UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF INSURGENT LEADERSHIP:
A CASE STUDY OF ABDULLAH ÖCALAN AND THE PKK

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By

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This work is dedicated to a handful of key individuals who stood by me with patience and encouragement throughout the entire project.

Thank you for your boundless support.
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Introduction and Justification

The dynamics between Turkey and its Kurdish minority have been troubled ever since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923. After decades of repression under state policies that tried to forcefully assimilate the Kurds, a lengthy war broke out between the central government and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in 1984 that continues to this day. This armed conflict has cost Turkey dearly in terms of lives lost, money spent, and a national consciousness scarred by a legacy of injustice and brutality on both sides. Though the last ten years have seen a welcomed decrease in violence compared to the 1980s and 1990s due to a shift in the PKK’s approach and new policies introduced by the ruling AK Party, there is still much to be done to resolve the conflict for good.

A close examination of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK’s only president since the founding of the party in 1978, offers a unique opportunity to draw lessons from Turkey’s Kurdish issue that may be relevant to intrastate ethnic conflicts elsewhere, especially in terms of understanding the importance and reach of strong leadership. Some say Öcalan was a madman, an egomaniacal killer, ruthless and brutal. Others call him a hero, the savior of his people, even a martyr. Whatever the opinion of Öcalan, it is clear that his impact on the development of Turkey’s Kurdish issue has been significant. Through analysis of the case of Abdullah Öcalan, this study seeks to examine the extent to which a single leader (in this case the leader of a terrorist organization) can influence events in an intrastate conflict, as well as highlight the circumstances that may allow this to occur. It hypothesizes that Öcalan has singlehandedly shaped the Kurdish issue within the Turkish republic, he has impacted Turkey’s posture in foreign relations, and he has continued to play a pivotal role in the conflict over the last several years, despite his incarceration in 1999.
As with many ethnic conflicts, Turkey’s Kurdish insurgency and the PKK’s leadership dynamics are not only important issues for Turkey domestically. The impact of the conflict is felt outside Turkey’s borders as well. Regionally, it has been a destabilizing factor for Iran, Iraq, and Syria, as these countries all border Turkey and have sizeable Kurdish minority populations of their own. Amidst ongoing violence between the PKK and the Turkish government, Turkey’s neighbors have alternated between feeding the conflict to manipulate Turkey and partnering with Turkey to eradicate Kurdish terrorism.\(^1\) Despite these differences, the fact remains that each of Turkey’s neighbors has been repeatedly drawn into the conflict to one degree or another. Turkey’s problems with its Kurdish population is also a significant factor hindering the country’s long-standing attempts to join the European Union, which looks down upon Turkey’s past human rights abuses in combating PKK terror. Concurrently, as a necessary pre-condition for Turkey’s full EU accession, the EU requires that Turkey solve the Kurdish issue through demonstrated progress towards democratization in relation to its Kurds.\(^2\)

Due to the visibility of Turkey’s conflict with the PKK, its profound implications for Turkish foreign policy, and the seriousness of possible future terrorist attacks within Turkey, Abdullah Öcalan emerges as a particularly important figure whose visibility lends itself to a study on the reach of individual leaders. Undisputed president of the PKK since the group’s establishment, Öcalan appears to play a pivotal role in the conflict even from prison. Although he has been in solitary confinement for over a decade, he sets the PKK’s agenda, calls for ceasefires or attacks and even allegedly negotiates with state officials occasionally.\(^3\)

\(^2\)Morton Abramowitz and Henri Barkey, “Turkey’s Transformers; the AKP Sees Big,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88 Iss. 6 (November/December 2009), 119.
examination of the reach of his leadership, and his impact on the Kurdish issue more generally, represents an opportunity to assess the state of the conflict in order to more efficiently bring about its resolution.

For the purpose of this paper, the reach of Öcalan’s leadership will be assessed as an extension of the framework established by Byman and Pollock in their article entitled “Let Us Now Praise Great Men; Bringing the Statesman Back in.”¹ In this article, to be discussed further in the literature review, these authors caution against ignoring the role of individuals in international affairs. When one considers the globalized, technology-infused nature of the world today, it becomes clear that the voices of individuals can reach further than ever before, extending their capability to impact matters at the international level. As Byman and Pollock suggest, now is the time for more scholarly attention to the role and reach of individuals in global affairs. This case study attempts to do just that by highlighting the impact of one leader, arguing that Öcalan’s unique leadership style and control of the PKK had profound repercussions for Turkey’s Kurdish issue at large which reverberate in the nation’s interaction with the global community. Additionally, since most of the literature on Turkey’s Kurdish issue either neglects the intricacy of Öcalan’s role, or only traces his leadership impact on the PKK organization, falling short of his multi-layered impact on the global community, this study addresses an important gap.

**Road Map**

This paper will begin with a brief literature review on the theoretical models for examining international relations and the role of individuals in international affairs. Then it will

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highlight samples of works that are characteristic of the literature on Öcalan and his leadership of the PKK. The review of literature will be immediately followed by an examination of the Kurdish issue in Turkey as a prerequisite for assessing the reach of Öcalan’s leadership in the conflict, which will include discussion of Turkey’s understanding of Kurdish identity and Kurdish nationalism. Additionally, an analysis of the inception of the Kurdish issue at Turkey’s founding, and of its relation to ideas on Turkish national identity is necessary in order to better understand the context that allowed for Öcalan’s extensive role.

From the background information on Turkey’s Kurdish issue, the project will turn to examine the history of Öcalan’s leadership of the PKK and analyze his impact at three specific levels leading up to his capture; the PKK organizational level, the Turkish domestic level, and at the international level. Certainly, there are moments in the story during which these three levels intersect to some degree. Instances of intersection have not been explicitly highlighted in the analysis for the purpose of structural clarity. Likewise, the analysis of Öcalan’s impact at each of the three levels is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the whole of Turkey’s Kurdish issue, but elucidation of the key moments in which Öcalan’s role is most readily visible.

Analysis of Öcalan’s leadership using the three-tiered approach for the period prior to his capture will be followed by an abbreviated assessment of the transformation (or lack thereof) of Öcalan’s role in the years since his incarceration. Although in some terrorist organizations, the words and views of captured leaders are often considered suspect and potentially coerced, this section will examine Öcalan’s successful, dramatic revision of the PKK’s strategy from an emphasis on militant attacks to a quest for a democratic solution, as well as the aftermath of this shift. The post-capture segment will also be carried out at the organizational, intrastate, and
interstate levels to determine the extent of Öcalan’s continued leadership from behind the bars of his cell on Imrali Island.

In the conclusions section of the project, assessment of Öcalan’s current role and leadership status will allow for extrapolating ideas on several topics. These topics will include the circumstances that allowed for the development of Öcalan’s leadership role that may be applicable to other conflicts, and policy recommendations, both for Turkish counterterrorism efforts and for solving Turkey’s Kurdish issue.

**Link to the Literature**

Many scholars have posited models for understanding international relations that focus on systemic level interactions between states. For example, classical realist theory seeks to explain global affairs by declaring states as single units that act rationally in the interest of achieving power within the international system, with forces at play between states at the systemic level as the causes of war and conflict. Hans Morgenthau, and other realist scholars claim that objective laws which are rooted in human nature and common to the behavior patterns of all states, shape the balance of power at the systemic level. In contrast, neo-realists like John Mearsheimer argue that rather than human nature, it is the anarchy inherent in the international system that is responsible for security competition and conflict among great powers. Liberal institutionalism, on the other hand, maintains that international institutions and economic interconnectivity temper the capabilities of states to create conflict, and provide alternative solutions to security (and therefore peace), that can eliminate the utility of war. Though these theories differ in many important ways, they all emphasize systemic level trends to explain why

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states act the way that they do in international affairs. This macro-level approach is important for creating a base from which to understand the workings of the international system, but as some scholars have suggested such systemic approaches are limited in their explanatory power due to their neglect of other significant, sub-state factors that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of state-posturing on the global stage.

In reality, states are not homogenous, ever-rational actors, only motivated by clearly defined national interests. It follows that intentionally overlooking the impact of domestic populations, non-governmental organizations, lobbyist groups, and individual leaders has left systemic theories limited in their ability to explain anything beyond broad trends and tendencies. Day to day workings of the international system require a more intricate approach. As suggested by scholars like Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack in their article “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Putting the Statesman Back In,” sub-state actors, especially individual leaders, must not be so readily neglected by international relations theorists. The article highlights Kenneth Waltz’s “first image” of analysis and underscores the troubling “tendency of scholars to ignore the role of personalities in international relations.”

Byman and Pollack, rather than focusing solely on the impersonal, systemic forces that shape history, demonstrate that individual leaders have played and continue to play an immutable role in global affairs. As the authors point out, the twentieth century cannot be explained without mention of Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill, and the like. Similarly, one cannot expect to understand the Kurdish issue in Turkey, or Kurdish terrorism without examining the impact of Abdullah Öcalan. Byman and Pollack’s work stands out as an urgent invitation for scholars to acknowledge the power of individuals to shape the international stage.

8 Ibid. 107.
As Byman and Pollack argue for a honing in on individual personalities, scholars like Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman have taken this theme one step further, applying it to the field of terrorism in their debate about the importance of leadership for modern terrorist organizations. Hoffman and Sageman differ greatly in their opinions about the extent to which individual leadership matters for terrorist groups like al Qaeda and the PKK. While they both acknowledge that “a new generation” of terrorist groups (especially in terms of al Qaeda’s global Salafi jihad) is becoming more “amorphous” and diffuse, Sageman emphasizes that terrorist leaders are becoming irrelevant and that formally tight organizations are transforming into nothing more than dispersed social networks immune to the decapitation of leadership.9 Hoffman, in stark contrast argues that “the center holds,” that central leadership and organizational structure remain absolutely critical to the activities of terrorist groups across the globe.10 With particular relevance to a terrorist leader like Abdullah Öcalan, Hoffman argues that leaders of nationalist terrorist groups like the PKK have a powerful resonance for the groups they head. They are the vanguards of the vision of a national homeland, responsible for “articulation of a concrete and comprehensible goal” which acts as “the most potent and persuasive rallying cry.”11 Therefore any work geared towards illuminating the reach of Öcalan’s leadership and his ability to shape events, satisfies not only Byman and Pollacks’ call for a focus on individual personalities, but also contributes to the terrorist leadership debate.

Narrowing in further, the academic literature on Turkey’s Kurdish issue is relatively quiet regarding the resilience of Abdullah Öcalan and his leadership. Though his name appears frequently in the scholarly work on the plight of the Kurds in Turkey, it is often accompanied by

only brief references to his charismatic appeal. Rather than expounding on Öcalan’s specific role, scholars have preferred to focus on the broader roots of Turkey’s conflict with the Kurds. Many examine the policies of systematic suppression by the Turkish central government, or the consequences of stunted economic development in the Kurdish regions in the southeast. Generally speaking, on the rare occasion that Abdullah Öcalan is assessed in the literature on Kurdish issues in Turkey, three patterns emerge; His role is either downplayed or neglected completely, he is dismissed as a murderous sociopath, or he is lauded as the hero and savior of Kurdish nationalism.

Embodying the tendency to downplay or neglect Öcalan’s importance as PKK leader is Svante Cornell’s work entitled “The Land of Many Crossroads; The Kurdish Question in Turkish Politics.” For example, regarding the reasons behind the PKK’s formation in the 1970s, Cornell emphasizes the “increasing stature” of the Kurds in Northern Iraq during the late 1960s and minimizes the impact of Öcalan and his unifying appeal. Likewise, Cornell neglects any mention of Öcalan when outlining reasons for the PKK’s longevity, instead citing the party’s “organizational skills,” the widespread “dissatisfaction of the Kurds in Turkey,” and “the mobilization of international resources” as the main causes of the group’s resiliency. Rather than a resonant vision carried forth by a dynamic leader, Cornell states that “unquestionably, the most important factor in the PKK’s survival has been the support of several foreign countries.” In the end, Cornell’s underdeveloped assessment of the PKK leader allows the author to prematurely

assert that “Öcalan’s capture and unreserved submission to the Turkish authorities” have “damaged the PKK so seriously” as to signal the “defeat of the insurgency.”\(^\text{15}\)

Where Cornell does address the person of Öcalan, he is more or less dismissed as a Stalin-esque “madman” who is as fickle as he is bloodthirsty.\(^\text{16}\) Öcalan’s popular appeal is likewise downplayed as the unfortunate result of an ultimatum in which Turkey’s Kurds were forced to “fight the state” by siding with the PKK, or face the group’s wrath. Cornell goes on to decry the “megalomania” of Öcalan, observable in the “cult of personality he developed around himself” which alienated other Kurdish leaders who dismissed Öcalan as a “dog looking for a piece of meat.”\(^\text{17}\) Cornell’s reading of Öcalan portrays him as a hypocritical opportunist, who “failed to stay out of the tribal politics [he] aimed to destroy” and subjected to violence “the very population he claimed to represent.”\(^\text{18}\) Though aspects of the story told by Cornell are true, his work cannot account for the steadfast loyalty of Öcalan’s followers within Turkey, and is powerless to address the reality of his vast international support.

