and Delaney, 2008, p.1). Afterwards, Öcalan stayed in Russia for a while and then landed in Italy for a short time on 12 November 1998 where he thought he would obtain the political asylum of the EU (Gunter, 2000, p.850). However, the US, as a NATO ally, put pressure on Italy for rejection of Öcalan's application on political asylum. Following the rejection, he moved to Greece at the beginning of February 1999 before his last stop, Kenya. The United States gave information to Turkish officials of where and how to capture him. On the 15th of February, when he was brought to Nairobi airport, he was captured by Turkish Special Forces and was brought to Turkey forthwith (Bodansky, 2006, p.180).

Although the leader of the terrorist group was captured, the fatal attacks did not stop; and before and after his capture, the PKK's separatist terrorism cost many people's lives. Thousands of people lost their lives from the beginning of the conflict until 2012, the initiation of the peace process, including 6,053 security forces (TSK and police officers), 5,557 civilians and 3,474 unresolved crimes. In addition, 22,101 PKK members were killed until 2012 (TBMM, 2013). Besides, armed forces spent almost 15 billion dollars to win the war on

terror against the PKK (Mango, 2005, p.46). Additionally, according to Minister of Defence, İsmet Yılmaz, Turkey has lost 35,300 people until 2011 (Sardan, 2012).

The US's invasion of Iraq in 2003 affected the future of the conflict completely. When the US administration decided to attack Iraq in order to overthrow Saddam Hussein, they demanded Turkey's support by using its airspace and airbases for the invasion of Iraq. However, the TBMM rejected to open its airbases which had an immediate effect on Turkey-US relations negatively. While Turkey was aiming to prevent potential attacks by Hussein's army, it was a missed opportunity to intervene in northern Iraq to destroy the PKK camps (Mango, 2005, p.48). As the former Chief of Staff of the TSK, İlker Başbuğ argued that the Iraq War was the most fundamental chance to destroy the PKK camps and so, its existence in northern Iraq (Başbuğ, cited in Birand, 2011).

The level of violence has decreased when conflict resolution methods have been applied by the Turkish government. Although the communication was built before the 2000s, the most comprehensive contact has been established between 2006 and 2011 between the National Intelligence Organisation of Turkey and the PKK, which is called the Oslo talks (Bezci, 2015; Kadıoğlu, 2018a). Along with the support of society and peace organisations, the peace process maintained until the end of the PKK ceasefire and then violence returned in 2015 (Kadıoğlu, 2018b; Köse, 2017). Then, the conflict again turned into an endless war together with the Syrian civil war and the PKK/PYD's enormous gain in northern Syria (Dag, 2018).

The history of the conflict illustrates several breakpoints, which have been affected by not only national political and security agents of Turkey and the PKK, but also international and regional actors. The next section investigates the influence of international and regional dimension of the Kurdish question to comprehend the insights of the conflict.

Understanding the Approaches of Iraq, Iran and Syria towards the PKK

Safe Haven

For a terrorist group, having a safe haven is the most critical condition to survive and strengthen its capacity to fight against a state's security forces. The PKK was aware of this importance, particularly on allowing the use of their territory for the support of training, material and bases. This demand has been responded differently by Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian governments and local authorities in these three states.

The PKK gained support from the Syrian government by providing safe territories shortly after its foundation. When the PKK's leader Öcalan escaped Syria immediately after the *coup* in 1980, the Syrian government allowed the PKK to build training camps and headquarters in northern Syria and the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon via the Syrian border (FAS, 2008). As Van Bruinessen (1988, p.44) indicates, the relationship between Turkey and Syria has been mostly determined by this issue since the mid-1980s. Öcalan noted that '15,000 guerrillas were trained in the camps provided by the Syrian government' (Öcalan, quoted in Pirim and Ortulu, 1999, p.248). Hence, it can be said that the Syrian government's support for the PKK was the biggest help for the group to survive in its foundation process. This help was evident also through the moral support of Syrian officials. For example, Syrian Foreign Minister Faruk-Al Shara called the PKK a 'resistance movement' instead of a terrorist group, even though the PKK was on the list of terrorist groups compiled by Syria (Al-Shara, cited in Phillips, 2015, p.52). Even though the Syrian government had to deport Öcalan and close the PKK camps in Syria after 1998, Shara's view has been Syria's long-standing approach on the PKK.

