THE KURDISTAN WORKERS’ PARTY, DISPLACEMENTS AND THE KURDS: A SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON CIVILIAN VICTIMS

Zahir Kızmaz¹, Nimet Teğin²

¹Prof. Dr., Fırat University, Department of Sociology. zkizmaz@firat.edu.tr
²Lecturer, Siirt University, Social Sciences Vocational School, nimet.tegin@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper addresses the resumption of the conflicts between the PKK terrorist organization and the government of the Republic of Turkey in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions of Turkey, after the end of the solution process that continued between the years of 2013 and 2015. Due to the conflicts that started after the collapse of the negotiation process, approximately 400,000 people had to migrate with their families to safer areas. For the purpose of this study, a survey was carried out among 649 people, who had to migrate to places other than the conflict zone, and informal interviews were held with about 10 individuals. The snowball sampling technique was used for the selection of interviewers. The study deals with the issues such as the outcomes of these clashes, the situation of the dislocated citizens during and after the migration, their perspectives of the PKK terrorist organization, as well as their evaluations on self-administration declarations and the state’s operations.

The main reason for the displacements was to avoid results such as the loss of lives during the operations of security forces against the militants of the terrorist organization who had been implementing the PKK’s strategies of the declaration of armed autonomy and the installation of trenches/barricades to create rescue zones. As the effect of the conflicts that had taken place, the cities/residential areas were ruined and the historical sites were ravaged in such a way that they cannot be repaired. People who lived in the region, especially children, had to experience the feelings of pain, death and trauma in an intense way. The problems that have arisen in many areas, especially economic, educational and those regarding the security, have made life seriously difficult and the region uninhabitable. In conclusion, the study proved that the vast majority of interviewers did not support the declaration of autonomy and trench/barricade conflicts; in other words, they did not support the PKK’s strategy of carrying the conflicts in the city center.

Keywords: the PKK, displacements, the Kurds

INTRODUCTION

The PKK terrorist organization has been carrying out armed efforts for about 40 years in Turkey. The first negotiations for providing de-conflict and a solution between the government and the organization including its components were launched in 2013 and lasted approximately 2.5 years. However, the conflicts restarted in 2016 and thus, the negotiations ended. In the end, the aim of realizing a transition to a new era in which the PKK terrorist organization would withdraw its armed forces to an area out of the border and in which the democratic politics would be the determinant, in other words the period of the solution process, failed. As the PKK did not withdraw its armed forces out of the border and carried out activities that threatened the public security, and it justified these activities on the grounds that the government had not spent the necessary democratization efforts, the Kurdish problem became an issue impossible to be solved in a peaceful and
democratic way. In the new period, the organization constructed ditches and barricades and set up explosive mechanisms in certain residential areas in order to create a territorial control by declaring autonomy and to prevent the security forces to enter these residential areas and be able to fight.

It is possible to consider the following facts as the developments that are effective in ending the negotiation/solution process and in the resumption of the conflicts:

1. The developments in Syria and the gaining of the PYD in Syria. (The possibility of the foundation of a new Kurdish state with the influence of the PYD, which is a branch of the PKK; the conflict situation between the government and the organization in politics regarding Syria led the strengthening of the PKK’s military power more rather than laying down the arms).
2. Activities that threatened public safety carried out by the organization, and the risks and the concerns that these activities created.
3. Using the negotiation period as a chance to increase its own power/authority by the organization.
4. The use of a provocative language and style that could be effective in terminating the process (especially continuing the conflict in the election process and the election strategy on a destructive level in which the solution process might be terminated).
5. Inability to produce solutions to the problems emerging during the de-conflict period in a competent way.
6. Lack of confidence between the organization and the state.
7. The PKK’s and HDP’s (Turkish: Halkların Demokratik Partisi, English: Peoples’ Democratic Party) playing a role within the scope of the efforts against the government in order to weaken and overthrow the government. [1]

With the termination of the solution process, the organization started its efforts for creating a territorial control or establishing liberated zones by declaring autonomy and constructing barricades and ditches in certain regions. In this context, the organization carried the violence from the rural areas to the urban settlements, which caused the hundreds of thousands of civilians to suffer. The purpose of these activities was to realize a Kurdish uprising after the deaths that were possible to occur during the conflicts in the civilian residential areas. The organization would be able to achieve this goal by having the conflict spread in the cities, by seizing the cities and making the people join in fighting against the security forces and by continuing this fight among the civilian residents. In this sense, the PKK’s new violence strategy was based on the idea of making the civilian element a part of this conflict and thus starting a revolutionist public struggle, by organizing and arming young people to make them prone to the organization in the cities rather than taking them to the mountains and by expanding the conflict areas to the cities and creating a new wave of violence.