Cornell’s views appear shortsighted and overly narrow after comparing them to those of Michael Gunter in his article entitled, “The Continuing Kurdish Problem in Turkey after Öcalan’s Capture.”\(^\text{19}\) He argues that Öcalan’s leadership role has been absolutely crucial for the PKK specifically, and the Kurdish resistance in general, stating that by the time he was captured “Öcalan had done more to re-establish a sense of Kurdish self-esteem and nationalism…than any other Kurdish leader.”\(^\text{20}\) To Gunter, Öcalan’s capture has signaled anything but a defeat for the PKK, as Cornell posits. Rather Öcalan has remained a source of hope for the Kurds,

\(^{15}\) Cornell, 42.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{17}\) Quoted in Cornell, 40.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{20}\) Gunter, 849.
representing a formidable leader with ample power to control and unify the Kurdish insurgency, even from behind bars. Öcalan’s vast popular appeal is apparent, according to Gunter, in the immediate outburst of widespread, violent opposition to his capture, which later ceased “almost overnight” on Öcalan’s orders. Rather than a madman, Öcalan emerges as a calculating pragmatist, first using violence to bring about a change in status for the Kurds, but transforming his approach to promote “a just, democratic peace for everyone” when circumstances called for it.

Aliza Marcus in her work entitled *Blood and Belief*, provides perhaps the most useful and comprehensive examination of Öcalan in terms of situating his character within the plot of the Kurdish issue more generally. While withholding an emotional assessment of both Öcalan’s leadership and Turkish state policies in response to the PKK’s war, Marcus paints a picture of a determined and self-absorbed Öcalan willing to go to great lengths to protect his own position, often at the cost of the goals he so highly espoused. He comes across as a flawed, though effective leader, bent on eliminating any activity “that would remove the Kurdish fight out of his direct control.” From his ruthless leadership tactics over the PKK, to ensuring that the PKK was the only Kurdish voice in Turkey that mattered, Marcus deftly paints a picture of an Öcalan who would stop at nothing to improve the plight of the Kurds, but only on his own terms.

As the literature demonstrates, Öcalan certainly emerges as an important figure in the history of Turkey’s Kurdish issue. What is left to be determined is the extent to which he has individually shaped the issue as a single leader, and the degree to which he remains relevant today. Has Öcalan’s unique personality and approach to leadership really had a great impact on

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21 Gunter, 851.
22 Ibid., 853.
the Kurdish issue, or was he simply in the right place at the right time as events unfolded? Has his potency diminished with the accumulation of years he has spent in prison? How and why has his role changed since the 1970s? What is his ultimate legacy in the conflict? These are all questions that have been somewhat neglected in the literature on Turkey’s Kurdish issue, and that merit current research. Seeking answers about the reach of Öcalan’s leadership offers not only an opportunity to illuminate possible solutions for the Kurdish issue, but also to highlight some of the conditions that catalyze the power of individuals in international affairs.

Initial conclusions indicate that Öcalan’s case is one in which an individual leader has undoubtedly had a profound impact on events both within a state, and by extension on how that state approaches international affairs. It is expected that while Öcalan’s reach is vast, there may be other factors at play outside of his control which have magnified his role in the Kurdish conflict. Additionally, after his capture, his continued impact on the PKK is most likely strong, with the broader Kurdish population in Turkey considering him a hero of sorts. Though his effect on the ongoing conflict is expected to be dynamic, his leadership role and personal strategy has likely shifted upon capture, as he is necessarily limited by imprisonment in terms of his ability to command and control the PKK’s militant forces. Generally speaking, however, his case most likely demonstrates that the role of individuals in international relations should not be ignored.

**Background Information**

**Turkish National Identity Development and the Inception of the Kurdish Issue**

Turkey’s Kurdish issue and Öcalan’s role within that conflict must begin with an understanding of the conflicts roots, which are traceable to Turkish national identity formation at the country’s founding. In the wake of the First World War, the once-mighty Ottoman Empire faced dissolution and dismemberment at the hands of the victorious powers in Europe by the
Treaty of Sevres, signed in 1920. The treaty however, was never to be enforced. Instead, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, a charismatic military leader, rose up to lead the peoples of Anatolia in a desperate war for independence, expelling European powers from the area and establishing the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923.

To guarantee the continued viability of the fledgling state immediately following the establishment of the Turkish republic, Ataturk assumed near dictatorial powers to enact a series of sweeping social reforms. The ultimate purpose of these reforms was to abandon “the patrimonial identity of the empire” by shirking off all residue of the decadent Ottoman past, establishing a decidedly secular, democratic, European identity for Turkey to promote modernization and secure a place for the country among the great powers of the world. The culmination of these reforms was a veritable cultural revolution, the deliberate construction of a singular national identity under the understanding that this was absolutely necessary to eliminate the ‘backwards’ elements of society and place the country firmly on a trajectory towards progress based on secular, liberal, unified democracy.

The national identity project was nothing if not extensive, beginning with the surgical removal of religious institutions from elements of the state in order to secularize the new republic. This process started with the abolishment of the Caliphate in 1924, an institution that for centuries held great significance for the whole of the Muslim world, with successive Caliphs revered as the very shadow of God on earth. The caliphate was not the only religious institution to be eliminated. The government ministry in charge of enforcing Islamic laws was also

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abolished, as were Arabic-based religious schools.\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, the creation of a new Turkish-language education system implied “‘an end to the transmission of the Islamic religious and cultural heritage’ to future generations of Turks.\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, the abolition of the ministry of religious affairs ensured that all religious matters would be subject to the secular criteria of the new national government.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, the power of Islam in relation to the state had been significantly reduced, signaling that religion would no longer be a driving force in Turkish political society.

Ataturk’s reforms were not wholly preoccupied with Islam. Rather, the reform process sought to re-shape the culture of the republic so as to define it as something that predated the introduction of Islam, which had “bogged down” Turkish history according to some.\textsuperscript{30} As the majority of the people in Anatolia were Turks, especially in the wealthy, elite classes, the new national identity was explicitly shaped along Turkish ethno-nationalist lines. Schoolbooks were changed to reflect new interpretations of history emphasizing the ancient, Central Asian roots of Turkic civilization, and the Turkish language was purged of Arabic and Persian loan words in favor of new vocabulary created from old Turkish root words.\textsuperscript{31} Ataturk even set up a commission of French linguists to transcribe the Turkish language from Arabic script to Latin letters. The language reforms of the 1930’s effectively cut off future generations of Turks from the cultural and religious heritage found in old Ottoman literature, but they simultaneously

\textsuperscript{27} Jung, 60.
\textsuperscript{28} Mango, 403.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 403.
\textsuperscript{31} Fuller, 25.
promoted a new, distinctly Turkish heritage in the country, drawing Turkey away from the Arab world and towards the powerful, modern nations of the West instead.\footnote{Serif Mardin, “Playing Games with Names,” \emph{Fragments of Culture: the Everyday of Modern Turkey}, Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayse Saktanber, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 115.}

The deliberate construction of the new republic’s decidedly Turkish ethno-nationalist identity came at a high price for ethnic minorities in the country. For many in the elite classes, the existence of ethnic minority groups inside the borders of the new republic posed an existential threat. After all the state, born out of Europe’s thwarted attempt to divvy up the remains of the Ottoman Empire, existed in a hostile neighborhood with much untamed territory to defend. Indeed, the preeminence of national security issues became a feature of the Turkish national identity, espoused since the country’s inception. In one of his most famous speeches Ataturk stated to the nation’s youth;

\begin{quote}
“Your first duty is to preserve and to defend Turkish independence and the Turkish Republic forever. This is the very foundation of your existence and your future. This foundation is your most precious treasure. In the future, too, there may be malevolent people \textit{at home} and abroad, who will wish to deprive you of this treasure …It is your duty to save Turkish Independence and the Republic. You will find the strength you need in your noble blood.”\footnote{Emphasis added: “Ataturk’s Address to the Turkish Youth, October 20, 1927.” \textit{Voice of Ataturk: Official Publication of the Ataturk Society of America} (Spring 2007).}
\end{quote}

With such a charter, the central state could not ignore the danger posed by internal dissention from consolidated minority identities and their potentially separatist aspirations. As a result, repressive policies towards minorities sprang up nearly simultaneously with the wave of social reforms instilled by Ataturk.

Due to the fact that Turkey’s Kurdish minority was its largest by a long shot, and the fact that for a brief moment the Treaty of Sevres had brought Kurdish independence within reach,\footnote{The Treaty of Sevres had allotted a piece of the defeated Ottoman Empire specifically for the Kurds – the closest they have come to possession of a homeland in the form of a modern nation-state.}
the Kurds were thought to represent an urgent threat to the country’s territorial sovereignty, and a danger to the whole of the national identity project. Indeed, the Kurds had fought alongside Atatürk’s forces under the banner of Islam during the Turkish war for independence, but this brief unity was all too quickly forgotten. Instead, the state’s solution to the question of the Kurds involved steadfast refusal to admit the presence of minorities on Turkish soil. In practice, this official denial birthed government policies which used systematic repression to inhibit any expression of a distinctly Kurdish identity.\textsuperscript{35} It became illegal to speak the Kurdish language, practice Kurdish culture, and wear traditional Kurdish forms of dress. Kurdish place names were replaced with Turkish ones, and individuals were forced to abandon their Kurdish family names as well.\textsuperscript{36} Publicly identifying oneself as a Kurd was enough to get someone arrested as a separatist. In a foolhardy attempt to link these repressive policies to national unity, the state claimed that the Kurds were Turks too, ‘mountain Turks’ who had forgotten their Turkish mother-tongue due to their isolation in the harsh, unforgiving terrain of the Southeast.\textsuperscript{37}

Naturally, the Kurds initially violently resisted the central state’s assault on their cultural identity. From the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, they carried out three successive armed revolts against the Turkish state.\textsuperscript{38} Sometimes aided by transnational Kurdish groups, sometimes motivated by religion more than ethnic grievances, all three rebellions were violently crushed by government forces.\textsuperscript{39} Though many Kurds supported the Turkish government during these rebellions (or at least claimed neutrality), the uprisings provided justification for the

\textsuperscript{36} Gunter, 200.
\textsuperscript{38} Brown.
\textsuperscript{39} Gunter, 200.
government’s continued repressive policies, and continue they did. Ultimately, the failed rebellions and the government’s strong-handed response to them nearly crushed the Kurdish nationalist spirit until the 1970s. Reports from those passing through the region during the 1950s suggest that it was difficult to perceive even “the faintest breath of Kurdish nationalism” in Turkey at that time.

By the beginning of the 1940s, the Turkish republic, with its tailored new identity, was up and running. Religious institutions had been subjugated to the authority of the state, a distinctly Turkish ethno nationalist consciousness had been awakened, and it seemed as though dangerous, subversive minority identities had been tamed at relatively low cost. Turkey appeared on a track towards progress and modernization, but the jury was still out on the new nation’s potential for longevity. The ruling elite remained somewhat suspicious of the West’s intentions for Turkey, and the Republic’s near abroad did not exactly inspire confidence as a picture of stability, to say nothing of neighbors like Armenia, who harbored historical grievances for the atrocities of 1915. After Ataturk’s death in 1938, many wondered if the revolutionary reforms he instituted would break down in the absence of his capable, charismatic leadership. Moreover, the onset of the Cold War put Turkey right at the borders of the Soviet Union, vulnerable to communist incursion and in a weakened economic state after the Second World War. Security concerns, therefore, maintained an overwhelming preeminence in the minds of the ruling elite. Internal stability and control, necessary to sustain the reform process, and by extension the whole endeavor of Turkey’s fledgling democracy, remained paramount. Therefore, Kurdish nationalist tendencies were seen to pose a particularly insidious, continual threat to the country’s viability. The state’s

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40 Gunter, 200.
42 Turkey did receive massive amounts of Marshall Plan aid during the post-war period, to try and bolster its economy from collapse and stymie any possible communist advances in the country.
knee-jerk reaction to even minor expressions of Kurdish nationalism is well-demonstrated in the words of Ataturk’s successor, Ismet İnönü, who said “In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. We must turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price, and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks.”\(^{43}\) This backdrop set the stage for the emergence of the PKK.