Syria's position towards the PKK re-emerged as the PKK was allowed to build safe territories thirteen years later through three camp areas: Idlib, ayn-el Arab and Kamışlı which camps accommodate around 1,000 PKK militants as of 2012 (Hürriyet, 2012). The nature of the conflict has completely changed after the Syrian civil war since a majority of the PKK militants moved Syria due to the territorial ambitions in northern Syria. While the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the PKK's Syrian branch, has been founded in 2004, it has been very effective among other Kurdish organisations (TESEV, 2011, p.46). On the one hand, the PYD aims to take northern Syria under its control through the war against not only the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but also all opponent groups in the region as part of their great Kurdistan project after the civil war (ICG, 2017). On the other hand, the Turkish government has seen no difference between the ISIS and PYD, which determined the state policy towards the war in Syria (Hashimoto and Bezci, 2016). Besides, the US-led western coalition facilitated the PYD's plan because of choosing the PYD as a tactical ally in their war against the ISIS. This proxy warfare campaign provided the PYD great ammunition and training support, which affected the nature of the conflict. Although it is not the main question of this research this is a significant point to strengthen the PKK/PYD in Syria.

The situation was not very different in Iraq as the dispute between Turkey and Iraq over the PKK started immediately after its first lethal attack in 1984. Afterwards, the TSK's operations in the rural areas of

southern Turkey obliged the PKK terrorists to escape not only northern Syria, but also northern Iraq (Kirisci, 2004, pp.283-4). It can be said that two reasons were effective for the use of Iraqi territory at the early stage of the conflict: attrition tactic and the aim to establish bases. Firstly, the mountainous terrain between Turkey's Eastern and South-eastern Regions helped the PKK to adapt hit-and-hide tactics, and so to apply the attrition tactics easily. This method helped the PKK to attack Turkish forces without giving many casualties. Secondly, the authority gap in northern Iraq provided a unique advantage for the PKK to locate its major base in the Qandil Mountains, which is a mountainous area over the border between Iraq and Iran. Thanks to this and other camps in Iraq, the PKK increased the numbers of its members and trained them against Turkish security forces, which was possible through the Kurdish population's support for the PKK in northern Iraq (Daloglu, 2007).

The lack of control of the Iraqi government over northern Iraq is one of the major reasons for the PKK to accommodate in the Qandil Mountains and its periphery. The camps are located in three main camp areas in Iraq: Qandil, Sincar and Makhmour. According to the Turkish government, there are more than thirteen different regions embodies several camps in the Qandil Mountains in 2018 (CNNTürk, 2018). The camps include Dole Koge, Şehit Ayhan, Hınere, Zeli, Kanicenge, Kalatukan, Surede, Belekati, Asus and Mahsum Korkmaz (Milliyet, 2018). Sincar is another camp area in northern Iraq, which has been an important base of the PKK after the ISIS attacks in Iraq. The PKK again took the advantage of the authority gap in the region. Makhmour Camp is one of the largest UN-assisted camp in the region, which has been declared by President Erdoğan that 'the Makhmour camp had become "a breeding ground" for the PKK' (Hürriyet, 2018). The camp consists of 13,000 people as of June 2018 according to the Turkish government. Since the camp has been established for those who have been forced to move northern Iraq by the PKK, the importance of this camp for the PKK can be clearly understood. As it was mentioned in the previous section, after Saddam Hussein regime's use of chemical weapons, many Kurdish people had to move to the Makhmour camp, which later became a great militant source of the PKK. As the district governor of Mahkmour Rızgar Muhammed İsmail said, 'The Makhmour camp is under the control of the PKK. The militants are being recruited and trained by the PKK' (CNNTÜRK, 2017). In total, there are 17,000 force of the PKK in northern Iraq, which seems a great threat by the Turkish government (Hürriyet, 2018). This is in line with the assumption that Iraq's help for safe territories facilitated the PKK's violent attacks against Turkish security forces.