The organization has been using violence as an important instrument to impose its ideological and political agenda on the public, to create the atmosphere of dominance and fear and to ensure the militarization of the Kurdish people. The organization’s activities such as carrying the conflicts from the rural areas to the urban settlements, efforts to arm children and young people for the conflicts and increasing the suicide bombing activities attracted attention as the prominent
developments in the new period of conflict. This new development, which can be conceptualized as "an armed autonomy period" for the PKK, turned out to be the suffering of hundreds of thousands of civilian residents as the result of the PKK violence. The battles that started together with the operations of the security forces aimed at establishing public security in the cities and eliminating the attempt of the organization, which wanted to realize the strategy of territorial domination by declaring an armed autonomy seriously risked the safety of the civilian residents. For this reason, approximately 400,000 people had to leave their residential areas and migrate to other regions. [3]

It is possible to say that the organization had especially two goals when carrying the violence into cities (constructing ditches and barricades, laying explosives):

1. The PKK terrorist organization aimed to make all the people a part of their efforts without discriminating anybody as old, children, women or civilians. That is the result of the expectation that the sufferings (deaths, destructions, human rights violations, detentions and arrests, economic problems, etc.) caused by the conflict and possible government operations in the civilian residential areas as well as the reaction and anger that might be related to these sufferings would soon create the opposition to the state and the organization would seriously be fed and strengthened from these. This expectation led the organization to seek out armed autonomy declarations and implement the strategy of constructing ditches-barricades.

2. Another objective was to silence the opposing and contradictory developments and to control people by arming young people in the cities/neighborhoods and ensuring the organization's dominance over the people. The opinion and fear suggesting the fact that any opposition to the PKK could be severely punished was strong and widespread in the region. The fear that the PKK terrorist organization might harm them seriously prevented Kurdish people to develop reactions against the organization. For this reason, it was basically not possible to pronounce the opposition to PKK in a very loud manner.

Yeşiltaş and Özçelik addressed the facts that the organization aimed at by starting the urban wars in the new period in four different categories:

1. To discard the restrictive effects of the rural areas and to expand the area of conflict and domination by carrying the fights to the cities, to create a psychology of superiority by ensuring the dominance/control of the residential area and by uncovering the insufficiency of the security forces.

2. To bring the power of the YDG-H/YPS\(^1\), which is the youth organization of PKK, over the people in a more visible and fortified status, and to enhance the mobilization of the ethnic radicalization.

3. To ensure the socialization of the PKK in a sense by spreading/expanding the conflict in a manner that would bring it among people, and thus realize the public insurgency.

---

\(^1\)YDG-H in Turkish: Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi, in English: Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement, YPS in Turkish: Sivil Savunma Kuvvetleri, (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Sîvîl), in English: Forces of Civil Defense
4. To establish a state-like structure and guarantee the sovereignty of the organization by establishing courts and by constructing ditches as well as conducting identity checks as if it was in line with law provisions. [2]

I. INFORMATION ON THE SUBJECT, PURPOSE AND METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

The subject of this paper analyzes how the dynamics/reasons and the results of the conflicts that restarted in 2016 after the termination of the solution process between the PKK terrorist organization and the government of the Turkish Republic were evaluated by the Kurdish residents in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions of Turkey. It is of utmost importance to know how the victims who had to leave their residential areas as the result of the PKK’s violence in the civilian residential zones, cities and neighborhoods evaluated, perceived or identified this process and the developments. Within this framework, the study aimed to determine opinions of householders, who had to leave their residential areas where ditches and barricades were constructed, the operations were carried out and the conflicts were experienced, on migration and the problems regarding migration, on the process of negotiation or solution, on the autonomy declarations of the PKK, on the activities of constructing ditches and barricades and on the new concept of urban violence/terrorism.

In this context, it is possible to state the purpose of the paper as follows:
1. To determine the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the displaced people.
2. To determine how autonomy claims and the ways of declaring them are considered by the displaced persons.
3. To understand whether there was any reaction among the people against the PKK/YDG-H/YPS's acts of violence/terror (ditches/barricades and bombings).
4. To learn the evaluations of participants on the contribution of the organization's actions to the formation of a peaceful and democratic environment.
5. To identify who the participants think is responsible for the termination of the negotiation process.
6. To determine how the security operations against the organization are assessed.
7. To determine whether there is a change in the Kurds’ view of the PKK terrorist organization and its other political structures.