**The Birth of the PKK**

In the decades leading up to the PKK’s formation in 1984, many changes were underway both within Turkish society, and within Kurdish populations in neighboring states which contributed to the formation of the group and shaped its trajectory. Though the Turkish government’s policies towards the Kurds were severe, they could not mute the effect of Kurdish nationalism in the neighboring countries of Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Outbursts of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq in particular did not go unnoticed by the Kurds in Turkey. Just across the border, Mulla Mustafa Barzani led several uprisings against the Iraqi government beginning in the 1930s.\(^{44}\) During this time Kurdish families periodically fled to Turkey seeking asylum, including Barzani himself.\(^{45}\) Though many were sent back, intermixing with Kurdish rebels from Iraq doubtless planted the seeds of nationalist fervor within Turkey’s Kurds. From their isolation in the Southeast, they watched as Iraqi Kurds repeatedly stood up to the central government in Baghdad militarily, and they built nationalist organizations like the Kurdistan Democratic Party, formed to “support cross-border Kurdish communities.”\(^{46}\)

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 37-38.
Kurdish nationalism was also at work in Iran. Subject to cross-pollination of nationalist ideas from Iraq, the Kurds in Iran partnered with Iraqi-Kurdish rebels to form the Mahabad Republic in December of 1945. The republic was Soviet-backed and very short-lived, facing dissolution after barely a year of existence. Despite the failure of the small Kurdish republic, the boldness of Iranian and Iraqi Kurds created an environment that allowed for incubation of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, where it could not be practiced outright. The unyielding nature of the Turkish state, however, could not eliminate Kurdish sympathies from across the border, as reported by Barzani:

“I will never forget the love and support rendered by our Kurdish brethren of Turkey. However, they were in a worse position than we were. They still suffered from the atrocities and savagery to which they had been subjected. Their fear and shock were clearly written on their faces. Despite their own miseries, they never withheld assistance from us…Often I sympathized with their agony despite our own affliction. I was very distressed at their condition.”

Even Barzani, who’s own clan and people had suffered mightily at the hand of the Iraqi monarchy (and would continue to suffer at the hand of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist government), recognized the dire situation of the Kurds in Turkey, admitting that they fared the worst, at least at that point in time.

In addition to the contagion of Kurdish nationalism from Iran and Iraq, the relative silence of the international community towards Turkey’s Kurdish populations facilitated the development of the PKK in the violent conflict’s early stages. Certainly, the European Union and the United States took notice eventually, urging Turkey to recognize minority rights and helping to combat the PKK through intelligence sharing and defense cooperation. However, initially the development aid handed out to Turkey after World War II focused on defense issues, and

48 Mulla Mustafa Barzani quoted in: Barzani, 37.
broader modernization, not in bolstering the beleaguered peoples in the country’s southeast. Unfortunately, after the formation of the Turkish state, “the institutional framework and international support for foreign aid transfers to the unrecognized Kurdistan Region were unavailable.”

During the 1950s and 1960s, US foreign policy was preoccupied with the dynamics of the Cold War, in which the Turkish state played an important geo-strategic role. It was only after violence broke out between Turkey’s government and the PKK, that US policy reflected an interest in solving the issue. Even then, the United States saw the PKK with its Marxist-Leninist leanings as a dangerous, terrorist threat to its ally Turkey. As a result, the U.S. focused on aiding Turkey in its conflicts with terrorists over advocacy for the minority rights of Turkey’s Kurdish citizens. The lack of international attention to the Kurdish issue limited Turkey’s Kurds in terms of effective measures for engaging the repressive central government when state policies became unbearable. Terrorist violence, then, represented perhaps the only viable last resort.

In addition to the conditions outside Turkey which the Turkish central government could not control, the country’s internal condition leading up to the 1980s contributed to the foundation of the PKK as well. The first of these contributing factors began in 1946, when the Turkish Congress passed a law legalizing the formation of political parties in opposition to Ataturk’s long-dominant People’s Party. Up until that point the ruling elite, composed of a marriage between Ataturk’s party and the military, “would not allow any groupings to emerge to challenge their political mission.” The 1946 law, however, facilitated the beginnings of multi-party

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49 Natali, 2.
democracy in Turkey, starting with the new Democratic Party, founded in January of 1946. The new party brought with it an emphasis on labor rights and liberalization of Turkey’s economy at the same time that the ruling party lifted a ban on ‘class-based associations,’ which together quickly led to the formation of 600 labor unions within Turkey. Though the state retained vast control over the country’s economy, granting the right to assemble and shifting to a more democratic, multi-party political system provided the people with a framework to understand that their opinions mattered, or at least should.

The military coups of 1960 and 1971 also paved the way for the formation of the PKK. These coups, supported by a growing upper middle class, sought to promote the nation’s modernization and progress. After the 1960 coup, the military and their civilian counterparts wrote a constitution to develop a “balance between capital and labor” and “social justice and land reform.” As time went on, however, it became clear that liberalization and democratic reforms pursued at the military’s hand (the vanguard of Ataturk’s vision) were not to apply to expression of Kurdish identity. Kurdish political parties continued to be shut down by the government, and individuals who tried to publish or broadcast in the Kurdish language were often arrested. In 1967, the government went so far as to pass a customs law against imported publications or recordings in Kurdish to prevent their infiltration from Europe and elsewhere.

While the country’s ethnic Turks saw many democratic improvements in their lives, guarded by the trusted and respected military, the Kurds remained isolated in the Southeast, lacking a political advocate and facing a continued lack of sufficient state investment for industrial development.

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53 Sakallioglu, 713.
54 Asli Daldal, “The New Middle Class as a Progressive Urban Coalition: The 1960 Coup d’Etat in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* (September 1, 2004), 84.
55 Barkey & Fuller, 64.
As time wore on, the Kurds grew increasingly frustrated about their disadvantaged position in Turkish society. In the 1960s and 1970s, the mechanization of agriculture and periods of economic crisis marked by runaway inflation forced many Kurds in Turkey’s rural areas to move to urban centers to find work.\textsuperscript{56} At the same time, growing numbers of Kurdish young people sought educational opportunities at universities in the country’s more developed Western region. There, in Turkey’s large cities, Kurdish workers and students came into contact with the modernization and development that their region had been isolated from, as well as “the quiet growth of a defiant Kurdish identity.”\textsuperscript{57} In the Southeast, this defiance manifested in the form of mass meetings in which Kurds came together to protest their oppression and lack of rights.\textsuperscript{58} The growth of Kurdish nationalism during this period was only aided by the state’s insistence on seeing the issue in the Southeast as a case of massive regional economic backwardness instead of recognizing the effects of long-term repression.\textsuperscript{59} Concurrently, Kurdish resistance to accepting a Turkish identity, partially due to their not feeling “included, equal, empowered, and motivated by the nation,” made problems in the Southeast “more likely to escalate into perceived [and actual] security threats for the hyper-sensitive state.”\textsuperscript{60}

During this time of economic upheaval, and in light of repeated military coups that were limited in their ability to produce political stability, the country’s youth began to organize, largely around leftist, socialist principles. For Kurdish youth in universities, these organizations took on nationalistic undertones that were partially a response to the cycle of repression.

\textsuperscript{56} Ziya Öniş, “Crisis and Transformation in Turkish Political Economy,” \textit{Turkish Policy Quarterly}, Vol. 9 No. 3 (2010), 46.
\textsuperscript{57} Marcus, 17.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Mesut Yeğen, “The Kurdish Question in Turkish State Discourse,” \textit{Journal of Contemporary History}, Vol. 34 No. 4 (October 1999), 564-565.
\textsuperscript{60} Ironically, the state used national security as justification for authoritarian policies that prevented full democracy and pluralism in Turkish society, which ultimately made the country less secure; Doğu Ergil, “Identity Crises and Political Instability in Turkey,” \textit{Journal of International Affairs}, Vol. 54 No. 1 (Fall 2000), 47.
mentioned above. One such leftist group, called *Dev Genç* (or Revolutionary Youth), “helped set the background for much of the leftist violence of that time.”

Throughout the 1970s student revolts were brutally crushed by military forces, which in the midst of the Cold War feared the infiltration of subversive communist narratives, especially considering Turkey’s position in NATO, and its nascent Western identity.

*Abdullah Öcalan’s Introduction to Kurdish Nationalism*

It was at this time that a young Abdullah Öcalan studied for a college degree from the Political Science Department of Ankara University. He sympathized with emerging leftist political groups as his own awareness of his Kurdish identity took shape. In March of 1972, the military overthrew the government of Suleyman Demirel and declared a state of emergency in the country, banning certain associations and organizations, and arresting or capturing leftist activists who tried to start an armed struggle against the state. Öcalan himself was arrested in April of 1972 for participating in an illegal protest against military brutality. He spent seven months as a political prisoner in Ankara, and later stated that this time in jail served as an incubation period for the development of his ideology which later formed the basis of the PKK. After he was released from prison, Öcalan participated in legal leftist organizations and immediately began making plans to create his own group.

Largely a product of the times, the PKK was founded by Öcalan with a confusing mix of leftist and Kurdish nationalist values. Years later, those who had been close to Öcalan said that in the PKK’s early days, it was unclear if he planned to create a group that was leftist and happened

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61 Brown, 118.
62 Ozcan, 89.
63 Ozcan 90-91.
to have Kurdish themes, or vice versa.\textsuperscript{64} Though he at first hoped to work with Turkish groups already in existence, Turkish leftist youths were unwilling to partner with Öcalan, as they thought their own revolution would be sufficient to free all of Turkey’s peoples from the tyranny of the elite.\textsuperscript{65} He decided then to create an organization that would start with a fight for Kurdish nationalism under the belief that “the revolution of Turkey has to pass through Kurdistan.”\textsuperscript{66}

The Kurdistan Workers Party (in Turkish, \textit{Parti Karkerani Kurdistan}) was officially founded in November of 1978 with distinctly separatist goals in mind, but the group began their violent operations by attacking rival Kurdish groups and “collaborators,” or Kurdish leaders who worked with the state.\textsuperscript{67} The PKK was not the only actor carrying out violent, politically motivated attacks during this period. Deaths from political violence escalated each year after 1976, with over 3,500 people killed in 1980 alone. As the 1970s came to a close, Turkey suffered increasing political instability and a general atmosphere of looming anarchy in which the government appeared unable to provide for the basic safety of the citizenry. As a result, the military carried out another coup in September of 1980, and set up a martial law system in the Southeast while they re-wrote Turkey’s constitution.\textsuperscript{68} In an effort to restore stability, the new constitution was authoritarian and severely limited individual rights.\textsuperscript{69} Specifically targeting the Kurds, it sated “no protection shall be afforded to \textit{thoughts or opinions} contrary to Turkish national interests, the principle of the existence of Turkey as an indivisible entity.”\textsuperscript{70} As the military tried to restore stability to the country, organized Kurds became targets. From 1980-

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\textsuperscript{64} Ozcan, 90.
\textsuperscript{65} Marcus, 28.
\textsuperscript{66} Ozcan, 91.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 352.
\textsuperscript{70} Quoted in Gunter, “The Kurdish Question in Perspective,” 200.
1983, military brutality in the form of widespread torture in the prisons of the Southeast helped fuel Kurdish separatist aspirations instead of crushing dissent. In August of 1984, the PKK responded with a coordinated attack on state security forces in multiple locations, marking the beginning of the decades-long armed conflict between the PKK and the state.

**Assessing Abdullah Öcalan’s Role at Three Levels of Analysis**

Before analyzing the extent of the impact of Öcalan’s leadership, it is important to recognize at the outset that Turkish state-formation and the national identity project described above played a major part in fostering the development of the PKK. Öcalan, therefore, emerges as a product of the times to some degree. Absent the state’s policies of repression, and the atmosphere of instability leading up the 1980 military coup, it is unlikely that a figure like Öcalan would have found a following of fellow Kurds strong enough to even consider waging a war against the all-powerful state. Turkey’s history and the circumstances on the ground, however, allowed exactly that to take place. The fact that the internal socio-political situation within Turkey contributed to Öcalan’s rise does not diminish the reach of his leadership. Rather, it demonstrates a feedback loop between the conditions in Turkey and the power of a leader who altered the circumstances within the country.