Furthermore, the eastern hillsides of the Qandil mountains have been the headquarter of the PKK and largest militant camp which is in the border of Iran. Despite the use of Iranian territory, the PKK did not organise violent attacks in Iran until the 2000s as opposed to the PKK's mortal attacks against security forces and civilians in Turkey. After the September 11 attacks in the US, the PKK changed the name of its affiliated groups in Syria and Iran by keeping its Kurdistan dream on the territories of four countries (Cagaptay and Eroglu, 2007). The PKK's Iranian wing was named the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK). The shared problems of Turkey and Iran emerged, primarily the fact that the PJAK and PKK both have their training camps and headquarters in Qandil Mountain in northern Iraq (Nicoll and Delaney, 2008). Although both states have exposed similar threat, The PJAK is much smaller and so has limited capacity as opposed to the PKK. Iran's position towards the PKK was in question during the early years of the PKK attacks.

The Turkish government blamed Iran for backing the PKK and hence, the group was able to survive like many other insurgent groups in north-western Iran, using hit-and-run tactics against Turkish security forces and civilians (Aras, 2001). Although the Turkish-Iranian officials made a security agreement against the PKK in 1984, the aim to prevent the mortal attacks of the group could not help to make progress in the fight against terrorism (Bölükbaşı, 1992, p.29). Thus, Turkish officials blamed their Iranian counterparts for not taking actions against the PKK to prevent establishing camps (Gunter, 1998).

The most obvious indicator of Iran's support was seen through the PKK offices in Iran. In 1989, Osman Öcalan (brother of Abdullah Öcalan) opened a liaison office in Iran. In addition, he negotiated to open twenty operational bases within the border of Iran to target Turkish cities in 1990 (Mango, 2005, p.37). As Barkey (2007) indicates, Iran's covert support was evident through the permission given the PKK to use its territory. This territory was mostly used for escaping from Turkish security forces. Therefore, it provided an opportunity to the PKK to survive against Turkey's counter-terrorism operations including air strikes. Similarly, Turkish officials constantly accused Iran for allowing the PKK to use its territory. For example, former Defence Minister Turhan Tayan stated that 'Iran provides support to the PKK and our security services have confirmed this on many occasions' (FBIS, 1997). In this context, the reason for Iran's unwillingness to dissolve the PJAK/PKK's existence is significant. Although there is no concrete information, arguably, it can be said that this is a result of being a regional power in the Middle East. Undoubtedly, Turkey's fight against terrorism has caused it to spend billions of dollars to security investment and expenditures, which affected the development of the country negatively. Therefore, as Iran and Turkey are the two major powers in the region, their aim to restrict each other's role in the region can be a result of this situation. The PKK has three bases in the border of Iran: Şehit Harun, Kuran ve Piran bases in the Qandil

region of Iran. These camps have an estimated 5,000 and 7,000 PKK members as of 2016 (Yenişafak, 2016). These numbers were evidence of providing safe havens for the PKK in Iran, which has several different reasons that will be assessed in the next section.

Bargaining Strategy

The use of a terrorist group as a bargaining strategy by sponsoring state is a well-known tactic, which is used for the sake of weakening the target state due to a historical problem, reach a specific goal, regional competition or change of the regime (Hoffman, 2006). These three states have had different approaches towards the existence and actions of the PKK. While the Iraqi government emphasised on the lack of control of the region, the Iranian government has consistently denied their help of the PKK. Although these approaches were an outcome of a strategy, they did not emerge through a visible bargaining strategy. This is clearly an outcome of 'not our war' approach since the PKK did not target their security forces or civilians. However, the Syrian government's historical disputes with the Turkish state had a peak because of the use of the PKK as a trump card against Turkey.

