The New PKK

Between Extremism, Political Violence, and Strategic Challenges

(Part 2)

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Two events, which took place between the completion of this two-part study in the middle of December 2015 and going to press, are relevant to the analysis of the PKK/KCK's ideology and organisational structure: first, the publication of the secret (!) talks between Öcalan, Kurdish politicians, and representatives of the Turkish government between 2012 and 2014, and, second, the decisions taken by the DTK congress of 27 December 2015 (on the DTK see Part 1 of this study). The secret talks were published, with surprising attention to detail as well as great textual fidelity, by the Mezopotamya publishing house in Neuss am Rhein at the end of November 2015. Their content, however, was only discussed in the Turkish press at the end of January/beginning of February 2016. The minutes confirm what was already known, i.e. they show how profound Öcalan’s influence is on the organisation and that his relationship with Tandil was sometimes strained. What is surprising, however, is the intimate tone between him and the representatives of the Turkish state.

The importance of another political paper by Öcalan, his Outline for the Democratic Autonomy of Kurdistan, which he most likely wrote towards the end of 2014, also becomes clear. This paper has to be read as a version of the KCK Agreement, adapted for Turkey, and was probably written with the DTK Congress of 27 December 2015 in mind. In any case, the conclusions of the DTK read like an abridged version of Öcalan’s Outline. Its demands (see below) also concern the creation of military forces on site, loyal to the PKK, i.e. in the Kurdish towns of south-eastern Turkey. These are to be viewed in the dual context of the military structures of the PKK/KCK and its expansion.

Military Structures: The Guerrilla

The origins of the PKK’s military apparatus can be traced to Turkish radical left-wing terrorism; however, it could never have achieved its efficiency and importance without the help and support provided by Syria in the 1980s. Numerous connections to Damascus remained intact even after 1999. In theory, and pursuant to Marxist thinking, military structures are subordinate to political ones. In reality, the former are the focus of attention for supporters and opponents alike, just as the most important political leaders have always commanded military units - this applies equally to men and women. The symbols and emblems employed by the military structures reflect the old PKK standard, with various units using the red Soviet star against a green and yellow background, and sometimes also hammer and sickle. National-Kurdish symbolism is only predominant in the green-yellow-red flag of the Kurdish areas of Syria. The pennants used by the military units of the KCK/PKK are easily recognisable: they are three-cornered, unlike the square flags of the civilian organisations.

Self Defence

In the course of the great crisis of 2002, the People’s Liberation Army of Kurdistan (ARGK) was disbanded and renamed People’s Defence Forces (HPG). This change of names, which forgoes the combative term army, reflects generally accepted terminology. Today, KCK/PKK publications use self-defence or legitimate self-defence (Turkish: meru savunma) instead of uprising (Kurdish: serhildan). In this manner, the organisation has managed to resolve - for itself - the inconsistency between the continued existence of a military wing and an official policy of peace.

Defence
Article 32 of the KCK Agreement regulates procedures in the “event of a war of legitimate defence” (meru savunma sava hali). This occurs if (a) the state (= Turkey) does not seize the chance of a peaceful solution, (b) attacks the KCK system or its leadership (= Öcalan), and (c) if the discrimination against the Kurds, the policy of assimilation, and the economic underdevelopment continue. It is unclear whether all or only some of these points have to prevail for a “legitimate case of defence”. The decision on war and peace is to be taken, at least in theory, by an absolute majority of the People’s Congress. If it cannot meet – rather realistic, given the circumstances - then other institutions will have to take this decision together with the Executive Council (Article 33). Articles 10c and 31 of the KCK Agreement stipulate universal conscription for all Kurds. Article 31b obliges “everybody to prepare for self-defence and to support the struggle for self-defence”. In the event of a war, however, this also means that the organisation recognises no neutral status on the part of the population.

Manpower and Child Soldiers

There are no reliable estimates concerning the HPG’s force level. It seems unrealistic that the high levels seen during the time of the serhildan in the 1990s (30,000 fighters and 50,000 militia personnel) could be achieved again. Turkish estimates for the time immediately prior to the expansion are far lower: 3,000-4,000 fighters for 2011 and 6,000 to 6,500 for 2012. Given an estimated life expectancy of two to three years, this means that the HPG has to recruit 150 fighters per year in order to maintain its strength.1 In 2013, before Öcalan’s order to withdraw from Turkey, approximately 1,400 fighters are said to have been active in Turkey, primarily in provinces bordering on Iraq.2

These numbers are completely out of proportion to the military challenges the organisation faces in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. A lack of troops would be a plausible explanation for the reports of child soldiers, circulated especially in Turkish media. In 2010, UNICEF condemned the use of child soldiers by the PKK.3 This mostly concerns press-ganged or kidnapped children between 12 and 17. Some of them are said to have been snatched in south-east Turkey as a punishment for their parents who refused to pay taxes to the organisation.4 According to ükru Gümüş, the former area supervisor of Mardin, the use of child soldiers goes back directly to Öcalan, who, in turn, adopted this practice from the Palestinians.5 For 2013-2015, numbers vary between 300 and 2,000 children serving in the ranks of the KCK/PKK combat troops.6 The situation in Syria is said to be more dramatic.7

While the fighters of the 1990s mostly came from the Kurdish areas in Turkey and occasionally from Syria, volunteers from Iran and Iraq have increasingly been signing up since 2003. The situation in Syria, and events in Iraq in the summer of 2014 led to a further influx of fighters, especially from radical left-wing Turkish and European students, as well as from religious minorities such as the Yazidis. Since the 1990s, the KCK/PKK has been operating an extensive European recruiting network, which is also used for military basic training. According to EUROPOL, the coordination of basic training is carried out by the Mesopotamia Social Sciences Research Academy in Charleroi (Belgium).8

HPG - Organisation

Pursuant to Article 43 of the Agreement, the HPG is an autonomous organisation (özker bir örgütlenmedir) and coordinates its activities with the other KCK organs via the Central Department for People’s Defence. This was only created in the course of the restructuring agreed upon by the 6th General Assembly of the People’s Congress, in summer 2013. It was the product of an amalgamation of the HPG HQ (ana karargah komutanı) and the People’s Defence Committee (halk savunma komitesi), by means of which the structure pursuant to Article 14/4 of the KCK Agreement was established.

General Command Echelon

Pursuant to its General Regulations,10 the HPG organises a biennial General Conference, where the 41 members of the HPG General Assembly (HPG medisli), the HPG’s highest decision-making forum, are elected. These, in turn, elect the 13 members of the Command Council (komuta konsesi) with a simple majority, the Commander General (genel komutan) with a two-thirds majority. The Commander General must be confirmed by the leadership - i.e. Öcalan - and the Command Council by the President of the Executive Council (Article 43 of the KCK Agreement; Clause 2 of the General Regulations provides for a confirmation by the, now defunct, People’s Defence Committee). The annual HPG General Assembly is responsible for the harmonisation of strategy and policy, ideological and military reviews and inspections, duty regulations, transfers, and promotions. The Command Council (General Regulations, Clause 3) meets every six months. The question arises whether Öcalan’s imprisonment is actually advantageous for the HPG, since both his mistakes in military leadership and his intransigence at the end of the 1990s significantly contributed to the military defeat.11

HQs

The HQs (ana karargah komutanı) are led by at least five members of the HPG Assembly, one of whom is the Commander General, three others are members of the Command Council. The latter is tasked with the actual military command, supported, pursuant to Clause 4 of the General Regulations, by the traditional staff functions: i.e. personnel and archive, intelligence, technology and research, PR, military jurisdiction, etc. (General Regulations, Clause 4/A-J). HPG HQ thus boasts a professional organisation, of which the two most important - engineers and intelligence - will be looked at in greater detail here.