Though circumstances out of his control facilitated Abdullah Öcalan’s rise to power, it stands that no individual had a bigger impact on the development of the Kurdish issue in Turkey than Öcalan and his PKK fighters. From PKK ideology, to attack strategy, to the group’s relationship with the Kurdish population at large, it was always Öcalan who called the shots. Sometimes by accident, sometimes by design, he orchestrated the development of the Kurdish

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71 Omer Taspinar, “The Old Turks’ Revolt: When Radical Secularism Endangers Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86 No. 6 (November-December 2007), 121.
issue in Turkey in the 1980s, and continues to do so today. To determine the state of his leadership and the extent of his role in the conflict, it is useful to trace his impact at three key levels. First, the organizational level will be examined, focusing on Öcalan’s leadership style and command and control of the PKK. Next, the intrastate level will be assessed to draw out Öcalan’s impact on Turkish state policies in relation to its Kurdish minority. Then, analysis will turn to the international level to determine how Öcalan has affected Turkey’s relations with the international community.

Öcalan’s Authoritarianism and the PKK – First Level of Analysis

Öcalan’s vast impact on the Kurdish issue begins at the organizational level with his leadership style and the manner in which he fashioned the PKK. Much like Saddam Hussein who eliminated opposition leaders and faithful followers alike in a bid to consolidate power, Öcalan opted for brutality and authoritarianism to manage the PKK. He then used the organization to pursue his version of a solution to the Kurdish issue, with an autocratic approach to leadership and absolute lack of tolerance for dissention of any kind. From the outset, this approach left Öcalan as the unrivaled head of the organization, and therefore, the main architect of the PKK’s conflict with the state.

From the early days of the PKK, it was clear that Abdullah Öcalan was the group’s undisputed leader. He had personally established the Kurdistan Workers Party after becoming dissatisfied with the Turkish left based on a political ideology that he had developed in prison. Motivated by this Marxist-Leninist ideology tailored to further his goals of Kurdish nationalism, Öcalan’s authoritarian personality gave the PKK its overwhelmingly vertical structure, with him at the top as dictator of the group’s activities. As the organization took shape in the late 1970s, Öcalan used networks he’d built from his activist past to round up support from leading leftist
groups. As he accrued followers, he set up small group meetings in the apartments of friends as part of a benign front organization called the Democratic Patriotic Association of Higher Education.\(^{72}\) At these early meetings, he used his charismatic appeal to build a fiercely loyal following of individuals indoctrinated with his personal vision for using illegal activities against the state to fight for Kurdish independence. As his leadership took shape, Öcalan set a precedent for intolerance of dissenting opinion, speaking out violently against those who criticized him for his political inexperience and lack of a strong reputation.\(^{73}\) Öcalan, however, undeterred and perhaps even spurred on by criticism from other respected leaders of the Kurdish movement, fancied himself a powerful speaker. As an early sign of his delusions of grandeur, he considered himself the only Kurd both willing and “ready to lead the first successful Kurdish uprising in history.”\(^{74}\) Under Öcalan’s watchful gaze an acquiescent and determined force emerged, willing, even eager to do whatever Öcalan required in the interest of Kurdish freedom. As a testament to their loyalty, before they became known as the Kurdistan Workers Party in 1978, Öcalan’s followers were called “Apocular,” or “Apo’s People,” after the shortened form of Abdullah Öcalan’s first name.\(^{75}\)

Öcalan further consolidated his authoritarian control over the PKK early in the group’s militant struggle against the Turkish state by vilifying those who stood in the way of the group’s goals, regardless of whether they were Turks or fellow Kurds. Significantly, he began by using terrorist tactics against Kurds who “collaborated” with the state. These individuals were often tribal chieftains who retained power with the assistance of the state in exchange for maintaining stability in their own areas. Öcalan considered these individuals bourgeois traitors, guilty of


\(^{73}\) Marcus 28-30.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{75}\) Gunter, 394.
propping up the state’s “colonization” of the Kurdish region of Turkey. By striking violently at these tribal leaders, Öcalan not only demonstrated his resolve in achieving his vision of Kurdish freedom from Turkish control, but also sent a message about the dangers of standing in his way. This message was not lost on Öcalan’s PKK fighters, who willingly took up arms against their fellow Kurds on his orders. Certainly Kurdish infighting was not a new occurrence, but the use of these tactics by Öcalan speaks to his perception of his position, namely that he stood as the only viable leader of a Kurdish revolution and would stop at nothing to realize his goals.

Öcalan’s power to wield the PKK for extremely brutal purposes against “collaborators” did not stop at tribal chieftains. Anyone and everyone who stood in the way of Öcalan’s vision became a target. Throughout the 1980s he ordered his PKK fighters to terrorize Kurdish villagers who remained unsympathetic to the group’s cause, killing men, women, and children indiscriminately. Those who worked for state institutions like hospitals and schools were killed as well. From 1984-1987 alone, 217 teachers were killed or kidnapped by the PKK. Öcalan even exacerbated tribal rivalries in murderous bids to draw supporters away from the traditional tribal system in the Southeast and towards the PKK. Brutality became Öcalan’s calling card, giving him a reputation for ruthlessness that was so well-known that Turkish authorities often got away with blaming him for atrocities that Turkish security forces had committed.

Öcalan’s dictatorial control of the PKK meant that perceived adversaries within the group became targets for his wrath as well. It did not matter how senior or respected a PKK fighter was, anyone who brought up critiques of Öcalan’s leadership or his strategy faced serious

76 Van Bruinessen, 42.
77 David L. Phillips, “Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Workers’ Party,” National Committee on American Foreign Policy (15 October 2007), 11.
78 Van Bruinessen, 42.
consequences for doing so, regardless of the legitimacy of their complaints. In the case of Öcalan’s own wife, Kesire Yildirim, who was one of the PKK’s founding members, some evidence suggested that she coveted Öcalan’s leadership position.\textsuperscript{80} After Öcalan became suspicious of her intentions, he accused her of being an agent of the Turkish Intelligence Service and she fled to Europe to escape his retribution.\textsuperscript{81} Other PKK members were not lucky enough to escape. Öcalan never tolerated dissent, even in the form of fighters who wished to leave the organization and return to normal life. In one instance in June of 1994, demonstrating the danger of disloyalty to Öcalan’s vision, PKK fighters stormed the house of a militant who left the organization, executing his entire family, including his mother and four young siblings who were all under the age of 15.\textsuperscript{82} To prevent the ascendency of rivals, Öcalan even targeted highly respected PKK members who held positions of responsibility in the organization, including almost all of those who had led the PKK’s historic first attack on Turkish military targets in 1984.\textsuperscript{83} Those original fighters who rose to prominence in the group but were not arrested were often publicly humiliated in front of other members by being accused of treason to the cause.\textsuperscript{84} Öcalan’s tendency to eliminate rivals and dissenters (both real and imagined) coupled with the fierce loyalty paid to him by the vast majority of PKK fighters allowed him to maintain his position alone at the very top of the PKK’s power structure throughout the group’s struggle with the Turkish state.

Of course, Öcalan did not eliminate all of those who held leadership positions in the organization. Practically speaking, he simply would not have been able to run the whole

\textsuperscript{81} Kutschera, 10.
\textsuperscript{82} Michael Rubin, “Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?” \textit{Social Research}, Vol. 70 No. 1 (Spring 2003), 314
\textsuperscript{83} Marcus, 110.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. 111-112.
operation alone. He did, however, make sure to assert his dominance at every opportunity, especially from the mid to late 1980s, when the militant operations against the state were still in the early stages. Essentially, Öcalan combined an oppressive, intolerant leadership style with real opportunities for fighters to rise through the ranks in an organization with a cause that many of them were willing to die to defend. Autocratic tendencies aside, for the majority of PKK fighters, the organization represented a golden opportunity to be a part of Kurdish liberation. To many, this dream was made possible by Öcalan’s authoritarian dedication to the cause, and the ruthlessness with which he was willing to pursue the goal of Kurdish independence. Essentially, Öcalan’s approach was a necessary byproduct of his all-important and inspiring vision for a homeland for the Kurds. For most of the group’s average fighters, his leadership remained the critical vessel by which they could play a part in what they saw to be a key turning point in Kurdish history. Time served to further consolidate Öcalan’s power as a new generation of fighters began to join the PKK under the assumption that his leadership was absolute and undisputed. Öcalan, therefore, remained the feared and lauded orchestrator of all of the PKK’s doings throughout the PKK’s war with the state during the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite Öcalan’s success in creating an organization in which he reigned unchallenged to steer the PKK’s course, it is important to recognize that this success was not all due to his prowess as a leader. Other factors, such as the tribal structure of Kurdish society, contributed to Öcalan’s primacy and the momentum of popular support that he enjoyed. For centuries the Kurds had maintained a traditional feudal social system, with rival chieftains (called aghas) vying for territory and seeking patronage from peasants who resided on their land. These tribal leaders played an important role in Kurdish daily life even into the 1970s and 1980s (when the PKK

85 Marcus.
86 Ibid., 111.
87 Hugh and Nicole Pope, Turkey Unveiled (New York: Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. 2004), 248.
conflict was in its infancy), demanding loyalty, providing protection, and taking part in blood-feuds. Öcalan’s manner of leadership was very much aided by these long-standing structural norms in Kurdish society. It was not new for the average Kurdish family to face violent authoritarian leadership, or to have to choose sides between warring parties while “maneuvering among competing external forces” who sought to play up divisions between tribes.88 Doubtless, Öcalan’s methods were brutal, but in the context of a society used to subjugation to the violence of Kurdish tribal politics, his success becomes more fathomable. Essentially, Öcalan acted like a new tribal chieftain in his uncompromising leadership of the PKK, which unlike other Kurdish nationalist groups did not include any additional tribal leaders in positions of influence from which to challenge him.89

The fact that Öcalan was the only Kurdish leader advocating immediate military action to improve the plight of the Kurds also facilitated his success in the face of an oppressive leadership style. His ideology began with advocacy of a separate state for the Kurds, but he would certainly tolerate nothing less than democratic rights. These goals were not necessarily unique to Öcalan. What set him apart was that he showed the confidence and audacity to actually act on his ideology by standing up to the state through armed struggle. All other influential Kurdish political thinkers insisted that as a people the Kurds were not ready for this step. They argued that any Kurdish revolt would absolutely fail as all previous revolts had if the Kurds did not first develop a political consciousness as a base around which to organize.90 Öcalan’s insistence on beginning an armed revolt without delay both differentiated him from more well-known Kurdish activists and earned him credit from those Kurds who were fed up with state-sanctioned oppression and marginalization.

88 Barkey and Fuller, 65-66.
89 Van Bruinessen, 42.
90 Marcus, 31.
Though Öcalan’s leadership went largely unchallenged for most of the 1980s and 1990s, there were a few key points at which his authoritarian approach and autocratic control could have spelled the end for the organization, and only extenuating circumstances saved it. One such point was his initial decision to begin the PKK’s armed struggle against the far better trained, better funded Turkish security forces. By the time Öcalan ordered the PKK to attack these elements, the Turkish military was crawling all over the Southeast enforcing martial law. This of course meant more targets for PKK fighters, but it also created a difficult atmosphere in which to maneuver. Though the PKK had several advantages, like knowledge of the terrain and connection to local social networks, there is evidence to suggest that Öcalan made the call to attack based on other factors. His lofty views about his own capabilities as a leader and his belief in the justness of his cause certainly played a part. Indeed, he has been known to shirk the advice of more-experienced activists and has compared himself to both Jesus and Nelson Mandela. A dispassionate look at the circumstances in August of 1984, reveals that Öcalan and the PKK were fortunate. They ended up with the unexpected enthusiastic support of local populations in the cities they attacked, and faced an adversary that was grossly unprepared to counter a guerilla threat. It was a mix of fortuitous circumstances, rather than the military prowess of Öcalan and his PKK deputies that spared the group from destruction after those first attacks.