Syria used the PKK for gaining political power as part of its regional ambitions (Tejel, 2009, p.71). By allowing the PKK's establishment of bases in Syria, Hafiz al-As'ad, the then president of Syria, gave permission implicitly the PKK to launch attacks against Turkish security forces (Tejel, 2009, p.75). However, it did not result in the Syrian government to admit enrolment in the PKK 'in lieu of compulsory military service, or alternatively, that it was informed by the PKK of Syrian Kurds casualties' (McDowall, 1998, p.65). Moreover, six candidates from Kurd Dagh, who declared that they were the representatives of the PKK, ran in the Syrian national election for office in 1990. Ismet Sharif Vanly claimed that the relationship between the Syrian government and the PKK was mutually beneficial, while the PKK had military bases in Syria, the latter provided a bargaining advantage to Syria against its enemies in the region, most importantly against Turkey (Vanly, 1992, p.169). This emerged through different historical issues between Syria and Turkey.

The first historical issue between the two states is the Hatay case. Hatay was part of Syria under the French mandate until joined Turkey on 30 June 1939 as a result of the plebiscite in the city (Mango, 2005, p.35). This initiated hatred of Syria against Turkey. While the Syrian government officially denied their support for the terrorist group, their support for rebellious actions against Turkey was evident (Altunisik and Tür, 2005). It was attested by a captured PKK member, Emine Gerger, she argued that Syria's support for the PKK was due to the 'dispute about Hatay whereby Syria hopes to benefit from the confusion and take Hatay back' (Gerger, quoted in FSA, 2008). This was evidence of the underlying reason of the Syrian support for the PKK to obtain safe havens in the region. In addition, the PKK attacks in Hatay by using the Syrian mainland resulted in the escalation of the conflict as Öcalan threatened Turkish officials that 'Hatay must be turned into a bloody lake' (Hürriyet, 1995).

The second issue is the water problem, which is related to the question of how to obtain more water from the Euphrates River that resulted in an escalation of tensions in the relationship.[1] This river is of vital significance to both states for several reasons including drinking water, hydropower stations for producing electricity, agricultural purposes and transportation. Hence, it has been used as a balancing policy by the Syrian government. As Van Bruinessen (1988, p.44) argues, President Besar Asad used the PKK as a trump card to use more of the Euphrates. However, the Turkish government did not allow this to happen because of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in the region.[2] However, the PKK aimed to prevent this project to be successful due to the aim of establishing a Kurdish state in eastern Turkey. The Syrian government's purpose to use the PKK as a policy tool against Turkey was evident through the statement of Samir al-Taqi, Head of Orient Centre for International Studies in Damascus. He stated that Syria used the Kurdish question as a proxy-war tactic through the PKK to push Turkey to sit at the negotiating table on the water issues (al-Taqi, cited in Hinnebusch and Tür, 2013, p.18).[3] This bargaining tactic against Turkey was used to put pressure on Turkey until the capture of Öcalan (Hinnebusch and Tür, 2013, p.4).

Furthermore, after the Iraqi government had controlled northern Iraq completely, it did not allow Turkey to organise military attacks in this region in order to destroy the PKK (Taspinar, 2011, p.173). According to a detailed research of Umit Ozdag, the Iraqi government had a secret deal with the PKK for the sake of putting

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[1] The Euphrates originates in eastern Turkey, and it flows through Syria and Iraq to join the Tigris in the Shatt al-Arab river. It finally discharges into the Persian Gulf.
[2] The GAP is a multi-sector project to provide regional development by using the rivers in the region for agriculture, hydroelectric stations and economic purposes to eliminate regional disparity between western and eastern Turkey (Kolars and Mitchell, 1991).
[3] The proxy war, instigated by a state against another state by using a sub-state armed group, caused to affect security concerns in south-eastern Turkey (Mumford, 2013).

pressure on Turkey with regards to water policy (Ozdag, 1999). Therefore, it can be said that Iraq is used the PKK as a bargaining tool against Turkey in order to obtain more water from Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

Diplomatic Pressure

The first decade of the conflict between the Turkish state and PKK was dominated by terrorist attacks of the PKK and the TSK's traditional counter-terrorism tactics. However, hard-line policies are not always successful in eliminating the act of terrorism or terrorist threat. In line with this argument, the PKK kept its existence thanks to the application of solely military methods and the lack of cooperation between neighbouring countries in the Middle East.