For this study purposes, face-to-face interviews were carried out with 649 individuals, who had to leave their settlements (in provinces such as Siirt, Diyarbakır, Batman, Gaziantep, Adana, Mersin, Mardin and Van) and migrate to other places, and a questionnaire was applied between February 17 and April 20, 2016. In addition to the questionnaire, more detailed interviews were carried out with 10 householders. Only a limited number of results of the survey form is presented herein. The snowball sampling technique was used in the selection of interviewers.

Ditches and barricades were mainly constructed in the residential areas where the HDP had received more than 75% of the vote. Likewise, 82% of those, who were interviewed in this study, indicated that they had voted for the HDP in the general elections of November 1, 2015. In this framework, it can be stated that the
The PKK Organization, Displacements and Kurds (...)

political party tendencies of the interviewers before the "barricade and ditch policy" were predominantly towards the HDP.

II. FINDINGS ON THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF THE RESEARCH GROUP

It was found that;
- 62% of the participants were male, 38% were female;
- more than half of them (58%) were in the age group of 33 years and above,
- the graduates of high schools (25%), secondary schools (23%) and universities (23%) constituted the highest percentages of the research group;
- 97% were married;
- the number of children concentrated in the categories of "more than 3" and "3" (61%);
- in terms of occupation, the categories of "self-employed" (25%) and "housewife" (23%) were most frequently mentioned (the sample group was mainly composed of individuals who did not have regular income and who lived with daily wage);
- they earned their lives mostly by loans, grants, savings and borrowings,
- 75% stated that the property of the place of residence before they migrated had belonged to them;
- they rather hired houses (67%) than bought and they stayed with their relatives (33%);
- 72% of the participants stayed in a crowded family environment consisting of 10 or more persons in the place where they migrated to;
- among the new settlement preferences, they mostly indicated factors such as "presence of relatives and close environment" (29%) and "proximity to previous settlements" (23%);
- 64% stated that they had encountered problems in the new residential area they had migrated to, and that they had experienced problems with finding homes and jobs, earnings and their children's education,
- 55% from the beginning benefited from the state grants;
- 83% stated that they wanted to return to their old settlement areas after the conflict was over;
- mainly, the reason for immigration was the pressure of the PKK (61%),
- the majority of the participants (68%) considered the PKK terrorist organization as responsible for the migration (23%).

3.1. Research Findings

Findings on the perceptions of those, who were displaced, about ditches/barricades, autonomy declarations, negotiation process, the PKK and the Kurdish question can be expressed as follows:
When examining the above diagram, it is observed that a significant proportion of the research group (3/4) did not approve the PKK's ditch and barricade strategy. The percentage of those who stated that they found it positive and supported it was limited only to 20%.

When the diagram is examined, it is seen that the negative views of those who were interviewed within the scope of the research on PKK/KCK/YDG-H/YPS increased after the formation of ditches and barricades had commenced. In a sense,
the ratio for "not defending and not supporting" position increased from 60% to 75%. Compared to females, the rate of males supporting and defending the organization was slightly higher.

Likewise, 74% of participants indicated that they did not consider the organization and its components’ democratic autonomy and self-government claims as right. In addition, the fact that 23% of the participants indicated the PKK’s autonomy declarations "right" is striking.

83% of respondents think that with this type of conflict, in which the violence and brutality have no limits, the cities turn into ruins and civilian casualties are being experienced, the peace will not be achieved. Only 17% of interviewees stated
that the PKK would provide peace through carrying violence to the cities. It is possible to interpret this to mean that the Kurds' desire for peace is not going to be realized by deepening the violence.

**Fig. 5. Opinions of the participants on the autonomy declarations' effects on democratizing Turkey**

*Source: Own research*

In most of the interviewees’ (81%) opinion the PKK's declaration of autonomy will not democratize Turkey. Only about 1/5 of them expressed the view that self-government declarations could democratize the country. Voices that democratization may arise from this conflict that was initiated in the civilian settlement areas have been largely heard from the representatives of the establishments that carry out policies parallel with the organization. In other words, according to obtained results, the autonomy declarations would not democratize Turkey as the PKK have been claiming.

**Fig. 6. Participants’ opinions on whether the Kurdish people benefit from violence policies**

*Source: Own research*
81% of participants think that Kurdish people will not benefit from violence and conflict.

![Pie chart showing evaluations on the perception of ditches and barricades as a self-defense tool for the public.](image)

**Fig. 7. Evaluations on the perception of ditches and barricades as a self-defense tool for the public**

Source: Own research

81% of participants stated that they did not see the construction of ditches and barricades as a defense tool for the public. Contrary to what the authorities of the HDP and DTK claimed, the public does not favor the activities of constructing ditches and barricades which are aimed at producing conflict and making the civilian Kurdish people part of this conflict. Only about 1/5 of the participants indicated that the ditch/barricade constructions were the means of self-defense for the people.