Similarly, Öcalan’s despotic leadership style has proved a liability to the organization rather than a strength on several occasions. His brutal tactics against fellow Kurds originally drove many to oppose the PKK. A significant number of them preferred to throw in their lot with the state, joining the government-funded Village Guard so as to at least have weapons with

91 Abdullah Öcalan, Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question (London: Mesopotamian Publishers, 1999); Rubin, 314.
which to fend off the fighters of Öcalan the “madman”. However, the State’s heavy-handed response to Kurdish terrorism drove many to support the PKK, which effectively increased the reach of Öcalan’s leadership. Turkish security forces turned to torture, extrajudicial executions, and burning entire villages to the ground in their fight against terrorism. Human rights reports in the late 1980s described state brutality in the Southeast stating “virtually no one escapes. Neither the old nor the sick nor the young are spared. Young men and women are tortured in front of each other. Parents are tortured in front of their children. Women held hostage for their husbands are tortured.” As experiences like this became more common over time, many Kurds turned to Öcalan and the PKK as their defenders. In short, the State’s response to Öcalan reversed the negative effects of his initial brutality, and increased his ability to shape the Kurdish issue in Turkey through his command over the PKK.

Events out of Öcalan’s control also mitigated the negative effects of his uncompromising leadership style in the months leading up to his capture in February of 1999. At that time, the Turkish state had gained the military upper hand in the 15-year conflict. The PKK teetered on the edge of collapse after Turkish security forces adjusted their tactics to fight a guerilla adversary. Concurrently, by the late 1990s, the PKK’s support base had eroded in response to the State’s forced relocation policies. PKK fighters were poorly supplied and waning in manpower, yet still using the same tactics they always had. In other words, the state had adapted, but Öcalan had not. When his deputies brought up their concerns and suggested a change in approach in late 1998, Öcalan considered it a personal attack. Instead of heeding their words, he questioned their loyalty and their courage, and even resorted to insults, calling them “prostitutes in the political

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94 Marcus, 256-266.
sense” with “advanced personality defects.”95 Within a few months, however, the Turkish security forces captured Öcalan in Kenya after his highly publicized leapfrog around the globe. After his capture, his case, and by extension that of the PKK and the Kurds, gained extensive international attention. Öcalan went from relative obscurity as the head of a failing terrorist organization to the front cover of Time magazine overnight. Had he not been captured, his stubborn, abrasive leadership style and resistance to the council of his deputies may have spelled the end of the PKK organization. Öcalan’s capture halted his descent and left the future open for new developments in the PKK, and new opportunities for him to impact the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Over the course of the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, Öcalan retained absolute primacy in the organization. Öcalan determined the group’s approach to armed struggle, and designed the shift from violence against other Kurds to violence against state security forces. He sanctioned the PKK’s terrorist tactics. He built training programs for the PKK with Palestinians in Lebanon and a safe haven for his fighters across Turkey’s border with Iraq. Öcalan was the face of the organization and over time became the face of the Kurdish struggle at large. His absolute control over the PKK and his dictatorial leadership style meant that every aspect of the group’s fight against the state was orchestrated by him and attributable to him. Therefore, as an individual, he is responsible more than any other for the shape of the conflict over time. This fact becomes especially pertinent when looking through a slightly wider lens to examine the effect of the Öcalan-led PKK armed struggle on the development of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

The PKK Shapes Turkey’s Kurdish Issue – Second Level of Analysis

Since Öcalan maintained absolute control over the PKK, it follows that his influence can be traced to the development of Turkey’s Kurdish issue at large over the last three and a half decades. Up until the late 1970s, the state was able to characterize the Kurdish issue in a very specific way, but after Öcalan entered the scene with his PKK fighters, the state’s traditional position became ever more untenable. This section will look at the development of the state response to Öcalan’s PKK, discussing how the group’s armed struggle shaped the Kurdish issue in Turkey by militarizing it and suggesting that therefore Öcalan as undisputed head of the terrorist group had much to do with the state’s changing response to its Kurdish minority.

To trace the state’s reaction to the PKK, it is important to examine Turkish state discourse on its Kurdish minority leading up to the 1980s. As previously mentioned, the state’s original response to ethnic minorities involved denying their existence altogether. In the minds of the elite, this was a most generous interpretation. Rather than sowing the seeds of division, those in power naively assumed they were instilling principles of unity by determining that all citizens of the Republic were equally ‘Turkish’. This changed after the Kurdish uprisings of the 1920s and 1930s, at which point the state began to characterize the social structure in the Southeast as “reactionary, backwards, and dangerous,” while the central state represented secular, progressive modernity.96 Importantly though, even after the first Kurdish uprisings the state did not openly acknowledge any ethnic aspect to the issues in the region. In 1969, for example, the ruling Justice Party insisted it would not waver in its aim “to bring all regions of Turkey to contemporary levels of civilization,” and described “the necessity of introducing special

measures in the regions where backwardness is massive and acute.” After 1984, however, the state could no longer get away with couching the problems in the Southeast in terms of simple banditry or economic and cultural backwardness. The PKK’s Kurdish nationalist motivations were no secret. The group’s goals and eventual high level of support among the general Kurdish population forced the government to acknowledge the ethnic dimensions of the conflict over time.

With Öcalan at the helm, the PKK’s armed struggle eventually necessitated the State’s recognition of Kurdish ethnic grievances, but his preferred tactics also allowed the state to define the Kurdish issue in terms of terrorism, justifying a massive, violent state reaction. In the state’s view, Öcalan’s PKK fighters did not represent downtrodden, oppressed, and frustrated citizens of a minority group. Rather, they represented lethal terrorist separatists. An organization with a powerful leader that wished to see Turkey ripped apart required a steadfast, bold response, and as the 1980s wore on, the PKK’s initial successes in the conflict would lead the state down an increasingly ruthless path. By 1988 Öcalan’s organization was well-established, and his fighters received burgeoning support from Turkey’s Kurds as all other Kurdish nationalist groups faded out of existence. The PKK even had a cadre of civilian recruiters as well as a cadre of fighters.

In addition to his supporters on Turkish soil, Öcalan also developed a support base among the Kurdish diaspora community in Western Europe, beginning just after the 1980 military coup. Through the 1980s, conventional Turkish security forces struggled to make headway against the guerilla tactics of its adversary. It was often said that although the Turkish military retained control during daylight hours, the PKK rebels could roam freely in the Southeast at night. In fact,

97 Quoted in Yeğen, 564.
98 Europe’s increasing pressure on Turkey to recognize minority rights as a result of the country’s violent state policies against the PKK helped force Turkey’s recognition of minority identities as well.
99 Marcus, 131.
100 Van Bruinessen, 41.
whole regions of the Southeast had come under Öcalan’s control by the early 1990s. By late 1993, Öcalan went so far as to speak of the PKK’s impending victory and claimed there were 30,000 guerillas under his control.101

These successes combined with Öcalan’s favoritism of terrorist tactics led the state to form policies which further militarized the conflict instead of solving the Kurdish issue. This militarization partially manifested in the state-sponsored Village Guard system, formed in 1985.102 Through this program, the state offered weapons, training, and a stipend for local Kurds in the Southeast to play a part in protecting their own villages from the violence spawned by the PKK. Though for some Kurds the Village Guard did provide an opportunity to have a role in defending the region from terrorist violence, in many ways the program was self-defeating. Those who did not volunteer for the guards were often feared to be PKK sympathizers, which sometimes, of course, they were. In any case, state security forces developed a tendency to capture Kurdish men who did not volunteer and coerce them to join the Village Guards through torture and other methods.103 Since Öcalan famously disdained dissenters, this coercion placed these men and their families in danger of facing reprisals from the PKK and undermined what little security they might have enjoyed by attempting to remain neutral.

In the end, the Village Guard exacerbated tensions in the Southeast by flooding the region with weapons where the state did not have clear control. Poorly managed by often corrupt state officials, clan-leaders-turned-village-guards began using their training and state sponsorship to play out blood feuds and spread their own influence in the region, which fostered an alarming

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101 Quoted in Özcan, 108.
increase in organized crime, kidnappings, inter-tribal violence, and seizures of property against a backdrop of continued terrorist attacks by the PKK. The detrimental effects of this program reverberate in the present; just last year members of the Village Guard were implicated in the massacre of over 40 men, women, and children at a wedding celebration in Mardin.\footnote{Burcin Dokgoz Corum, “Prosecution Requests Six Life Sentences in Mardin Massacre Case,” Today’s Zaman (April 13, 2010), accessed 24 April, 2010 at [http://www.todayszaman.com].} Already by the early 1990s the state had all but lost control of the Village Guard, which had also become heavily involved in the smuggling of drugs and elicit arms.\footnote{Evren Balta, “Causes and Consequences of the Village Guard System in Turkey,” Draft paper for Presentation at Mellon Fellowship for Humanitarian and Security Affairs Conference (2 December 2004), 13.} It did not help the situation that many individuals in the state’s gendarmerie (the rural military police force that helped manage the village guard) played off of tribal rivalries to direct and engage in criminal activities for their own personal gain.\footnote{Ertan Bese, “Gendarmerie Intelligence” Democratic Oversight and Reform of the Security Sector in Turkey: 2005-2006 Status Report, Ed. Umit Cizre (Berlin: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007), 200; Ercan Yavuz, “Government to Revise Village Guard System,” Today’s Zaman (24 September 2009), accessed on 20 April 2010 at [http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=187841], 1.} As the Village Guard was a direct state response to the armed struggle in the Southeast led by Öcalan, the program represents one instance where his impact was particularly devasting. Likewise, the guards’ inability to enforce peace and involvement in unsavory activities drove otherwise neutral Kurds into Öcalan’s growing sphere of influence.

As the situation in the Southeast deteriorated, partially due to the state’s own programs, the Turkish government turned to forced relocation in attempt to sap Öcalan’s support base. By the time this process began, the PKK relied heavily on the Kurdish population for provisions and shelter. In attempt to cut off the PKK’s lifeline, the government violently and illegally forced over 380,000 Kurds from their homes in the rural Southeast, transferring them to larger urban centers in western Turkey after burning their homes, crops, and livestock.\footnote{“Last Chance for Turkey’s Displaced?” Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper (October 4, 2004), 2.} State security forces
killed or ‘disappeared’ many of those who did not leave on their own.\textsuperscript{108} Depleting the PKK of its human resources for recruitment and the social networks it relied on for supplies did have a detrimental effect on the ability of the group to wage war. However, the state’s displacement policy had negative impacts which echo in the present. According to the recent figures, Turkey still has around one million internally displaced people.\textsuperscript{109} Forced relocations and destruction of property also took a heavy economic toll in Turkey’s already poorest region, and led to overcrowding in poverty-stricken areas of the country’s urban centers.\textsuperscript{110} In addition, the Turkish government has endured much international criticism for its forced relocation programs to combat the PKK (to be discussed further in section 3).

The degeneration of the conflict into all out violence in the late 1980s and 1990s was never inevitable. Öcalan had recurring opportunities to adjust the PKK’s approach and invest in other options to try and ease the plight of the Kurds, but he preferred to keep events moving in a direction in which he retained ultimate control, and that meant emphasizing the PKK’s armed struggle at the cost of other methods. In one instance, a high-ranking PKK member responsible for European activities suggested that his committee work to provide social services to struggling Kurds in Europe and engage with NGOs and mainstream political parties to raise awareness, rather than only asking for support for the PKK’s armed struggle.\textsuperscript{111} Öcalan had him assassinated in 1985 for challenging his authority and advocating activities that might have weakened the organization. Similarly, in 1993 Öcalan called a unilateral ceasefire to bolster Kurdish political activities in the form of a regional assembly, but orchestrated the collapse of that same body after

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 3
\textsuperscript{110} “Last Chance for Turkey’s Displaced?” 3.
\textsuperscript{111} Marcus 89-91.
it proved insubordinate to his own goals. Instead of harnessing the influence of the PKK “to
develop even semiautonomous Kurdish institutions that could have strengthened Kurdish identity
and power, Öcalan sought to harness directly these forces to promote himself,” which stunted
productive political development in the Southeast.\textsuperscript{112} In other words, Öcalan’s played a distinct
role in ensuring that the PKK remained the only viable political outlet for the Kurds through the
1990’s.