After fifteen years of violent conflict with the PKK, the Turkish state began to increase its force on Syria to extradite Öcalan and the PKK terrorists in the late-1990s. The increasing attacks of the PKK by infiltrating Turkey from Syria, and thousands of casualties because of deadly conflict resulted in the TSK's declaration, which referred the UN Charter's 51st Article:

> *Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security (UN, 1945).*

This declaration was followed by the Turkish state's diplomatic pressure in international arena on Syria regarding the Syrian government's support for a terrorist group. As a result, Syria had to deport Öcalan and the PKK's many of the training camps were closed in 1998 (Nicoll and Delaney, 2008, p.1). Turkey's relationship with Syria stabilised after the capture of Öcalan and at the beginning of the 2000s Turkey was exposed relatively fewer terrorist attacks by the PKK coming from the Syrian territory. However, the tension increased after the beginning of the Syrian civil war as the PKK's Syrian wings the PYD and People's Protection Unit (YPG) are backed up by global powers including the US and Russia in the fight against the ISIS (Al Jazeera, 2017). The situation in 2017 has deteriorated as the Kurdish insurgent groups in northern Syria aim to establish a Kurdish state. While the literature on diplomatic pressure predominantly focuses on the international help to terrorist groups, this article argues that diplomatic channels can also be used by the target state against state-sponsored terrorism, which helps to cut the link between terrorist groups and their sponsors. This condition emerged through Turkey's use of diplomatic pressure against Syria, which resulted in the deportation of Öcalan and closure of PKK bases.

Moreover, the Iranian government's unwillingness with regards to the fight against the PKK terrorism was evident through its reluctance to declare the PKK as a terrorist organisation. While Iran did not add the PKK to their terrorist groups list until the 2000s, Iran's point of view changed after the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government's initiatives. As the AKP government developed strong ties with Iran in the mid-2000s, the two states began to cooperate regarding counter-terrorism policies. Correspondingly, as Mango (2005, p.79) notes, the change in Iran's stance towards the PKK became clear when Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan visited Iran in July 2004. He thanked the Iranian officials for fighting against terrorism. As a result, Iran declared the PKK and its splinter groups (KADEK and KONGRA-GEL) as terrorist organisations. In return, Turkey announced the Mojahidin-e Khalq (People's Fighters) in Iran as a terrorist organisation, and declared that it could not use Turkish soil for its extremist actions.

Distribution of terrorists according to their country of which they joined the PKK proves that it is also crucial to respond mutually against the PKK's activities in the future. TEPAV research indicates that distribution of terrorists have been provided until 2011 from several countries: Turkey (57,13%), Iraq (12,70%), Iran (7,75%), Syria (12,28%), EU countries (8,90%) and others (1,24%) (TEPAV, 2012). These data show that 89,86% of the human source of the PKK has been distributed by these four countries. Therefore, it is vital to resolve the problem by establishing diplomatic relationship between these states.

Diplomatic pressure, bargaining strategy and safe haven provide a comprehensive analysis of bilateral relationships between the three neighbours and Turkey on the one hand, and between these states and the PKK. However, there are some other circumstances, which facilitated the PKK to survive and strengthen its military capacity in the territory of these states. These issues can be assessed as external circumstances in the region.

External Circumstances

The existence of a terrorist group is not always related to the intensity and fatality of its attacks, or the support provided by other states. The external circumstances have been another facilitator for the PKK to maintain its existence in the Middle East. During the early 1990s, there was a wider conflict between the two Kurdish movements in northern Iraq. While the fight between Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK caused hundreds of casualties, this dispute created a suitable place for the PKK to maintain its existence in Iraq without any opposition (Gunter, 1996). As Kirisci (1996) notes, in response to the PKK's tactical advances to

expand its armed and militant capacity, Turkey organised a cross-border operation with 35,000 troops for six months in northern Iraq in March 1995. The reasons for organising such a large ground operation are twofold: It was not only to destroy the PKK's Makhmour Camp and headquarters in the Qandil Mountains, but also to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. The dispute between the major two Kurdish movements demonstrated that a Kurdish federation could have been established in the north. Arguably, it can be said that Turkish officials believed that the partition of Iraq would deteriorate the terrorism problem in Turkey.

Moreover, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1999 after Ocalan's capture, which lasted in 2005. While the ceasefire was not fully complied with, it helped decrease the level of violence, which made it possible to implement political reforms towards ending the conflict.