The Division for Logistics and Engineers (Clause 4/E) is responsible for the respective infrastructure, such as the building of shelters and bunkers in the area of operations, or the construction of secret tunnels and field cable cars. The organisation shows itself capable of more than digging simple trenches, building shelters or carrying out terrain reinforcements: whole mountains in the Iraqi-Turkish border region are said to have been tunnelled under (a statement which, however, requires proof through inspection).

There is ambiguity concerning the intelligence service. Pursuant to Clause 4/F of the General Regulations, military intelligence is tasked with key personnel training, as well as heading mixed (civil-military) intelligence teams. It is, however, not allowed to conduct intelligence operations within the organisation or to run the counter-intelligence service. This seems to be the responsibility of other units, which, however, are not listed in the General Regulations. (see below)
Clause 4/1 - public relations (halkla ilikiler) - is interesting, as its aim is to "create an illegal civil defence organisation (sivil savunma) among the masses. In order to carry out this work, the HPG creates an organisational base external to its general political work." This base is responsible for HPG logistics, recruiting and channelising fighters, as well as courier and surveillance measures, and for convincing the "masses" (gen kitleleri) to join the uprising (serhildan). This HQ is therefore responsible for the territorial forces, i.e. the former milis or today's Self-Defence Forces (see below). What remains unclear is whether the Office for Public Relations still exists, and how its functions vis-à-vis the Self-Defence HQs are regulated.

So, HPG is tasked with overall military command and it is responsible for training and logistics. Thus, all armed units are integrated into the HPG, retaining their own HQs (karargah), however. These are organised along the lines of the HQ and are made up of at least seven persons, of whom three exclusively exercise coordination functions (General Regulations, Clause 6).

Rear Commands

The rear commands (kol komutanlkalar, General Regulations, Clause 5) integrate the following important elements in the HPG, each with their own HQ: YJA-star, academies and schools, special forces, self-defence forces, as well as the urban guerrilla and areas of operation.

Women’s Combat Units

The Free Women’s Units - STAR (YJA-Star Regulations, Clause 5/A 1-10) can look back on a separate, parallel development and therefore, in theory, have great political clout, which sometimes leads to tensions. According to the former PKK commander Hdr Sarkaya, the then-commander Filiz Yerlikaya was murdered in 2002 at the order of Cemil Bayks, the later KCK chairman, to deprive YJA-Star of its political independence.\(^{17}\) Clause 5/A-7, which stipulates the possibility of relieving a female commander of her position "in exceptional circumstances", can be read as proof of a restriction on the female units’ autonomy, as no such stipulation exists for other units. Furthermore, upward of a certain echelon (probably company), YJA-Star is required to have promotions confirmed by the Command Council. In other respects, its representatives are represented at all hierarchical command echelons of the HPG and act largely autonomously. In most areas of operation, male and female units operate in parallel. There are, however, striking differences which take local and cultural realities into consideration: whereas in the Alevite region of Tunceli/Dersim women have always been active, one woman even was area supervisor, the mostly Sunni province Amed/Diyarbakr, of which conservative Erzurum and Garzan are also a part, only decided in 2006 to deploy a unit of 20 women, without, however, a combat mission.\(^{18}\)

Academies and Schools

In the course of the large-scale reorganisation of the military forces in 2013, training was also reorganised. To this end, the training facilities were subordinated to the Apollo Academy Command,\(^{19}\) which is responsible for all academies and schools. Pursuant to Regulation 5/D, Apollo is also responsible for HPG’s propaganda and publications, and it regularly organises seminars for its military leadership in which the most recent technical and tactical developments on the battlefield are analysed in order to improve training. It is unclear, to what extent Apollo itself conducts the training or primarily organises it and passes out the graduates of all other schools and academies, as was the case in summer 2014.

According to a Stêrk-TV\(^{20}\) report of September 2014, three schools are united under the Apollo Academy Command, ehih Bahtiyar Assassination School, ehih Mahmut Afaref School for Medium Weapons, and the ehih iyar School for Heavy Weapons. Given the PKK’s weapons, both schools most likely train the use of small arms and light weapons.\(^{21}\)

This raises the question to what extent the three weapons schools mentioned above replace the actual PKK military academy, the Mahsum Korkmaz Academy. The latter was opened at the end of the 1980s in Lebanon and then moved to Iraq.\(^^{22}\) It was the highest training institution for military key personnel and commanders, and trained them in tactics, strategy, ideology, and logistics. The major part of ideological training for commanders and fighters alike has been carried out by the Haki Karer Ideological Training Academy. In how far it cooperates with the Central Department for Ideology (cf. Part 1 of this study) is unclear. Recently the attempt was made to create a Haki Karer School for Ideology in the political underground of Gaziantep.\(^^{23}\) Its female counterpart is the Gülnaz Karata Women’s Academy. Military basics are trained in the recruit training schools (yeni savaçi eitim okulları), the main task of which, apart from providing basic military training, is familiarisation with life in the mountains. This can be seen as proof that as a result of Turkish resettlement measures in the 1990s, the PKK can rely less and less on hardy mountain peasants as volunteers, and increasingly has to find recruits in towns and cities. The HPG training centres are without exception to be found in northern Iraq; YPG, YPS, and others train on-site.

It only remains to be added that the names chosen for the schools do not lack a certain irony. There are persistent rumours that the PKK martyrs Mahsum Korkmaz, Haki Karer, and Mahmut Afaref were murdered by the PKK itself. Apollo, in turn, is a quasi-apotheosis of Abdullah ‘Apo’ Öcalan.

Special Forces

The HPG’s special forces (özel kuvvetler) (General Regulations, Clause 5/B) are at the disposal of the Commander General and report to the Command Council. Their missions are derived from the orders given by the leadership (Öcalan), and they must therefore be capable of performing all military and reconnaissance functions. Hence, they are made up of selected, experienced members of the HPG. Their training was never halted, even during the various cease-fire phases. They carry out a part of strategic and tactical intelligence gathering, as well as counter intelligence, and force protection. Sarkaya probably refers to these troops when he reports in great detail on Murat Karaylan’s instrumentalisation of the intelligence service for internal power struggles. They are also tasked with personal protection; special forces elements can therefore be found in the HQ at the Zab, and with the People’s Congress in Xinere and Xakurki.
Their area of operations, however, also includes (or included?) urban terrain. Operations in the course of which they infiltrate towns, organise an attack together with sympathisers, and then withdraw into the mountains, are, for example, documented for Diyarbakır/Amêl in 2008. It is, however, not up to the special forces area supervisor’s initiative to select targets; he must coordinate decisions with the HPG regional command.