As noted in the first level of analysis however, circumstances outside of Öcalan’s control
also contributed to his organization’s primacy among the Kurds. The Turkish state played a large
part in hindering the development of a peaceful Kurdish political identity during the 1990s.
Throughout this “lost decade,” Turkey’s high court banned Kurdish political party after political
party for containing members with alleged sympathies to the PKK. Turkish leaders refused to
grant any measure of legitimacy to separatist ideas by allowing Kurds with ambiguous loyalties
to sit in parliament. Certainly, some of these parties did contain Kurds who felt strongly about
changing state policies towards Turkey’s Kurdish minority, like the People’s Labor Party, or
HEP which was banned in 1994.\textsuperscript{113} Though the goal of preventing separatists from rising to
influential positions in parliament sounds justifiable, the incessant banning of Kurdish political
parties, had two major effects; it ensured that the government would have no moderate Kurdish
political counterpart with which to interact on the Kurdish issue, and it delegitimized influential
Kurds who sought to have a voice through legal channels, leaving Öcalan’s outlawed PKK as the
only strong advocate for the country’s Kurds. Therefore, those who found it ideologically
impossible to side with the state in the conflict had to side with the PKK by default.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{112} Marcus, 217-218.
\textsuperscript{113} Songün, 2.
\textsuperscript{114} Marcus, 228.
The long-time absence of a legitimate political voice for the Kurds, and the overwhelming violence and human rights abuses inherent in the state’s response to the PKK have left their scar on the Turkish nation. Since Öcalan’s capture, both the Turkish government and Öcalan himself have recognized that they committed excesses during the conflict. After his capture, Öcalan went so far as to admit that perhaps the PKK should never have resorted to violence, “which got ever more degenerate and led to great pain and loss.”\textsuperscript{115} This “pain and loss” resonates in Turkish popular culture, fostering the development of films and literature that depict the human suffering caused by the PKK conflict and the state’s response. One popular film, \textit{Babam ve Öğlum} depicts a family torn apart by the effects of torture and the brutality of state security forces in a society that still finds it difficult to openly discuss the realities of such recent trauma. The impact of the Öcalan’s war has certainly left its mark. To put it another way, the reach of Öcalan’s leadership irrevocably transformed the Turkish nation, as demonstrated by the conflict’s reverberations within Turkish popular culture.

\textbf{The Terrorist War and Turkey’s International Posture – Third Level of Analysis}

Öcalan’s impact did not stop at the Turkey’s borders. The way that he shaped the PKK and its armed conflict with the state has also impacted Turkey’s relations with its neighbors and others on the international stage. Though Turkey has always operated on a security footing, the war with the PKK marked Turkey’s international relations posture unmistakably. As one man, Öcalan had an impact on the international community like few others have.

As leader of a large Kurdish nationalist terrorist organization, it is not surprising that Öcalan had a significant effect on Turkey’s neighbors with Kurdish populations of their own.

\textsuperscript{115} Abdullah Öcalan, \textit{Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question} (London: Mesopotamian Publishers, 1999), 7.
Kurdish matters had always touched the way these states interacted with each other, but Öcalan and his fighter’s complicated relations between them. In regards to Iran, Turkey’s internal struggle with the PKK has periodically led to tensions between the two countries. In 1995 for example, Turkey and Iran found themselves providing support to opposite sides of a civil war between Northern Iraq’s two main Kurdish parties. Turkey supported the faction led by Massoud Barzani in hopes he would help destroy the PKK, but Iran supported the faction led by Jalal Talabani in order to interfere with Iraq and minimize Turkish influence in the border area.\footnote{Michael Gunter, “Turkey and Iran Face Off in Kurdistan,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol 5 No. 1 (March 1998), 34.}

Turkey had become preeminent in the border region during the Iran-Iraq war when Iran tolerated Turkish military forays across the Iraqi border in pursuit of fleeing PKK militants. In any case, in this proxy conflict between Iran and Turkey, the PKK is present in both Iranian and Turkish motivations.

More recently the PKK has helped forge strong cooperation between Iran and Turkey. This cooperation springs from the fact that neither wants to see the development of an independent Kurdish state, which they fear would include pieces of Turkish and Iranian territory. The emergence of the autonomous Kurdish political structures in northern Iraq exacerbates these fears. Notably, an Iranian branch of the PKK has developed overtime, called The Party for Free Life in Kurdistan, or PJAK. In 2006 and 2007 Turkey and Iran went so far as to carry out joint military operations against both groups.\footnote{Graham Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 111.} The two countries share intelligence on the PKK and PJAK, and each have carried out airstrikes on and arrested militants from both groups as well.\footnote{Omer Taspinar and Phillip Gordon, *Winning Turkey: How American, Europe, and Turkey can Revive a Fading Partnership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008), 50.}

Cooperation in matters involving the PKK has become characteristic of the working relationship
between the two countries which includes close trade relations, energy cooperation, and new real-time intelligence sharing.\textsuperscript{119}

Turkey’s relationship with Syria, on the other hand, has suffered greatly over the course of Turkey’s conflict with the PKK. Even without the PKK, the two countries have had a rocky coexistence due to Turkey’s historical support for Israel and resentment in Syria over the loss of the Hatay province to Turkey. It did not help matters that the two were in opposite camps during the Cold War. In the 1980s, Öcalan exploited and exacerbated historical tensions between the two countries by setting up PKK training camps in Lebanon with Syria’s tacit approval.\textsuperscript{120} Öcalan himself took refuge in Damascus, where the Syrians allowed him to remain for almost two decades. There he set up a compound where PKK fighters new and old could come for training in the PKK’s political ideology while enjoying rest and recreation.\textsuperscript{121} With his own villa on the compound and little to no disruption from Syrian authorities, Öcalan grew quite comfortable there while still retaining absolute control over the PKK.

Over time, Öcalan and the PKK often became a political tool that Syria used to try and manipulate Turkish political activity in the region. When Öcalan and groups of his fighters first started moving through the country, Syrian approval was partially a response for Turkey’s harboring of members of the Muslim Brothers, who had led an assault on the Syrian government right around the same time.\textsuperscript{122} Syria also used the PKK to try and manipulate Turkey’s policies on natural resources, including a massive dam project in which Turkey planned to harness the water of the Euphrates to irrigate its Southeast region. Syria vehemently opposed the project as it

\textsuperscript{121} “Abdullah Öcalan: We Are Fighting Turks Everywhere,” \textit{Middle East Quarterly}, Vol. 5 No. 2 (June 1998), 80.
\textsuperscript{122} Marcus, 60.
would stifle Syrian water supplies, and provided increased aid to Öcalan in attempt to convince Turkey to allocate more water to Syria.\textsuperscript{123} Turkey accused the Syrians of “playing the PKK card,” which of course it did on more than one occasion.\textsuperscript{124} Though its use of the PKK says much about Syria’s approach to international relations in its own right, it was a tactic that would have been impossible without the leverage of Öcalan and his fighters.

Perhaps in his most direct impact on international relations, Öcalan’s presence in Syria nearly caused Turkish-Syrian relations to deteriorate into war. Throughout the 1990s Turkey grew increasingly frustrated with Syria’s support to the PKK. The Turks resented Syria for using the militants as a political tool with which to jab at Turkey, but it was especially offensive that they did so while allegedly hiding behind their progress in peace talks with Israel, drawing international attention away from their state sponsorship of PKK terrorism. By 1998 the Turks had had enough and handed Syria an ultimatum. Either they immediately kick Öcalan out of Syria and cease their support to the PKK, or Turkish military forces would invade.\textsuperscript{125} The Syrians wisely chose the former, and since then relations with Turkey have improved. Syria even cooperates with Turkey in matters of intelligence-sharing against Kurdish separatists. Thus, although Öcalan impacted activity in the international community, the international community has also affected him.

Turkey’s relationship with Iraq was particularly troubled over Turkey’s conflict with the PKK. Volumes could be written about the manner in which Iraq complicates Turkey’s international posture in regards to the Kurdish issue, but for the sake of space, only those most

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Fuller, 96.
pertinent to the current discussion warrant mentioning.126 Certainly there have always been connections (tribal, cultural, familial) between the Kurds in Turkey and the Kurds in Iraq. At the outset of the PKK’s armed struggle against the Turkish government, Öcalan relied on these connections to develop bases for his organization on the Iraqi side of the Kandil Mountains near the Turkish border. The existence of these bases remains an irritant to Turkish military forces, who have faced international repercussions if they attempt to violate the Iraqi border to pursue fleeing PKK fighters after a terrorist attack. During Saddam Hussein’s reign, he periodically supported the PKK, and was either unable or unwilling to rid the north of PKK bases.127 Neither did the United States appear willing, as a matter of fact; the US-led Operation Provide Comfort after the first Gulf War shielded not only Iraq’s beleaguered Kurdish population, but the PKK as well, with at least one airdrop of provisions accidently delivered to the rebel group.128

Even before the accidental delivery of provisions to the PKK, Operation Provide Comfort (known by the Turkish military as Operation Poised Hammer) remained a contentious point in the Turkey-US relationship, partly due to the ongoing armed struggle led by Öcalan. The Turks had misgivings at the outset, fearing that “a chain of havens could eventually develop into a full-fledged Kurdish political enclave, inflaming independence fervor among its own Kurds.”129 The Turks initially supported the operation because it would help ease the influx of Kurdish refugees to Turkey, but by 1994 the Turkish government had grown so impatient with Washington over the operation that some in the Turkish government began openly questioning whether NATO membership was still valuable for Turkey.130 Likewise, the US grew frustrated with Turkey’s

126 More on the complexity of the Kurdish issue in terms of Iraq will be discussed in the fourth section of this paper entitled “Since Öcalan’s Capture”
128 Gunter, “Turkey and Iran Face Off in Kurdistan,” 35.
threats to shut down the operation, which was launched from Turkish air bases. Though Turkey most likely would have been averse to any measures that would bolster Iraq’s Kurdish minority, the long-standing, violent struggle with the PKK doubtless exacerbated Turkey’s misgivings, which negatively impacted its relations with Iraq and with the United States.

In part to try and alleviate Turkish nerves about Operation Provide Comfort, the United States did periodically cooperate closely with Turkey to counter the PKK. Continued US approval of massive amounts of weapons transfers and personnel training to Turkey helped serve this purpose, as did periodic intelligence sharing. During the Clinton administration, arms transfers to Turkey increased dramatically as the Turkish military became approximately 80% dependent on US defense cooperation to function.131 From 1993-1999, Turkey received around $800 million dollars a year in US weaponry, some of which it paid for, some of which was subsidized with US loans, including controversial attack helicopters and armored personnel carriers. The U.S. knew that much of this weaponry would be used by Turkey to fight Öcalan’s PKK, but Turkish forces also used them to commit gross human rights violations against Kurdish civilians, such as destroying whole villages during the state’s forced relocation program.132 Using US weapons in operations against civilians strained the US-Turkish relationship, but arms transfers continued nonetheless.

Continued arms transfers coupled with the ongoing Operation Provide Comfort demonstrated a dual personality that developed in the US regarding Kurds. Northern Iraqi Kurds were considered ‘good’ and had earned protection for their disloyalty to Saddam Hussein, while

the Kurdish PKK represented ‘bad’ Kurds that needed to be subdued.\footnote{Gunter, “The Kurdish Question in Perspective,” *World Affairs*, Vol. 166 No. 4 (Spring 2004).} The categorization of the PKK as a terrorist organization, and the close nature of the US-Turkey bilateral relationship necessitated that the US acknowledge Turkey’s national security concerns. Likewise the US had a moral obligation to protect the security of Iraqi Kurds after having advocated that they rise up against Saddam. However, this good Kurd-bad Kurd dichotomy complicated US relations with Turkey and Turkey’s relations with Iraq. Doubtless, the difficulties inherent in these relationships still would have been present in some manifestation without the PKK owing to the Kurdish minority populations in both Turkey and Iraq. However, the PKK’s armed struggled exacerbated systemic tensions by putting Turkey in an uncompromising position where eliminating a perceived existential threat took precedence over everything else.