The Iraq War of 2003 raised the question of the partition of Iraq again. The catastrophic effect of the war and the efforts of Kurdish political parties to establish a Kurdistan federation in northern Iraq caused angry reaction of Turkish officials:

> *Turkish frustration at not being able to strike at the PKK in northern Iraq was exacerbated by a fear that the Iraqi Kurds would use US protection to proclaim their own independent state- a move that, Turkey has long believed, would further fuel separatist sentiments among its own Kurds (Nicoll and Delaney, 2008, p.1).*

Therefore, Turkey was worrying about that an authority gap in the region would possibly lead to encourage separatist groups to strengthen. After the invasion of Iraq, Turkey criticised the US's failure for establishing a rapprochement between the central government and Iraqi Kurds against the PKK. Arguably, this criticism was due to the fear of Turkish officials for Iraq's partition and the potential loss of control of northern Iraq. Five years after the beginning of the Iraq War, the Iraqi Kurdish authorities attested that their forces were inadequate to fight against the PKK (Nicoll and Delaney, 2008).

During and after the invasion of Iraq, the PKK raised its mortal attacks and became even more lethal than before in the region. As Efegil (2008, p.54) indicates, the high-intensity conflict conducted by the PKK changed the nature of Turkey's borderland in 2007. This led Turkish political agents and military officials to discuss another cross-border operation to the PKK's headquarter in Qandil. They had two major aims just like the cross-border operation in 1995. Their first aim was to destroy all PKK camps in the region. The other aim was to inhibit the legal formation of an independent Kurdish state. Although the EU, Iraqi government and the US were opposed to a cross-border operation, after long debates and bargaining, Turkish officials had a consensus to organise several air and land operations to destroy the PKK camps. This operation interrupted the PKK's guerrilla tactics. However, Turkey could not prevent the establishment of the regional Kurdistan government in northern Iraq due to the authority gap after the Iraq War.

Northern Iraq has always been a major focus point for Turkey as the main trainee camps and headquarters of the PKK were located in this region. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq spokesperson Jalal Abdullah states that Iraq cannot declare that the PKK is a terrorist group, because they do not have the right to say this (Abdullah, cited in Daloglu, 2007). In contrast, the US State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack argues that the major and positive issue is the starting engagement between Turkey and Iraq in the PKK case (McCormack, cited in Daloglu, 2007). In this context, it can be argued that Turkey's fight against terrorism became more complicated with the Iraq War and the foundation of Kurdistan region. While there is no official link between the KRG and PKK, Turkey constantly claimed the reluctance of the KRG to end the existence of the PKK in northern Iraq.

Not Our War: The Unbearable Lightness of Disregard

The historical analysis of Syria, Iraq and Iran's relationships with the PKK has demonstrated that the approach of these states has not always been against the PKK's presence within their borders. In contrast, their actions are more complicated because of the use the PKK as a trump card against Turkey (Syria), the reluctance to fight against the PKK due to the invasion of their land and the existence of several regional actors (Iraq), and making balance with Turkey in the international arena (Iran). These approaches brought out a common point of view of the three states towards the conflict between Turkey and the PKK: 'It is not our war'.

To isolate themselves from Turkey's fight against terrorism resulted in the lack of cooperation between the three states and Turkey, and limited shared information, which caused the PKK to strengthen in the Middle East. As the three states do not see the PKK as a security threat, this has not prevented them to provide safe havens in their territory. While all three countries provided designated areas for training camps and accommodation of the PKK militants, the analysis has illustrated that the most effective factor that strengthened the PKK was its main camps in Makhmour and Qandil Mountains of Iraq and Iran.

Particularly, as the Turkish-Iraqi border is the closest line from the PKK camps to Turkish residential areas, the PKK militants do not struggle to use this route. The existence of the PKK camps in the region has been one of the most important reasons for not to exterminate the PKK's militant sources.