Urban Guerrilla

At its core, HPG remains a rural guerrilla, which explains the total lack of instructions concerning urban guerrilla techniques in the General Regulations. This statement may seem surprising, given the recent violent clashes in the towns of south-eastern Turkey, but the recently created YPS-militias (see below) in, for example, Diyarbakır and Cizre are markedly different from the concept of an urban guerrilla as defined by Carlos Marighelas. This concept is known in Turkey, and it has been practised since the 1970s by the Revolutionary Youth Dev-Genç (Dev înco Genpîlî) and its successors (e.g. DHKP-C).

Closest in character to an urban guerrilla are the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons - TAK whose origins, according to Sarkaya, go back to immediately after Öcalan’s arrest in 1999. Their actual establishment took place in 2003. They were attached to the Special Forces Command, were, however, expected to act independently of the PKK and be capable, if required, of unleashing a wave of terrorism in Turkey. TAK declared civilians and tourists, as well as the infrastructure of tourism, to be legitimate targets. Such a group would make it possible for Kandil to exert military pressure on Turkey, without having to break off the peace process. This is why official KCK/PKK declarations, as well as the 2005 TAK Founding Manifesto (Kurulu Bildirgesi), state its independence of the PKK. According to this, TAK is made up of former PKK members who left the organisation because of Öcalan’s path towards peace. This seems completely preposterous, given their absolute loyalty to Öcalan as well as the fact that the organisation puts its complete media apparatus at their disposal. What is also conspicuous is that the KCK was able to stop the TAK when they lost support among their sympathisers following a suicide attack in November 2010. The Turkish and international public have therefore always regarded the TAK as a front for the PKK/KCK.

Around 2009, the TAK is thought to have consisted of approximately 400 persons, mainly students, which is a lot, given the small number of PKK fighters at that time (approximately 4,000). They were, for the most part, trained by the special forces in bomb-making in the Kandil mountain camps; a smaller number was trained in Istanbul and Bursa by iîhîcî, former PKK fighters who had done time. After their two-month (often poor) training, the various groups were given their orders probably by the Special Forces Command, and then sent to Turkey. In this, a special forces approach was pursued, i.e. equipment and activists arrived in the target area separately. The missions are kept deliberately vague, i.e. the target area and the type of attack are defined in Kandil; reconnaissance proper, and choice of the definitive target, however, must be carried out by the groups on site. Captured TAK fighters reported of their lack of experience: they were channelled through Syria, as part of a group of twenty-five, and promptly arrested during attempts at target reconnaissance.

Contact between TAK and PKK forces on site was avoided, direct command through the Special Forces Command or the Executive Council seems improbable; however, some form of contact must have existed, even if Kandil keeps TAK on a long leash.

It is likely that only small groups are left of TAK. In 2011 and 2012 they carried out further attacks to protest against Öcalan’s solitary confinement. One of the most recent attacks took place on 23 December 2015, at Sabiha Gökçen Airport in Istanbul, and was described as revenge for Turkish actions in the south-east of the country. The new TAK activists are either to be found among the ranks of the Komadîn Ciwan, or the Komadîn Ciwan gives them their orders. This is the only explanation why the attack took place a week after the declaration of 15 December 2015, in which the necessity of military actions in western Turkey was mentioned. In its own declaration, the TAK stressed its readiness to attack international visitors in order to hit Turkish tourism. The most recent TAK attack took place on 17 February 2016 in Ankara, against military personnel, again in revenge for military operations in south-eastern Turkey. On the basis of available sources it is impossible to calculate the number of cells currently active in western Turkey.

The TAK’s sporadic attacks not only show up its weakness as an independently operating urban guerrilla. Yet, from a KCK/PKK point of view, the Self-Defence Forces are supposed to be the actual power in urban areas.

Self-Defence Forces

In February 2004, the HPG decided to set up the Self-Defence Forces (öz savunma gülenler) which replaced the old PKK militia (milis). Pursuant to Article 24 of the Agreement, the Departments for Self-Defence (öz savunma aalanlar) are located on the lowest local level, their members organised in secret cells (General Regulations, Clause 5/C, must be read in conjunction with Clause 4/I Public Relations). The mission of the Self-Defence Forces is, essentially, identical to that of the PKK’s. milis i.e. “to support by means of reconnaissance and intelligence, in the event of a war, the main forces in the area of operations through sabotage and assassinations (sûkast), and to participate in their actions.” In this sense, they are a counterbalance to the village guards, as organised by the authorities (köy korucular).

In the beginning, both the HPG forces active in the area of operations and the HQ only half-heartedly pursued the task of creating this force. The Self-Defence Forces boast their own command personnel in the region, which communicates directly with its own command in the HQ via encrypted internet and telephone lines. At least until 2011, the Self-Defence Forces commands for Turkey and Syria were part of the HQ; whether this still applies today, could not be verified on the basis of available sources.

Also in this case, similar to the TAK, individual activists were chosen and sent into the mountains for brief training. In August 2006, however, the HPG Command severely criticised them; security seems to have been lax, which led to the loss of experienced HPG personnel, who had been in contact with them. In 2008, Turkish authorities still rated the chances of HPG or KCK to establish territorial armed forces as low, despite numerous sympathisers. In August 2009, Öcalan again stressed the importance of the Self-Defence Forces. In December 2010, this demand was reiterated in a DTK Workshop for a Democratic Autonomy and taken up again by the 2015 DTK Congress.

What makes the Self-Defence Forces important is the fact that the HPG’s top echelon can lead them via the Rear Commands, and thus directly impair Turkey’s domestic security, as was the case with the creation of territorial forces, whose last transformation are the YPS (and others).

Areas of Operation and Fallback Areas
The lack of original documents concerning the HPG makes it difficult clearly to identify and categorise its camps and main areas of operation. Reports in Turkish media and western publications are often contradictory or obsolete. Despite this, a rough picture can be assembled for the time directly preceding the reorganisation of 2013. Given the geographical and political conditions in the region, it must be assumed that there have not been too many changes since.

Since the loss of its fallback areas in Syria and Iran at the beginning of the millennium, the entire Kurdish infrastructure and the majority of its camps can be found in northern Iraq, in the KDP’s and the PUK’s zones of influence. The bases from which Turkey is attacked are in the KDP’s exclusive zone of influence. HPG fighters rely on geography and the environment, they require natural water supplies, and, for the most part, have to be supplied by the civilian population. The Kandil food supply, for example, is mostly organised via the small town of Raniya; important - if modest - financial means are generated by taxing trade on the Iranian-Iraqi border at Haji Umran. This is why the local population’s territories, as well as their infiltration and supply channels are known to the KRG security forces and the Turkish armed forces.

The HPG’s terminological fuzziness concerning its camps precludes any clear picture. The terminology used does not allow for a differentiation into area of operation, assembly area, or fallback area. The synonyms alan and saha (area, sector, region) denote three (!) hierarchical levels: initially, a distinction is made between the Northern (Turkey) and Southern (Iraq) Sectors (alan); These are subdivided into areas or regions (sah), which, in turn, are split up into sectors (alan) or provinces (eyale). As a rule, the latter are referred to by historical names, or the name of the nearest larger mountain, river, or village. There may be one or more camps within this sector.