While the PKK clearly affected Turkey’s interactions with its Middle Eastern neighbors and the United States, its impact on the global stage did not end there. Turkey’s relations with Europe also suffered as a result of Öcalan’s long-running conflict with the state, mostly due to gross human rights violations committed in Turkey’s reprisals against the PKK. Since its first attempt to join the EU in 1987, the country’s poor track-record for protecting human rights has been a significant obstacle to its membership.\footnote{Ioannis Grigoriadis, “Turkey’s Accession to the European Union: Debating the Most Difficult Enlargement Ever,” *SAIS Review*, Vol. 26 Issue 1 (Winter-Spring 2006), 148.} In 1993, the European Union adopted a set of criteria highlighting several items a candidate state must achieve to be eligible for full membership, including “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.”\footnote{“Accession Criteria,” *European Commission Enlargement* (October 30, 2010), accessed 22 February, 2010 at [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement_process/accession_process/criteria/index_en.htm].} Since the start of hostilities in 1984, Turkey has come under fire from the EU for its brutal treatment of Kurdish non-militant
civilians, including destroying civilian property, use of torture, disappearances, widespread forced relocations, and placing restrictions on Kurdish freedom of expression. The EU has emphasized repeatedly that Turkey must make progress in terms of protection of human rights for all its citizens if it is serious about gaining full membership. Indeed, these demands have proved a catalyst for improving the treatment of Kurds within Turkey. The country has demonstrated a willingness to meet accession criteria by allowing Kurds to broadcast in their own language, allowing Kurdish to be taught in universities, and in developing resettlement plans for those kicked out of their homes in the 1990s, but much remains to be done before Europe is satisfied on Turkey’s human rights front. 136

Öcalan also affected Turkey’s relationship with European nations due to the fact that his organization had developed a far-reaching support base from the Kurdish Diaspora communities in Europe beginning in the 1980s. The PKK has often turned to its supporters in Europe for financial backing, recruitment, spreading the PKK’s political ideology and the like. Turkey has frequently expressed frustration at Europe’s lack of an urgent response to PKK activities on the European continent, with Turkish leaders insisting that Europe’s lack of countermeasures against the PKK is equivalent to offering the organization tacit support. 137 Europe has occasionally responded to these complaints, as in a decision by the European Court that banned vocal support of the PKK, but measures have fallen short of Turkey’s expectations, much like Turkey’s human rights progress has fallen short of Europe’s. 138 In any case, the PKK’s European support base

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helped make Öcalan’s organization “Ankara’s number one foreign policy issue in the broader world.”

From the 1970s until 1999, Öcalan greatly impacted the formation and strategy of the PKK, the shape of Turkey’s Kurdish issue, and Turkey’s relations with the international community. As a terrorist leader, he maintained an unyielding final goal of a separate state for the Kurds. Everything changed when he was captured in 1999. With Öcalan repatriated to Turkey and put on trial for his crimes, all appeared lost for the PKK and their separatist struggle against the state. In reality, many things did change for the PKK after Öcalan’s arrest, but his incarceration by no means spelled the end for the organization, nor for Öcalan’s far-reaching role in it.

**Öcalan Post Capture: All Three Levels of Analysis at a Glance**

As previously noted, by the time the 1990s drew to a close, the Turkish state had gained the upper hand in the conflict with the PKK, partly due tactical military adaptations, and partly due to harsh policies against the civilian population in the Southeast. Crackdowns on free speech on the Kurdish issue throughout Turkey also contributed to the state’s advantage. Likewise, Öcalan’s obstinate refusal to adapt the PKK’s failing strategies in response to the state’s gains contributed to the organization’s deteriorating position. Öcalan’s capture, however, transformed the PKK leader from the flawed, stubborn, brutal head of the stalled PKK to an important symbol of the plight of the Kurds internationally. For many incarcerated terrorist leaders, their words become immediately suspect after they are captured, and calls for a shift in

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139 Fuller, 95.

strategy are often thought to be elicited under duress. This proved not to be true in Öcalan’s case, and has allowed him to continue impacting the development of the conflict at the organizational, state, and international level.

Öcalan’s capture and the decade that has passed since then show that Öcalan’s control over the PKK as an organization remains significant and that his reach as a leader, though necessarily limited by his imprisonment, is still meaningful. His call for a dramatic shift in strategy for the PKK soon after imprisonment represents one major indicator of his continued resonance. In the midst of the violence that erupted throughout Europe and in Turkey in response to Öcalan’s capture, he boldly declared that the PKK would lay down their arms and pursue Kurdish rights through democratic means. He stated that his organization’s ultimate goal was no longer to achieve a separate state, and as a gesture of good faith, he called on the thousands of PKK fighters within Turkey and the group’s supporters abroad to cease hostilities immediately.

As early as 1993, Öcalan had started dropping hints that the PKK may try to pursue peaceful means to reach a political settlement to the conflict. Just months before his capture, he expressed this sentiment stating “a dialogue between Turkey and the PKK followed by an agreement would be good for Turkey and make it stronger. All I am asking for is real democracy in Turkey.”

After his imprisonment, he made unilateral ceasefire the official policy of the PKK. In a work he wrote from prison immediately after capture, he states that “the right of nations for self-determination which was fashionable in the 1970s, and which in practical terms meant establishing a separate state, was a blind alley…obstructing the solution rather than solving the problem.” In other words, he implied that the PKK’s violent struggle, in which so many

141 “Abdullah Öcalan: We are Fighting Turks Everywhere,” The Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 5 No. 2 (June 1998), 82.
fighters had sacrificed so much, was an impractical folly and that working within the Turkish democratic system had always been the only realistic opportunity for achieving Kurdish rights. Though many in the PKK found this shift hard to swallow, it is a testament to Öcalan’s absolute control of the organization at the time of his capture that the PKK obeyed his orders and the ceasefire held.

Öcalan’s command and control over the strategy of the PKK as an organization continued in the first decade after his capture. Only able to contact the outside world via his team of lawyers, Öcalan called off the 1999 unilateral ceasefire in 2004, ordering the PKK to resume hostilities throughout Turkey due to the state’s lack of progress in granting Kurds minority rights. The imprisoned leader has called for unilateral ceasefires and resumed hostilities at several points since his incarceration, demonstrating his continued ability to set the PKK’s broader strategy, though his is obviously restricted in his ability to micromanage things like day to day tactics and so forth. Nonetheless, Öcalan remains at the top of the PKK’s hierarchy of command. This was certainly the case when he called for a PKK ceasefire in August of 2010 to last for the month of Ramadan after a summer of increased hostilities against Turkish forces. As Ramadan came to a close, the Turkish state and the Kurds anxiously awaited Öcalan’s announcement on whether or not he would extend the ceasefire. Despite an attack by a non-PKK Kurdish group in Istanbul on October 31st, Öcalan declared on November 1 that the ceasefire would remain in effect until after Turkey’s general elections in June of 2011. Even from solitary confinement, Öcalan is able to wield the PKK as a ‘stick’ with which to threaten the Turkish state in case the democratic approach stalls.

143 Pam O’Toole, “Rebel Move Sends Mixed Signals,” BBC News Online (September 2, 2003), accessed at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3202645.stm]

144 “Kurdish PKK Denies Istanbul Bomb, Extends Truce,” BBC News Online (November 1, 2010), accessed at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11664707]
Öcalan’s emphasis on a democratic solution to Turkey’s Kurdish problem post-capture, and his shift in PKK strategy towards that end have helped shape the state’s response to its Kurdish minority over the last decade as well. Unilateral ceasefires and a declared desire on the part of the PKK to find a peaceful solution partially removed the state’s justification for harsh policies in response to the Kurds. Though the military often lashes out at the PKK despite the group’s unilateral ceasefires, military campaigns that result in renewed PKK attacks are naturally vulnerable to criticism from a population that is fed up with violence. It would be problematic for the state, and indeed has been for the military, to take the blame for the continuation of the conflict. Öcalan’s shift in strategy then, induced a shift in state policy as well.

Certainly other factors have played a role in the ruling AK party’s attempts to pursue a “democratic opening” to the Kurds over the last decade. A simple declaration of ceasefire by a captive Öcalan would be insufficient to justify military disengagement with terrorist guerilla fighters. When the AK party first came to power, they did so on the promise that they would push hard for reforms to clear the path for Turkey’s European Union membership, partially in attempt to dispel the anxiety of steadfast secularists about the party’s Islamist roots. In practice, this meant genuine pursuit of increased minority rights, and a crackdown on human rights abuses. European Union reforms also necessitated improvement in civilian control of the military, no small task in the Turkish republic where the military has traditionally been widely respected as the vanguard of secular democracy. Decreasing the military’s autonomy, and by extension its ability to bully Turkish legislators, has increased the AK party government’s potential to actually carry out democratic reforms. Additionally, many in positions of influence

hoped that political progress on the Kurdish issue would stifle PKK recruitment and public support by rendering its terrorist tactics irrelevant.  

As one might expect, the early path of terrorism and separatism that Öcalan had chosen for the PKK limited his ability to bring about results from the declared shift to a democratic solution. In a precarious position, the state was reluctant to pursue any kind of outright negotiation with the PKK, due to the valid concern that this would bestow political legitimacy on an internationally recognized terrorist organization. Sitting down for talks with terrorists, even if only to solve a long-running domestic insurgency, would doubtless be a black mark on Turkey’s bid for EU accession. Likewise, it is important to remember that the long-running conflict left deep emotional and psychological scars on large segments of the population on both sides of the conflict - voters to whom a democratic solution would seem overly soft and inadequate. 

Despite these complications springing from the methods used in the PKK’s armed struggle, Öcalan’s capture put him in close proximity to the institutions of the Turkish state, which augmented his importance. He was no longer an obscure, distant figure hiding out in Damascus, but a relevant commander and leader who demonstrated continued control over his armed fighters from behind bars. Initially by default, he became critical for ending the conflict due to the state’s ability to communicate with him directly in captivity. Though it was understood early on that individuals from Turkey’s intelligence service, and even Turkish government officials may be talking with Öcalan, it was always kept very secret for the same reasons that the PKK has never been invited to a negotiating table. In the last year or so,
however, Turkish leaders have openly admitted that they are in contact with Öcalan from time to time.\(^{150}\) These admissions reveal Öcalan’s increased stature in the conflict. He would never have been in the position to openly negotiate with the state on any level had he remained free as a terrorist criminal or had he been executed. Though the details of what Turkish leaders speak about with Öcalan remain secret, it is no stretch to assume his contact with officials allows him to continue impacting unfolding events regarding the Kurdish issue and the PKK.

Though there is certainly more at play in the recent development of the Kurdish issue within Turkey than just Abdullah Öcalan, his declaration of the PKK’s shift in strategy and his accessibility to state officials has impacted the conflict since his capture. Calling ceasefires and emphasizing the need for a democratic solution contributed to a perfect storm of circumstances in which a state-sponsored “democratic opening” to the Kurds was plausible. Attempts to solve the conflict peacefully would have been a difficult sell to the Turkish public in the face of continued violent PKK attacks. While several factors have contributed to Turkey’s posture towards its Kurds, Abdullah Öcalan’s course of action since his capture has been critical.

Öcalan’s impact on the Kurdish issue at the international level has continued since his capture as well. This can be readily observed in the circumstances leading up to his repatriation to Turkey. After he was driven from Syria in 1998 due to Turkish threats of invasion, Öcalan ran from country to country seeking political asylum. From Syria to Greece to Russia to Italy, and beyond, there was not a single country that would give him refuge. In part, countries faced behind-the-scenes pressure from the United States to turn Öcalan down, but they were also swayed by the mobilization of Kurdish diaspora communities in mass support for Öcalan. Those

countries who did not have to deal with navigating these competing interests because Öcalan never showed up on their doorstep counted themselves lucky.\textsuperscript{151}

Even after his capture, Öcalan continued to effect Turkey’s relations with Europe. Once brought back to Turkey, the government put him on trial and sentenced him to death. Almost immediately, the Council of Europe responded by threatening to exclude Turkey from its Parliamentary Assembly if Öcalan’s execution was carried out.\textsuperscript{152} The EU had outlawed capital punishment, a legal mandate with which Turkey would have to comply as part of the EU accession process. Though under significant pressure from the domestic Turkish majority to carry out Öcalan’s sentence, international pressure (and indeed the reality that executing the PKK’s leader would probably lead to violent backlash from Turkey’s Kurds) culminated in the government’s decision to change his sentence from execution to life imprisonment in solitary confinement. The process of his capture and Europe’s lobbying for his stay of execution thrust Turkey’s domestic Kurdish issue into the international spotlight once again.