![Pie chart showing views on whether there was YDG-H/YPS's pressure or not.](image)

**Fig. 8. Views on whether there was YDG-H/YPS's pressure or not**

Source: Own research
The above diagram clearly reveals that there was a serious pressure of the organization on the public during the construction of the ditches. Approximately 2/3 (68%) of the participants stated that YDG-H/YPS had actively used the pressure mechanism during this process.

Fig. 9. Participants’ views on the state operations
Source: Own research

Approximately 35% of the participants indicated that they did not support the state’s operations carrying out against PKK’s and the YPS's activities of occupying the cities and constructing ditches and barricades, while 65% found them right.

In addition, in the diagram below, the vast majority of the participants see the PKK terrorist organization as the responsible for the resumption of the conflicts.

Fig. 10. The one who is considered by the participants to be responsible for the conflict
Source: Own research

In response to the question "Who do you think is responsible for the conflicts in the East and the Southeast Anatolia region?" the rate of those who answered "PKK
terrorist organization" was 67% and the rate of those who said "the state" was 22%, while 11% of the participants recognized the two actors as responsible by selecting the option of "both the state and the PKK".

![Pie chart showing responses to who is responsible for the termination of solution negotiations](image)

**Fig. 11. The Participants' view on who is responsible for the termination of solution negotiations**

*Source: Own research*

In this study, it was determined that 65% of the participants considered the PKK terrorist organization as responsible for the conflicts in the region. While 6% of the participants regarded both the state and organization as responsible, only 26% of the interviewees indicated that "the state" was responsible.

![Pie chart showing responses to whether democratic autonomy claims should be a part of the Kurdish question](image)

**Fig. 11. Participants' evaluations on democratic autonomy - whether they consider it as a part of the Kurdish question**

*Source: Own research*

A large majority of participants (72%) did not consider the PKK's democratic autonomy claims as an element of the Kurdish question. This finding is remarkable.
It is possible to interpret this in the way that there is no strong support for this direction of democratic autonomy, which has been claimed by the PKK for a long time and found support or is responded at a limited level among the Kurdish participants. It is undoubtedly noteworthy that 24% of the research group regards the democratic autonomy as a part of the Kurdish question.

The people who have stated their opinions on democratic autonomy, ditch/barricade construction, violence and the Kurdish question in a similar or close way with the PKK terrorist organization and its components are generally identified as:

- having more family members that are active politicians in the political parties such as the HDP, the BDP, etc.;
- participated more frequently in the past periods in the activities/meetings of the PKK terrorist organization, the HDP, the BDP and other political parties and NGOs;
- having more individuals in their family and relatives who have had detention and arrest history;
- having a higher proportion of family members and relatives who were imprisoned for being a member of a terrorist organization;
- having a higher proportion of the family members and their relatives attending the members of the organization in the mountains.

CONCLUSION

The new condition of suffering that started with the termination of the negotiation process, the resumption of the conflicts, the construction of ditches/barricades, the beginning of military operations, resulted in a heavy bill paid by the people in the region. Thus, it was also found in the study that the vast majority of participants did not support the autonomy declarations and ditch/barricade conflicts. The fact that the people in the region left their residential areas and their homes and migrated to various other residential areas despite all the threats of the PKK before the conflict started, and that they did not participate in the conflict with the security forces by being behind the ditches despite all calls of the organization and its components, constitutes the most concrete evidence showing that this uprising of the terrorist organization has not been supported by the public. This also means the collapse of the organization's revolutionary concept. The role of the organization in the failure of the solution process and the activities of constructing ditches/barricades that led to the transformation of the cities into ruins as the result of "self-defensive resistance" constituted a turning point in the Kurdish people’s drawing away from the terrorist organization and the HDP.