**Northern Sector: Area of Operation**

The Northern Sector (zücey alan) is responsible for the areas of operation. It coordinates the Dersim, Botan, and Amed Regions (sah), which, in turn, are subdivided into in sectors (alan) or provinces (eyale). The latter could be an indication that the HPG operates in an area boasting a strong KCK underground structure. This appears to be the case in the Dersim Region (Tunceli). It consists of the Dersim and Karadziz Provinces and the Koçgiri Sector (i.e. the region to the east of Sivas); near the Black Sea, however, the PKK is notoriously weak. The provincial structures for Amed, Erzurum, and Garzan; the Botan Region, in turn, is formed of the Mardin Provinces; Botan is the area around Cizre and Silopi, as well as the Haftanin Sector in Iraq. The commanders of these three regions are often Command Council members, or hold other important positions. This also applies to the commanders of the Zagros and Metina Provinces. The Zagros area of operations stretches from Çukurca to Mount Cilo, Çarçalla/Yüksekova to emdinli, and therefore has nothing to do with the Zagros Mountains in Iran! Fighters from Metina mostly operate in the region between Çukurca and the zab HQ, as well as Haftanin, to the north of Zaxo. Matina in the north and Gare in the south include the Turkish military base of Bemerni, approximately 50 km to the east of Zaxo. Where most parts of the HPG employed in the Northern Sector remain stationed in Turkey, as a rule, the units from Zagros and Metina withdraw to Iraqi territory during the winter, where they spend this time of the year in the regions between Barzan and Avain or Metina next to Amedi (or Imadiya, not to be confused with Amed/Diyarbakr). Units from Botan who withdraw to Haftanin constitute an exception. The Regional Commands listed - Amed, Botan, Dersim, Metina and Zagros - have the right to initiate operations and they coordinate them with the HQ.

**Southern Sector: Fallback Area**

Zagros, Metina, Kukurk and the HQ are regarded as part of the HPG’s Southern Sector (güney alan). The HQ directly commands Serat Province, to the north of Lake Van up to the Armenian border, the Amanos Sector, in the woods of the same name near skenderun, as well as Gare to the east of Zaxo and Kukurk in the vicinity of Xinere, in the border triangle between Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Xinere is not only home to the People’s Congress, but also to the propaganda infrastructure for Turkey, as well as the People’s Defence Committee and the PJAK, which was a reason for numerous Iranian artillery barrages between 2005 and 2007. The HQ is located at the upper Zab, only separated by a mountain range from the small town of Çukurca on the Turkish side. The Special Forces Command, the Command of Self-Defence Forces for Syria and Turkey, as well as the academies are/are located there.

The Kandil region is also a part of the Southern Sector. This mountain range extends from east of Erbil and north-northwest of Suleymaniya for 150 km along the Iranian-Iraqi border, between Ravanduz in the north and Panijin in the south. However, most camps are within a range of 50 km² between the Kandil massif and Karox. Access to these camps in Kandil is possible from the small towns of Raniya and Qal’a Dizah. The infrastructure of this sector is located there, as is an important part of the HPG forces.

Maxmur (Makhmur) refugee camp may also be part of the Southern Sector. This camp was set up in 1998 by the UN, which still runs it. Its 12,000 inhabitants are Kurds driven out of Turkey, which explains their great support for the PKK/KCK. They are not especially listed in the PKK schematism, although at least 60 key personnel - a battalion in HPG terms - are located here. In 2014/15, the KCK/PKK extended its area of influence to Sinjar/ingal. It is, however, unclear whether this is regarded as an organisational part of the YPG or of the HPG’s Southern Sector.

**Development Stages and Force Protection**
The various designations do not allow for any inferences concerning the development stages of the camps. For the most part, they are likely to be nothing more than bivouacs with weapons, munitions, and drugs caches hidden away in caves or dug-outs. Reports of extensive tunnel systems, which make it possible to survive attacks by the Turkish air force, sound credible and refer both to camps in the fallback and assembly areas, as well as to installations in the area of operations. There are eye-witness accounts of a mountain, expanded into a fortress, close to Haskaris (the above-mentioned Çarpellit?), whose immediate vicinity was declared a restricted area by the HPG.\(^{49}\) On the other hand, the civilian KCK structures, especially in the Kandil region, are located directly in the villages, for example the field hospital in Levje (whose doctors and nurses were trained in Eastern Europe), a power station in Dola Koge etc.

It stands to reason that those camps have been best developed in which the command and logistics functions are located, or from which Turkey is infiltrated, as they - or their surroundings - are regularly bomed by the Turkish air force. As can be gathered from the map, the Kandil camps are the best secured: the 300 troops in ehid Ayhan are equipped with RPG-7, heavy machine guns (doqka, i.e. the DShK-38), and 60mm grenade launchers; those in Qal’a Tuga with an unknown number of heavy weapons and a number of SAM-7 (Strela 2).

The Defence Sector Media (Medya savunma alanı) seems to be more show than substance, integrating all Iraqi PKK/KCK bases and camps. Comprehensive defence of this (fictitious) huge L-shaped area, stretching for 200 km along the Turkish-Iraqi border, and then another 300 km along the Iranian-Iraqi border, is impossible anyway. Quite possibly, those voices are correct which regard this defence sector as nothing more than a big bluff, as in reality the vanquished guerrilla - at that time still the ARGK - stayed in its camps and limited itself to self-defence.\(^{50}\)

The Force

The HPG is an infantry, lightly armed and used to mountainous terrain. With the help of the Self-Defence Forces mentioned above, it has recently launched attempts at establishment itself in urban surroundings. Heavy weapons - to the extent available - are transported by mule. Eye witness reports speak about the great discipline, self-control, as well as the quasi-monkish life of the troops in the mountains and camps.

The guerilla’s actual organisation (General Regulations, Part 2, Clause 7) follows the traditional pattern of team (bırın), platoon (takır), company (bölük); and in Iran also of battalions (tabron). A team consists of three to five men, a platoon of two to three teams, a company of two to three platoons (i.e. approximately 30 men), and a battalion of two to three companies. As a rule, however, all units upwards of 40 men are referred to as battalions. HPG Regulations also stress that the number of forces employed reflect the terrain in the area of operations.

The unity of command and leadership does not seem to be a given. The respective commanders may have command authority; in order to lead, however, they have to include the commanders of the subordinate echelons and, starting at platoon level, the political officer, and at battalion level, YJA-Star commanders (General Regulations, Clause 9). The force consists of fighters - ideally, indoctrinated volunteers - (savaş; General Regulations, Clause 10), and commanders (komutan). A komutan’s job specifications correlate with those of a good officer employing mission-type tactics: HPG Regulations stress initiative, decision-making competence, decisiveness, as well as the capability of independent tactical planning (Clause 9a). The deputy commander (yardmc komutan, Clause 9b) is responsible for staff work (sev ve idare), and he supports the komutan in matters of military planning and implementation. The political officer (etim; literally: instructor, educator; Clause 9c) is responsible for the ideological indoctrination of the respective units. For smaller, ideologically sound units, his services are not stipulated in the General Regulations.

Routine procedures and duties are also laid down in the General Regulations (Part 3, Clause 1-7). As with civilian institutions, HPG units are required to provide detailed reports. A difference is made between verbal orders (emni) and written instructions (talimat). The latter could also be operation plans or concepts of operations (General Regulations, Part 3, Clause 1 and 2). Although the organisation stresses its members’ equality, what prevails is a strict hierarchy typical of any guerilla organisation. However, according to the General Regulations, the frequent assemblies (toplant) may be used to voice criticism. There is no hard evidence of this ever having happened, as opposed to the infamous criticism/self-criticism sessions used to address military mistakes and misconduct. These sessions are in tune with Öcalan’s logic, according to which individuals are fallible and must adapt their behaviour to the collective - in this case the military unit in which they serve.