The legacy of the long-endured armed struggle between Öcalan’s PKK fighters and the Turkish state has also impacted Turkey’s international posture in indirect ways since Öcalan’s capture. These indirect effects are most readily observable in Turkey’s response to the US-led war in Iraq. The significant measure of autonomy that Iraq’s Kurds have enjoyed since the end of hostilities makes the Turks anxious that its own Kurdish minority might clamor for the same. Additionally, in the name of its own war on terror Turkey sometimes carries out military operations across Iraq’s border in hot pursuit of PKK fighters.\textsuperscript{153} In the fall of 2007 US-Turkish relations became strained over these incursions. The United States saw them as a significant

\textsuperscript{151} Marcus, 275.
\textsuperscript{153} Tulay Karadeniz, “Turkey Sends Troops to Iraq Border After PKK Raid,” \textit{Reuters} (Ankara, June 22, 2010).
threat to the stability of northern Iraq, which represented the country’s most stable region after the US invasion. In the last year or so, the Turkish government, rather than treating Iraqi Kurds with hostility, has attempted to win over their leader, Massoud Barzani in hopes that he will oust the PKK from northern Iraq once and for all. In an important symbolic step, Turkey is even set to open a consulate in Arbil, the de facto capital of the Kurdish controlled region of the country.

Another indirect consequence of the PKK’s conflict is that since Öcalan’s capture, Turkey has improved relations with Iran and Syria. Though relations between these parties remained strained throughout much of the 1990s, within the last several years the continued threat of Kurdish terrorism has provided the grounds for increased cooperation. Certainly, the AK party’s overarching foreign policy goals are at play here rather than just a dire need for collaboration against the PKK, but “the main driver of the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement is the common interest in dealing with Kurdish separatists.”

Ironically, relations between Turkey and the U.S. have improved through increased intelligence sharing for the same purpose, though Turkey’s warming partnerships with Iran and Syria have been frowned upon in Washington.

Öcalan’s capture, rather than confining him to irrelevancy, catapulted Turkey’s Kurdish issue onto the international stage. His initial ceasefire and continued calls for a democratic solution still shape the development of the conflict within Turkey’s borders. Similarly, the obedience of Öcalan’s fighters to shifts in his strategic vision show that his leadership of the PKK remains largely intact. Even after over a decade of captivity, Öcalan has the moral support

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155 “Iraq Finishes Procedure for Opening of Turkish Consulate in Arbil,” Today’s Zaman (February 15, 2010), accessed at [www.todayszaman.com].
156 Taspinar, “Winning Turkey,” 53.
of Kurds around the world who consider him a hero. The resilient, sweeping impact of this one leader on Turkey’s Kurdish issue domestically, and on the country’s posture in the international system is more than just a static observation. It can offer lessons about the circumstances under which an insurgent leader might vastly affect events both within a country, and on the international stage.

**Policy Implications and Conclusions**

When one considers the far-reaching influence of Abdullah Öcalan, it is important to call attention to the circumstances which allowed for his leadership to flourish. Öcalan was not a political mastermind, or a genius who had conquered the art of organizational management. When he established the PKK he was best known for his lack of experience and muddled political ideology. Ultimately, Öcalan’s personal leadership style combined with several key conditions on the ground to leave him the lead architect of Turkey’s Kurdish issue, with a reputation and popular appeal that imprisonment only served to strengthen. Analysis of his impact is useful in its own right to illuminate the powerful role that a single leader can play on the international stage. It also allows for highlighting the circumstances that facilitated his rise to prominence to identify factors that may be relevant for identifying insurgent situations elsewhere that may be susceptible to similar leadership trends.

One of the most obvious factors that boosted Öcalan’s leadership was his authoritarian approach and intolerance for dissent which he combined with a powerful promise of a brighter future for the Kurds. In periods where this vision seemed unattainable, Öcalan’s reputation for ruthlessness was often sufficient for keeping rank and file PKK fighters in line. At the same time, in moments when his leadership seemed overbearing and obstinate (like at the end of the 1990s just before his capture), the hope in attaining a goal that most PKK fighters considered worth
dying for was enough to inspire them to stay committed despite their leader’s flaws. It is important to remember that when Öcalan formed the PKK in the late 1970s, he was not the only strong-willed Kurd seeking to change the status quo. However, he was the only one who promised immediate, decisive action to bring about a dramatic turn of events. These factors for consequential leadership may be applicable to other insurgencies as well. Individuals who emerge advocating new, decisive methods for realizing popular goals, who are calculating and even brutal in their attempt to consolidate their own position, could rise to impact events in a big way just as Öcalan did. Authoritarianism alone is not enough, and a popular vision devoid of action is relatively meaningless; but all three factors combined are potent when found in one individual.

Ruthless commitment to popular, idealized goals is not the only secret to Öcalan’s success. His leadership was also aided profoundly by Turkey’s long history of repression of its Kurdish minority and a period of political unrest within the country that made armed revolt more feasible. Widespread repression of minority rights provided Öcalan with a large audience that had begun to express dissatisfaction with their enduring marginalization. In some ways, Turkey’s Kurdish issue resembles a freight train steaming down the tracks. The Turkish state filled the cars with dissatisfied Kurds who had legitimate grievances springing from decades of discriminatory policies, and Öcalan hopped in the conductor’s seat to take the controls. In other words, countries with a large population of disenfranchised citizens, who have endured the hardships of repression together over a long period of time, will be susceptible to the appeal of a leader with transformational goals and the gumption to act. As apparent from events unfolding across the Middle East, the effects of long-term repression are so volatile that a popular revolt may occur even without strong leadership. An individual’s ability to take advantage of
circumstances that favor change is indicative of a leader that may have a profound impact on unfolding events.

As Turkey’s Kurdish issue progressed, the state’s brutal response to the PKK’s armed struggle contributed to Öcalan’s growing appeal as leader of the Kurdish uprising. As noted previously, torture, forced relocation, destruction of whole villages, and the murder of civilians were all typical of the state’s answer to PKK terrorism. These tactics, rather than eradicating the Kurdish rebellion, radicalized portions of the Kurdish population that were otherwise neutral, and galvanized popular perception of Öcalan as a hero for the Kurds. This fact serves as a warning for policy makers engaged in counter insurgency campaigns. Simply combating the insurgent threat with whatever means necessary, absent an attempt to address the legitimate grievances of and dangers to the civilian population may be counterproductive. It is possible that insurgent leaders may even try to purposely elicit a heavy-handed state response against civilians in order to seize the strategic initiative.

Öcalan’s leadership potential was also augmented by the terrain in the Southeast. The rugged, mountainous landscape that had fostered the economic and political isolation of the region worked in Öcalan’s favor on several levels. On one hand, it allowed for the initial success of the PKK in their fight against better trained and well-equipped conventional Turkish military forces. Knowledge of the landscape helped PKK fighters move quicker and hide more easily than the Turkish troops they faced. The early success gleaned from these advantages increased Öcalan’s credibility as head of the revolt, and therefore his potential to shape events in his favor. The fact that the rough terrain of the Southeast shares borders with Iran, Iraq, and Syria also worked to Öcalan’s advantage, as he was able to set up sanctuaries in these border regions that were inaccessible to Turkish forces, both physically and in terms of international law. Presence
along the border areas allowed PKK fighters to cross in and out of Turkey relatively easily, and contributed to Öcalan’s presence in the international arena through Turkey’s relation’s with its neighbors. For insurgencies elsewhere, isolated regions that serve as a geographical home base connected to cross-border sanctuaries may increase a leader’s resonance, and allow him to consolidate his position more easily. Policy makers, therefore, must incorporate knowledge of the political geography of a region when developing both strategic and tactical plans to combat an insurgency.

In addition to geography, it is important to note that the traditionally tribal structure of Kurdish society aided Öcalan’s rise to power, as mentioned previously. His authoritarian approach and his use of violence were not an anathema to the Kurdish way of life, but coincided with long-held traditions and common manifestations of power struggles and so forth. Öcalan simply mobilized these historical trends for his own purposes. Though traditional Kurdish power structures survived within the Turkish state, they were distinct from legitimate governing authorities. Öcalan’s rise shows that a single leader can significantly extend his influence by manipulating these existing nodes of power. For policy makers keen on limiting the reach of an insurgent leader, understanding the cultural structures from which he may glean power is critical.

Öcalan’s case also demonstrates that circumstances outside of a leader’s control can increase his or her influence. For example, Öcalan’s efforts at Kurdish liberation benefitted from the presence of Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe and their willingness to support the cause. Likewise, though he most likely would not have chosen to be captured, Öcalan has benefitted from the political platform that his imprisonment has provided. During the conflict, he had an advantage in that the state’s counterinsurgency policies were eventually tempered by Turkey’s EU accession aspirations. His influence was also aided by US policies in northern Iraq
that indirectly insulated PKK sanctuaries in the border region. Therefore, it was a combination of Öcalan’s leadership style, the socio-political context of Turkey’s southeast region, and a host of extenuating circumstances that led to Öcalan’s preeminence in the conflict. Sometimes he made gains by design, at other times he benefited from being in the right place at the right time. Policy makers tasked with counterinsurgency operations should not be discouraged however. The combination of factors allowing for Öcalan’s vast role may suggest that a leader can have such an impact only as long as conditions are ripe for it. Therefore, policies formed with an understanding of the roots of an insurgent leader’s appeal may have success in dialing down his leadership role. This may be achieved by spreading a peaceful counter-narrative to compete with that which emphasizes violent conflict, for example. Luckily in Öcalan’s case, he has taken on this task himself. In addition, policy makers may find success in circumventing a counterinsurgent force in order to dialogue directly with the insurgency’s civilian supporters, addressing real grievances where possible, and supporting an atmosphere of reconciliation to remove militant struggle as a politically legitimate option.

The case of Abdullah Öcalan serves as a useful tool for understanding the resonance that a single leader can have. Although his case is rooted in the context of Turkey’s Kurdish issue, it serves as a valuable model for determining the potential reach of terrorist and insurgent leaders in other locations. Understanding how the Kurdish conflict unfolded in Turkey, and especially how Öcalan’s role shaped it, allows for the development of more specific policies to eradicate the threat of renewed ethnic violence in the country. It also may elucidate important points for limiting sub-state ethnic conflicts elsewhere. From Abdullah Öcalan and the story of the Kurds, an important concept stands out. Individual leaders can play immutable roles in both the domestic and international spheres. Understanding the unique conditions that allow terrorist and
insurgent leaders to have such a widespread impact is the key to unlocking context specific solutions for bringing about lasting, comprehensive solutions to conflicts like that between Turkey and its Kurds.

Events have begun unfolding in a promising direction in Turkey in terms of improvements for the Kurds. It is now legal to broadcast in Kurdish, to teach Kurdish language classes at university, and the government is working (albeit haltingly) on resettlement plans for people driven from their homes in the southeast during the 1990s. As part of the AK party’s groundbreaking policy for a “democratic opening” towards the Kurds, the party has taken steps to eliminate human rights abuses, as with the “zero tolerance for torture” policy, which has greatly reduced instances of torture by security forces. Recently there has been talk about the potential utility of truth commissions to aid in the reconciliation process, and free speech is more tolerated by the state. Characteristic of this new tolerance, state TV continued broadcasting when a Kurdish parliamentarian switched to Kurdish during a speech in parliament in February of 2011.

However, there is still much to be done to normalize the situation in Turkey. The government’s progress has often come in fits and starts with significant back-pedaling. Though the AK party likes to trumpet the government’s democratic opening to the Kurds, some government policies are counterproductive. For example, in October of 2010, the state arrested 151 Kurdish activists and 12 mayors in the southeast for allegedly distributing anti-government

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159 “Parliament TV Channel Continues Broadcast as Deputy Speaks Kurdish,” The Economist (February 23, 2011), accessed at [www.todayszaman.com]
propaganda. Similarly, the government’s trustworthiness came under fire when it declared that repentant PKK members who renounced terrorism and had never participated in terrorist acts could return to Turkey with no punishment, but later arrested those who came forward. Schools are still not allowed to teach courses in Kurdish, and journalists are regularly arrested for writing too freely about the Kurdish issue.

As the conflict continues, Öcalan’s broad appeal may yet hold answers for the peace process in Turkey. For decades he was the unrivaled leader of the PKK, and his resilience has overcome the confinements of his prison cell. He remains a hero among Turkey’s Kurdish population, demonstrated recently as thousands of Kurds waved flags portraying his likeness at Nevruz celebrations throughout the country. Though imprisonment naturally limits his ability to command and control the PKK, he is a constant feature of the dialogue within the country that is concerned with resolving the Kurdish issue. Perhaps with a renewed understanding of the circumstances that facilitated his powerful place in the conflict, combined with a careful consideration of present conditions, Turkish authorities may discover new routes to a lasting peace.

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160 Joshua Keating, “Why Does Turkey Always Arrest So Many People at the Same Time?” *Foreign Policy* (October 21, 2010), accessed at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles]

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