The overall outcome of the research is determining that approximately 65-80% of the participants have totally opinions, disagreeing with the organization in terms of the ditch/barricade/autonomy efforts, the negotiation process, the Kurdish question, the state operations and the assessment of the organization. In this context, having the findings of the research generally overviewed, it can be concluded that:

- the ditch and barricade strategy is not supported;
- democratic autonomy and self-government claims are not deemed to be appropriate;
– a solution/the negotiations cannot be reached/continued by increasing the terrorist activities;
– armed declarations of autonomy will not democratize Turkey;
– the Kurds have been suffering from the PKK violence;
– the ditches and barricades are not considered as the means of defense by the people;
– there has been the pressure of the terrorist organization in the process of constructing ditches and barricades;
– the security operations in the area where the ditches/barricades are established are deemed appropriate;
– the terrorist organization is regarded to be responsible for the termination of the negotiations on a solution;
– the demands on education in the native language are deemed to be appropriate;
– even in the case that regulations are made for the education in native language in the government schools it will not be sufficient to end the Kurdish question;
– there is no demand for an independent Kurdish state within the borders of Turkey;
– the solution process should continue;
– the Kurdish question could be solved without the intervention of the PKK terrorist organization, however, the PKK problem may not be solved;
– the solution process should continue between the AK Party and NGOs.

The following can be stated as the new developments brought about by the start of the conflicts and armed actions after the termination of the negotiations:

1. The resumption of the conflicts in a more intense way.
2. Taking the conflicts mainly from rural areas to urban environments, and establishing the centers of conflicts in the cities.
3. Ruining the historic settlement areas, the destruction of the historical fabric.
4. Experiencing a new wave of immigration, the creation of new grievances as a result of the displacements.
5. New bankruptcies replacing the economic recovery, and the change in the optimistic atmosphere regarding the solution of the economic problems. The occurrence of the conflicts predominantly in poor and low-income residential areas, and the families’ residing in poor settlements facing serious economic problems.
6. The occurrence of confidence loss in finding a political solution to the Kurdish problem, the suffering of politics from a heavy impact, the loss of the HDP’s influence on the will for finding a solution, the start of a political insecurity, the decrease in the hope for democracy and a solution, and weakening the faith that the Kurdish question could be solved with democratic politics.
7. The decrease in the trust on solving the Kurdish question through democratic means, the removal of parliamentary immunities, arresting the parliamentary members and the heads of the HDP, as well as putting emphasis on security policies.
8. Experiencing new grievances and losses of life, obligation to comply with curfews by the people in the region, children’s educational problems, and the family members’ being left in the conflict zones.

9. The possibility that the children growing up in violence, destruction and suffering will identify with others and idealize the PKK.

10. The establishment of a peaceful environment and the peaceful solution of the Kurdish question have received a severe blow.

REFERENCES


ORGANIZACJA PARTII PRACUJĄCYCH KURDYSTANU, DYSLOKACJA I KURDOWIE: STUDIUM SOCJOLOGICZNE NAD OFIARAMI CYWILNYMI

Streszczenie: Artykuł poświęcony jest tematowi wznowienia konfliktów między Partią Pracujących Kurdystanu a rządem Republiki Turcji we wschodnich i południowo-wschodnich regionach Anatolii w Turcji, po zakończeniu procesu rozwiązania, który trwał w latach 2013-2015. Ze względu na konflikty, które rozpoczęły się po rozpadzie procesu negocjacji, około 400 000 osób musiało przeprowadzić migrację do bezpieczniejszych obszarów wraz z rodzinami. Badania socjologiczne przeprowadzone zostały z udziałem 649 osób, które musiały migrować do miejsc innych niż strefa konfliktu, a nieformalne wywiady przeprowadzono z około 10 osobami. W doborze ankieterów zastosowano metodę kuli śnieżnej. W badaniu poruszono kwestie takie, jak wyniki tych starć, sytuacja przemieszczonych obywateli podczas i po migracji, ich postrzeganie Partii Pracujących Kurdystanu, a także oceny deklaracji samorządowych i działań państwa. Główną przyczyną wysiedleń były obawy przed utratę życia podczas operacji sił bezpieczeństwa przeciwko bojownikom PPK. W wyniku konfliktów, które miały miejsce, miasta i obszary mieszkalne zostały zrujnowane, a historyczne tekstury miast zostały spustoszone. Ludzie, którzy żyli w tym regionie, a zwłaszcza dzieci, musieli doświadczać uczucia bólu, śmierci i traumy w intensywny sposób. Problemy, które pojawiły się w wielu dziedzinach, zwłaszcza gospodarczych, edukacyjnych i dotyczących bezpieczeństwa, poważnie utrudniły życie i sprawiły, że region stał się nie do zamieszkania. Podsumowując, w badaniu tym stwierdzono, że zdecydowana większość ankieterów nie poparła deklaracji autonomii i konfliktów okopowych, innymi słowy, nie poparła strategii PPK w zakresie przenoszenia konfliktów do centrum miasta.
The PKK Organization, Displacements and Kurds (…)

Słowa kluczowe: Partia Pracujących Kurdystanu, dyslokacja, Kurdowie