The HPG’s approach to rotations is inconsistent; on the one hand, changes of function carried out too frequently are said to produce negative consequences, on the other hand, for example, the HQ commander may not serve for more than four years in this position. The same applies to simple fighters, who are also not to be employed for more than four years in the same area of operations. The rotation principle, however, allows for fighters to be deployed to wherever they are needed. Despite this, the expansion of the PKK/KCK in Turkey and Syria poses great challenges to the HPG in the fields of training and command.

The Expansion of the PKK/KCK

The expansion of the PKK began at the beginning of the new millennium. This step was informed by Öcalan’s assessment that the American military intervention in the region would weaken the nation states and thus be a chance to expand the room for manoeuvre. This decision also made allowances for two further facts: first, that the imminent American intervention in Iraq threatened to take the regime in Baghdad, the PKK’s last ‘partner’ in the region, out of the strategic equation, and would thus make the parallel diplomacy, as engaged in by all Kurdish political groups, impossible for the PKK.\(^{51}\) And second, that, since the mid-1990s the PKK had increasingly been recruiting members from other Kurdish regions, especially Syria, Iraq, as well as Iran, and could therefore begin to set up political structures for its members in these countries: in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party - PÇDK\(^{52}\) was founded in 2002, which won 6% of the vote at the last elections.

In the following year, more parties followed: Party of Free Life in Kurdistan - PJAK in Iran, and the Democratic Union Party - PYD in Syria.\(^{53}\) All three parties identify with Öcalan’s ideology and are a part of the KCK system. Their formal allocation to the Ecologic-Regional Leadership Committee of the Central Department for Policy must not, however, be mistaken for hierarchical subordination, although the scope of their political independence and autonomy remains unclear.

Further Guerrilla Units

The organisation’s expansion also had an impact on the military units, so that at first the focus shifted beyond Turkey.\(^{54}\) Thus, Fehim Huseyn (known as Bahoz Erdal/Dr. Bahooz Erdal), a Syrian, and Leyla Wali Huseyn (Viyan Karox), an Iraqi who fell in Turkey in 2006, attained high command positions. Accordingly, new areas of operation such as Syria and Iran were added. The expansion of the areas of operation poses a significant challenge to the HPG in the fields of command and logistics, and it bears the risk of strategic overextension. The extension can be justified, however, by the historically unique chance of being able to act militarily in all Kurdish regions. A passive wait-and-see approach would have resulted in a loss of initiative and thus of room to manoeuvre.
At closer inspection it becomes obvious, however, that despite its geographical expansion the KCK/PKK remains a Turkish organisation at its core. Even the Syrian theatre, as will be shown later, is always seen in relation to events in Turkey. Today, the HPG leadership boasts directly commanded units, including female units and special forces, as well as the so-called self-defence units located in the region – i.e. Turkey. In contrast, the YPG operates largely autonomously in Syria. A comparison with the YPG illustrates how much weaker the Iranian KCK/PKK structures are.

Iran: HRK/YRK and HPJ

The leadership in Kandil only began to devote more attention to the theatre in Iran after Öcalan’s arrest. Its understanding of Iranian politics, however, seems to be far worse than its grasp of the political situation in Iraq or Turkey. The same applies to the Iranian political elites, who are well aware of the importance of the Kurdish question and managed to neutralise, both politically and militarily, the old Iranian-Kurdish movements (Komala, KDP-I). They have problems understanding the PKK/KCK and its concepts, though.

Concurrent with the PJAK’s founding, the KCK/PKK set up the *Forces of Eastern Kurdistan - HRK*. Initially, the HRK was employed as an additional security unit in the KCK/PKK HQ in Kandil. However, they soon used the Kandil for forays into Kurdish areas in Iran, where they promptly set up camp. Around 2010, they were strong enough to meet Iranian units in combat and to carry out attacks outside of the Kurdish- Iranian areas. It was obviously KCK policy to delegate political responsibility for the fight against Teheran to the PJAK, and military responsibility to the HRK, as a way of keeping channels of communication to the Iranians open. This explains the reaction in summer 2010, when Teheran attacked HPG and DKB units, thereby hitting the organisation’s military nerve. How much this Iranian action hurt is clearly expressed in the Executive Council’s press statement: “It is especially important that the Iranian forces directed their aggressive stance, quite inexplicably, not against the PJAK, but directly against the HPG and the DKB, which are the military forces of our movement.”

A year later, Iran obviously had, for the time being, achieved its aim, as PJAK and HRK withdrew their fighters, following a mediation effort by the KRG and the arrest of high-level PKK leaders by Iranian agents.

In May/June 2014, PJAK organised its *4th Party Congress*, which decided to extend the KCK system to Iranian territory. This is tantamount to a change of the PKK/KCK’s Iran policy, as - up to that time - a direct confrontation with the regime was avoided. To this end, the KCK Agreement was translated into Persian and published under the name Democratic and Free Society of the East - KODAR (see Part 1 of this study). KODAR’s influence is difficult to gauge. According to statements by Iranian academics the text was circulated among Kurdish students in Teheran, who discussed it with their fellow students. What is remarkable is that it currently remains the only concept which lays out an alternative to the Islamic Republic, is read outside the respective ethnic group, and which outsiders can link to concrete policy - the resistance in Kandil.

Following the PJAK Congress of May, the HRK decided in June 2014 to reorganise itself as the *East Kurdish Forces - YRK*. The Women’s Defence Forces - HJP were founded contemporaneously. There is no information available on YRK and HPJ force strength, but it cannot be more than a couple of hundred fighters. Obviously the confrontation with the regime was planned despite the cease-fire, but postponed due to the events unfolding in the region. The YRK therefore moved to Sinjar/Engal in August 2014, hundreds of kilometres to the west of the Iranian border. Iranian observers interpret this as dithering and disunity, which ascribe to disagreements within the PJAK.

Independent of KODAR’s activities, events in Kobanê led to numerous protests and demonstrations of solidarity, not only among Kurds but also among left-wing Iranians, which the regime met with positive propaganda by stressing the PYD’s alliance with Assad, Iran’s ally, and by emphasising the role which Iran played in summer 2014 as the KRG’s protecting power, when IS threatened break through to Erbil. During the winter months of 2014-15, there were, as was to be expected, no hostilities. YRK fighters, however, must have redeployed to the Iranian border. In May, social unrest broke out in Mahabad, which none of the Kurdish groups could exploit, however.

Arguments among Kurdish groups actually led to a short but bloody battle between the Iranian KDP-I and the YRK, the reasons for which have still not been completely clarified. According to one report, HPG forces stopped KDP-I Peshmerga from moving into the ‘east’, i.e. Iranian Kurdistan. This would mean that the HPJ and the Executive Council are so interested in good relations with the Iranians that they will not even shrink from violence to bar enemies of Iran from entering eastern Kurdistan from regions they control. However, this is in variance with the escalation of violence between the PJAK/YRK and the Iranians in August 2015.