The external circumstances also supported the belief that Turkey's war against terrorism is not a concern of the three states and global powers. Instead of opposing the violent attacks of the PKK, the neighbours and great powers disregarded this threat. This disregard policy was evident through the ignorance of the PKK terrorism in the Middle East even if the group strengthen its military and logistic capabilities due to the decisions of these actors. The US invasion was an indicator of this condition that resulted in the survival of the group due to the authority gap in northern Iraq. This gap created a unique opportunity for the PKK to maintain its attacks against civilians and security forces despite the TSK's intensive counter-terrorism measures. Undoubtedly, the invasion and war in Iraq caused several problems in the country from unity question and ethnic claims to sectarian disputes between different sects in society. These complicated issues resulted in an inevitable disregard of the PKK's existence in northern Iraq. The Iraq War was also seen as a missed opportunity by Turkish security forces to destroy the PKK. The former Chief of General Staff of the TSK, İlker Başbuğ argued that the Iraq War could have been a great chance to destroy the PKK camps in northern Iraq (Başbuğ, cited in Birand, 2011). This opportunity was missed after the resolution to open its land and airspace to the US had been refused in the Turkish Parliament.

The reluctance to fight against terrorism was an indicator of the 'not our war' approach. This reluctance stemmed from both casualties as a result of the PKK and its Iranian wing PJAK, and the disregard of the PKK's existence by Iran as the group did not target Iranian territory. This disregard resulted in the lack of cooperation between Turkey and Iran to take a mutual position against the PKK. For example, the refusal to acknowledge the Iranian government helped the PKK to operate more than fifty camps for training and accommodation purposes, and liaison offices in six different cities of Iran, which resulted in the confrontation between the two states (Hürriyet, 1999). While there is no clear evidence for the support of the Iranian government for the PKK, the reluctance to destroy the PKK camps in Iran has clearly resulted in strengthening the PKK's military and personnel capacity. Therefore, Turkey had to focus more on counter-terrorism instead of economic development in the southeast, which affected its influence on the Middle East negatively as a regional power. This is in line with Iran's expansionist policies towards the region. Although the perception of Iran on Turkey's fight against PKK terrorism has changed after the AKP government contacted to Iranian officials, this occurred after de-escalation of the conflict. Thus, it did not play a great change in terrorism threat deployed by the PKK.

The intention to use of the PKK as a bargaining strategy is part of a proxy war campaign, which demonstrates the approach of Syria towards the PKK. As discussed in the previous section, two historical disputes between Turkey and Syria resulted in the use of a proxy war strategy by Syria, with the aim of obstructing Turkey's development projects on the Euphrates and initiatives in the Middle East. While this indirect use of violence caused an escalation of the violent conflict in Turkey, this situation led to Turkey's diplomatic and military pressure on Syria. Particularly, the use of diplomatic language by referring to the UN Charter and the threat of cross-border operation of the TSK resulted in the Syrian government to deport Öcalan. It can be argued that Turkey's decisive policy was influential in the late 1990s.

Conclusion

This article has critically analysed the role played by Turkey's three neighbours on the country's war against PKK terrorism. Despite the limited support of the Kurdish community for the PKK in Turkey, the lack of cooperation between Turkey and these three neighbours for the PKK caused the deaths of thousands of people and hit Turkey's economic development. The article has argued that the three neighbours took a benefit of this situation through logistical support, the use of the PKK as a proxy war campaign and the disregard of the PKK activities in their territory as these aspects indirectly support the power of these states against Turkey.

The regional dimension of the terrorist threat has been of vital importance in Turkey. This is in line with Newland's (1993, p.149) argument as he states that if ethnic tensions emerge mostly in the borders of states, one neighbour's help or support to this group might cause the problem to get worsen. This causes state-sponsored terrorism, which needs to be eliminated to bring the PKK terrorism to an end. When Syria, northern Iraq and Iran stop allowing the PKK to use their territories and start cooperation with Turkey through establishing sustainable communication channels instead of confrontation, Turkey's struggle to overcome terrorism is more likely to become less complicated. The analysis has also demonstrated that the aims of states to use the PKK as a tactical tool in order to reach their political goal is the major problem, which is needed to be resolved through diplomatic efforts. It is suggested that Turkey's struggle with the PKK cannot be finished unless domestic pressure is supported by the international society's complete reinforcement.

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