Does this mean that PJAK and YRK are able to pursue policies independent of the Executive Council? If this were the case, it would be important proof that the KCK is not capable of presenting itself as a uniform organisation, in a coordinated manner, in all parts of Kurdistan. A different interpretation might be that policy decisions are taken by the Executive Council, while the PJAK/YRK are used to carry out occasional political changes of direction via the Command Council.

Syria: YPG, YPJ, and Asayî

In 2008, the KCK/HPG leadership also formally decided to initiate the establishment of self-defence forces in Syria. HPG war veterans and returnees played an important role in this. In the beginning, these units were unobtrusive and they organised local forces - in secret, and obviously tolerated by the Baath regime - which formed the basis for the Women’s Protection Units - YPJ, as well as the Asayî police forces. These militias first appeared publicly in 2011.

The PYD/YPG subsequently emerged victorious from the tensions among the Kurdish organisations and parties under the aegis of the *Kurdish National Council - ENKS*. This was followed, in keeping with the PKK’s claim to sole representation, by the attempted elimination of all other Kurdish parties. This, in turn, led to the escalation with KRB President Masud Barzani, who, in 2014, had the border to the Kurdish areas in Syria (Rojava) closed.

Rojava is important for the KCK/PKK leadership, because here the organisation of a society based on Öcalan’s ideals is being attempted for the first time on a large scale. The underlying idea is that democratic autonomy à la PKK is to serve as an example to other Kurdish regions. This autonomy, however, has its limits. Rojava only offers limited prospects to its population, which is why Syrian Kurds, because of war and economic hardship, are joining the flow of Syrian refugees to Europe. In addition, the Syrian regime may have been pushed back in many areas, yet selective cooperation with Assad is readily admitted. In some towns, such as Kobanê, the Syrian administration has remained operational, and in Qamishlo, critical infrastructure (airport, border crossings) is still controlled by Syrian forces. This makes an open break with Assad difficult, which would also be politically unwise given the threat of IS and Turkey’s unfriendly stance vis-à-vis Kurdish autonomy in Syria.
Fight against IS: Sinjar und Kobanê

The rise of the *Islamic State* in Iraq and Syria in summer 2014 was used by both Kurdish main adversaries (KCK/PKK and KRG) to pursue their respective ideas of Kurdish rule. In July, *Peshmerga* units of the KRG occupied Kirkuk, *The Jerusalem of the Kurds*, a city which had been contested for decades. This boost in prestige for the *Peshmerga* was lost again a month later due to their embarrassing abandoning, without a fight, of the Sinjar/Jingal Mountains, inhabited by Kurdish Yazidis.

Sinjar

The *Peshmerga*'s defeat made it possible for forces from Syria, i.e. the YPG and later the HPG, to establish themselves in Sinjar. This way they gained, at Barzani's expense, a second territorial base in *Iraqi-Kurdish territory besides Kandil*. (A third base is camp Maxmur, which, however, is not in *Kurdish territory.*) The justification given for these actions was the - controversial - role the PYD played in protecting the Yazidis’ flight.

Sinjar’s importance for the PKK/KCK can also be made out by the fact that more and more fighters are deployed to the region, and that the HPG is trying to organise the local population in PKK-controlled militias, such as the *Resistance Units ingal – YB* recruited from among the Yazidis, whose creation and military training was taken up by the YPG. In other words, this means that the attempt is being made on the part of Kandil to transfer the entire KCK system into the Sinjar Mountains. The YB was part of a large, combined Kurdish counter-offensive in autumn 2015; the most important PKK units, however, were deployed by the YPG and HPG.

Since IS was driven out of Sinjar, a tense mood has prevailed among the various Kurdish militias. This situation is typical of the prevailing relationships between Kurdish groups: they are just about able to combine forces against a common enemy, such as IS, but there is no common *Kurdish strategy discernible, nor, given their ideological differences, is it feasible. The necessity to cooperate was clear to the protagonists in 2014, as the *Kurdish public has little understanding for the competition between the armed militias.* Therefore, in summer 2014, Barzani negotiated the return of his militias to the Rojava regions controlled by the PYD, which was only grudgingly accorded to by the latter. The reason was the dramatic events in and around Kobanê, which at that time was close to falling.

Kobanê/Ayn al-Arab

Similar to Sinjar, Kobanê lies on the edge of the Arab-Suni area, with Rakkà as its centre. By taking it, IS wanted to realign this ethnically compact region geographically and ensure a further direct border crossing point to Turkey. The idealisation and glamorisation of resistance in Kobanê, especially of female YPJ fighters, by media close to the PKK/KCK initially meant that PYD/YPG human rights violations were ignored by the international public.

At the same time, the media’s interest in Kobanê provided unexpected help for American efforts to push back IS in Iraq. In this, the psychological aspect was more important than the actual military value, since the more the IS militias focused on the battle for Kobanê every day, the more IS’ offensive against Baghdad, strategically far more important, was pushed out of the headlines. After the Iraqi army and the *Peshmergas* had melted away in summer 2014, the combat effectiveness of YPG and other PKK units quickly became apparent to the USA. Against this backdrop, the USA supported the signing of the *Dohuk Agreement* between the PYD and the KRG in October 2014, which made it possible for a part of the *Peshmerga* to return to areas of Syria controlled by the PYD. Since then there has been cooperation of sorts between the US Air Force and the YPG. If the USA was secretly hoping that its support for the agreement as well as downplaying the relations to the PYD and the KCK/PKK was enough to get the PYD/YPG to move closer to Barzani and the KRG, it was in for a disappointment.

The reason was that the pragmatism shown by Salih Muslim, the PYD’s co-chairman, who was aiming for constructive relationships with both Turkey and the USA, was faced with the KCK’s long-nurtured anti-imperialist - i.e. anti-American - discourse. Thus, the battle for Kobanê and its iconography reminiscent of the Spanish civil war and Che Guevara, mobilised the support of the world’s entire spectrum of left-wing and anti-imperialist movements. Especially left-wing ethnic separatist movements, such as those of the Catalanians, Amazighs, Balochs, and even Bretons, declared their solidarity with Kobanê and the Kurds, i.e. the PKK. To say nothing of the spectrum of post-communist parties in Europe from whose ranks volunteers went into battle in northern Syria. These campaigns at first led the KCK to overestimate itself, i.e. to regard itself as a strategic player. To Syrian Kurds they were, however, of less concrete use than to the European organisations CDK and KCD-E, which aim to exploit solidarity with Kobanê to achieve the legalisation of the KCK/PKK.

More dangerous for Syrian Kurds in the long term, however, was the link between the Rojava and the fate of the Kurds in Turkey. From the beginning, Turkey demanded that the Syrian Kurds give up or loosen their ties to the KCK/PKK, or at least keep out of domestic Turkish affairs. For the PYD and YPG a good working relationship with the Turkish government would have been very important, but neither was able to pay the political price demanded by Ankara. On the contrary, they had to consider the KCK’s political sensitivities. Relations with Ankara and the Turkish elections were made more complicated by the debate about Kobanê, which Turkish-Kurdish activists linked to the Gezi protests of the previous years. Finally, the Suruç attack of July 2015, most likely carried out by IS, on a solidarity committee for Kobanê formed of left-wing Turkish-Kurdish activists, bound the fates of Turkish and Syrian Kurds even closer, so that, from the point of view of those involved, the Kurdish question in Turkey was linked to Turkish security interests in Syria.

Since then, Turkey has been blocking a diplomatic upgrade of the PYD by, for example, preventing its participation in the Geneva peace talks. On site, Ankara is at pains to stop the expansion of YPG forces. In this, Turkey is pursuing two different, yet complementary, goals: from a national security point of view, the aim is to foil the establishment of a PKK state running along the Turkish-Syrian border, and to preserve independent border guards - i.e. not controlled by either the regime or the YPG - on the Syrian side. From the point of view of Turkish regional policy, the aim is the fall of Assad, brought about by Sunni-Islamist forces. To combine both goals, Turkey has never really been very particular in its choice of partners in respective regions. Busted arms shipments to Sunni extremists in Syria, and the manner in which the government dealt with them afterwards (prominent journalists were sentenced to absurdly high prison terms), shocked the Turkish public and angered Ankara’s allies, especially the USA, which still remains basically committed to its support of the YPG.

Turkey: Autonomy as Trauma
Strengthened by international interest in Kobanê and the resultant increased standing of the organisation, the PKK/KCK leadership in Kandil and on mrali stuck to the extension of underground structures in Turkey. This includes the creation of military structures in the sense of self-defence forces as demanded by the KCK, which was closely observed by the Turkish authorities while keeping a surprisingly low profile. One reason for this may have been that negotiations were still taking place between Öcalan and Ankara at that time, and that the Turkish government - i.e. President Erdoan - wanted to avoid any escalation. From the point of view of the KCK executive council, it was therefore sensible to exploit the political mood and increase pressure on Turkey.

With a view to Turkey, as well as internationally, the aim was to discredit the Erdoan government further, and to depict it, in a partisan manner, as a supporter of IS. In this, the complicated situation on site in summer 2014 was reduced to an Islamic struggle against ‘the Kurds’, i.e. the PYD. Facts that did not fit this picture, such as Kurdish fighters in IS or Turkey’s tacit acceptance of resupplies and care for the wounded fighters of Kobanê, were ignored. 98

It was especially four factors which contributed to the escalation in 2014 and 2015: the creation of YDG-H, the reorganisation of the Kurdish Islamists, and the elections of June and November 2015. The fourth factor was discontent in the restructured security apparatus, which – as in the decades before - wanted to ‘finally’ defeat the PKK militarily.

**Angry Youth: YDG-H**

As was shown above, KCK structures in Turkey have been strengthened and enlarged for years. This has also affected the Self-Defence Forces and the youth movement YDG-H. The latter are characterised by a high propensity to violence and risk-taking, which could be explained by an average age of between 15 and 17, high unemployment, as well as a lack of education. 99 The majority of those organised in the YDG-H hail from socially marginalised families, many of them peasants who had been the victims of the large-scale resettlements and evictions in the 1990s and had then to rebuild their lives, enduring great privations and hardships.

Towards the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, the YDG-H began to implement its own ideas of democratic autonomy, and set up ‘police’ units (asayî) as part of the - yet to be established - Self-Defence Forces. The YDG-H’s numerous spontaneous actions in 2013 and 2014 distracted attention from the fact that the enlargement of the KCK system and the creation of local military units were envisaged in the KCK Agreement and demanded by the Executive Council. The inexperienced YDG-H fighters were now led by old HPG hands, who no longer, as before, only came to the cities to coordinate attacks, but stayed to set up the local Self-Defence Forces, as per/in accordance with the KCK Agreement. In the light of available KCK documents, the claim by Murat Karaylan and Emine Ayna that, given the special dynamics of youth and the ongoing military operations, Kandil would have more and more trouble leading the YDG-H, 99 is not credible.

When members of the YDG-H began to set up sporadic road checkpoints in Lice, mak, Diyarbakr, and even Istanbul, Turkish authorities initiated steps against them. 96

**The Islamists**

At first, the YDG-H’s prime targets were the Kurdish Islamists, who had begun to reorganise themselves at the same as the PKK/KCK, i.e. from 2004 onward. For the most part, they hail from the Hezbollah movement of the 1980s and 1990s, which was broken up in 2000. 79 Since then, there has been a Hezbollah underground in many Kurdish towns, which is linked to a further network of associations and organisations, among which is also the Free Cause Party - Hüda-Par. 93

Towards the end of 2013, a militant organisation began to form among the youth socialised in these circles, the êxîê Said Serîyelerî - Stormtroopers of Sheik Said, whose links to the radical Islamist groups in Syria could not be proven, who, however, sympathise with them. These circles openly rejected the messages of support for Kobanê which were sent out by the Turkish left and the HDP/BDP and which, at the same time, were stage-managed as a demonstration of the KCK/PKK’s power. Tensions between the two groups soon escalated, and Hüda-Par published a list of 77 PKK assaults on its members in September and October 2014. 49 When, during the Festival of Sacrifice at the beginning of October 2014, a sixteen-year-old Hüda-Par sympathiser was murdered by YDG-H members, tensions increased even more, until they exploded in Cizre at the end of December 2014 in violent clashes between the YDG-H and the êxîê Said Serîyelerî. 95

Since October, the YDG-H had been declaring districts in, inter alia, Cizre and Silopi, autonomously liberated areas in which state authority was no longer legitimate. Road blocks and barricades were erected and trenches dug. In areas thus controlled, the YDG-H began to expel followers of the Hüda-Par and of other Hezbollah groups. 96 In their traditional strongholds, such as Batman, the situation, was completely different, however, as the Islamists there managed to frustrate the establishment of KCK structures. 97 Many of them soon went on the offensive, and the call went out via Twitter to persecute the ‘apostated’ (mürtedler, i.e. all parts of the PKK) and not to wait for the state, because the “state is in hell, the Serîyelerî are in service”. 98

Thus, at the beginning of 2015, the violent triad made up of the PKK or YDG-H, Hezbollah or Serîyelerî, and the regional Turkish security forces, which had featured in the 1990s, was back. The big difference is now that the effects of the civil war in the neighbouring country are clearly noticeable. This situation basically continued until the June 2015 elections in Turkey. The Serîyelerî did defend themselves, but they were actually waiting for the Turkish authorities to move against the YDG-H and its autonomy. It must be assumed that the Hezbollah underground will only become active after the confrontation between the security forces and the KCK/PKK has ended, and will use the time until then to consolidate its structures.

**Counterstrike, Autonomy/YPS, and Flight**

The measures taken by the Turkish authorities, as expected by observers, began immediately after the June elections and have continued until today. Their severity, however, was surprising. The reasons are Erdoan’s disappointment with the HDP’s conduct regarding the question of his presidential powers, and his frustration with the progress of the peace talks, which he had been conducting indirectly with Öcalan. A further reason is also the type of skirmishes fought, as urban combat does not leave the militarily inexperienced YDG-H much choice, but to fight to the last round. On the part of the forces fighting them, drawn mostly from the ranks of the Police, hatred and bitterness dominate, since the operations were preceded by a large-scale attack in Dalca/Oramar, Hakkari Province, in September 2015 (16 soldiers killed), and by the murder of two police officers shot in the head, in Ceylanpınar, Urfa Province, in July of the same year.
A further aspect which might serve as an explanation of the brutality of the fighting is the *esprit de corps* in the newly created special units of the Police (POH Polis Özel Harekatı), the so-called *Ezedullah Timler*. Little is known about these para-military forces; however, on account of the slogans and propaganda they use, they are described as a mixture of right-wing extremist in the tradition of the *Grey Wolves*, whose symbols they often employ, and Islamist. The foci of operations of the restructured Turkish Police, which has been supported by the armed forces from autumn 2015, provide insight into those regions in which the KCK/PKK has its strongholds and underground structures: Diyarbakır/Sur, Nusaybin, Derik, Cizre, Silvan and also the HPG’s areas of operation Botan and Amed (see above). Interestingly, in *Dersim*, another KCK stronghold, everything remained calm. The Turkish air force onlyombocked a PKK heroes’ cemetery in the Pimori/Pülümür valley. The question is whether the HPG Regional Command has consciously taken a step back, or whether guerrilla units are only waiting for the snow to melt, to become active there also.

Police blockades began at the beginning of September with an eight-day curfew in Cizre, followed by Silvan at the beginning of October, and again from 3 to 11 November, Nusaybin from 13 to 26 November, Derik from 27 November to 3 December, the old town of Sur in Diyarbakır from 11 December, followed by Silopi on 15 December, and dİ in January 2016. Curfews are always accompanied by a disruption of the telephone service and the electronic information services. In some cases, medical care for the wounded as well as the recovery of dead bodies was prohibited. The severity of the engagements is shown by the pictures of destruction following the operations, which evoke Syria and Iraq. The towns affected are faced with an absurd situation: whereas, mostly in the poorer districts, barricades are being erected and urban combat is raging, there is a pervasive calm in other parts of the same town. In Amed/Diyarbakır, for example, a DTK congress took place in December 2015 — not far from the contested old town of Sur. The decisions taken at this congress in no way referred to the dramatic local situation. The final communiqué stressed the necessity of self-defence — which, in this form, can only be interpreted as directed against Turkish security forces, whereas the *14-Point Plan* envisages the creation of local security forces, which are expected to cooperate with the central security authorities.

Given ideal and democratic conditions, this could serve as the starting point for meaningful negotiations for autonomy, behind closed doors. Under the present circumstances, negotiations remain illusory.

The KCK leadership in Kandîl is obviously preparing for an offensive, as the decision was taken — concurrent with the DTK Congress — to unite all local forces active in the region under one organisational umbrella: the *Civilian Defence Units — YPS*. These are the logical continuation of previous efforts to reorganise the HPG-led YDG-H and self-defence units. The KCK is obviously convinced that the YPS can establish itself in Kurdistan in the long term. It must be presumed that the YPS’s command fighting at least until the snow starts to melt, i.e. the start of the annual HPG offensive. A further escalation thus appears possible in summer 2016. This seems to be the view of the Turkish Army, which, in autumn 2015, acquired 900 mules for mountain warfare, which suggests that the Turks want to attack the HPG in its assembly and fallback areas in Iraq.

Fears that Turkey may now be facing a civil war are thus not unfounded. Something similar was already predicted in the 1990s. However, three parameters have changed: first, the fight now takes place in urban areas, which means that the classic means of counter-insurgency — i.e. resettling the rural population in towns, where they are, allegedly, easier to control — no longer work. Second, the war could now last longer, as the war in Syria makes access to anti-tank weapons much easier. In the past, Damascus exercised strict control over the arms market; today, due to the civil war, there is a liberalised market for MANPADs, Milan, Kornet, and TOW. The third change concerns the new generation of fighters who will constitute a new KCK generation and whose objective is the implementation of KCK rule as ‘democratic autonomy’. Negotiated compromises between the Turkish government and the KCK will thus be more difficult to reach, if they are at all attempted.

From a political point of view, these operations neither help the KCK/YDG-H nor the government. The anger of the browbeaten civilian population, who, for the most part, were involved in the fighting against their will, is directed in equal measure at the Police’s brutality, as well as the violent braggadocio of the YDG-H/YPS and the PKK leadership in the mountains. The only tangible results of autonomy are the military operations, as well as the large-scale economic and human damage. Experts are already warning of the psychological effects of the events. The flight of the civilian population into other parts of the country is even more dramatic — even if the, mostly underage, YDG-H/YPS representatives want to stop this. In dİ, the announcement of a Police blockade was enough for most of the population to flee the region in panic. In Sur, most of the demoralised population have left their homes, and in Cizre, according to HDP MP Fayysal Saryldz, only 20,000 out of a population of 120,000 still live in the city. The *Yeni Özgür Politika* confronts the tragedy of the civilian population with rallying calls: the Kurds should remain steadfast, show solidarity with other Kurds, and offer resistance. If this is the official KCK position, it must be assumed that the organisation thinks itself capable of maintaining resistance for a long time. Its ideological and organisational structure do not allow for any other course of action, anyway. The same seems to apply to the Turkish security forces.

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1 Abdullah Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtulu ve Özgür Yaam nas,* (mral Notlar), [Democratic liberation and the creation of a free life. Notes from *Imral*], Neuss 2015. The publishers regarded the first edition in 2014 as unsuitable for the public and thus immediately had it pulped. The new ‘first’ edition was published in November 2015 and immediately sold out, the second edition followed in February 2016. Email correspondence with Neuss, 19 September 2011.


3 http://bayanet.org/files/doc_files/000/000/179/original/demokratik%C3%B6zerklik.htm


5 e.g. http://www.sehid.com/


7 Haber Vaktim, 11 February 2012.

8 These figures are based on estimates published by the Turkish Defence Staff, cf. *Türkiye’de hangi iade kaç PKK’i terörist var? [How many PKK terrorists are in which Turkish province?*], Haber Vaktim, 7 March 2013. http://www.haber7.com/print.php?id=1005218.


11 Haim Söylemez, ‘PKK’nin çocuk militanlar’ [‘PKK child soldiers*], Aksyosan, 11 June 2012.

12 PKK bin 853 çocuk Kandîl de esir aldi’ [‘The PKK keeps 853 children prisoner in Kandîl’], *Haber Star*, 30 August 2015. ‘PKK Son iki yıla 316 Çocuk Daha kaçırdı’ [‘The PKK kidnapped 316 children in the last two years and brought them into the mountains*], *Haberler.com*, 24 August 2015.
Both measures changed Kurdish society, as they politicised 'the man in the street' and thus pushed back the influence of traditional Kurdish

James Brandon, 'Qandil: Panahgah-e shureshiyan-e Kord' ['Kandil: refuge of Kurdish fighters'] (translated from English by Seyyed Musa

Oran, 'I hereby inform the Kurdish people', 5 April 2011.

Hdr Sarkaya, 'Kürt halknn bilgisine sunuyorum' ['I hereby inform the Kurdish people'], 15 August 2013, pp. 132-134 & 152. Söylemez,

The Kurds and the regional powers as well as the powers outside

HPG Genel Yönetmelii cf. the new TAK homepage: http://www.pydrojava.net/ and the

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Who mainly relies on the minutes of interrogations


Sarkaya, Kürt halkn bilgisine sunuyorum.

Zeynep Dicle, 'Karaylan: Sonunda bizimle görüecekler' ['In the end they will talk with us'], conversation with security forces in Diyarbakr, September 2008.

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