

Types of Turkish Paramilitary Groups in the 1980s and 1990s

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Abstract: Although there are a lot of sources on paramilitarism in the international literature, there are few studies of paramilitary groups supported or formed by the Turkish state. This article focuses on the types of state-backed paramilitary groups that became perpetrators of violence against civilians during the 1980s and 90s in the war between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK). The Turkish ruling elite formed paramilitary groups in support of the official security forces in the local area (in northern Kurdistan). The article examines the reasons for the formation of these paramilitary groups but mainly focuses on their types and it examines the ideological and ethnic backgrounds of the members of these groups, their roles and transformations in conflicts, and the types of violence they implemented. The article also aims to make a contribution to the literature by discussing the relationship between state-paramilitary groups through four different paramilitary groups.

Keywords: Turkish paramilitaries, Kurds, violence, conflict, types of paramilitary

Introduction

From the early twentieth century, states, both weak and strong, autocracies and democracies, have mostly formed or used paramilitary groups in civil wars and internal conflicts to limit, repress and eliminate ethnic and religion minorities and opposition movements, their supporters and opposition leaders.¹ State-linked paramilitary groups are informal or semi-formal armed groups with a flexible hierarchy created for specific goals and typically deactivated when their missions are over.² They are referred to by various names, including 'pro-government militias', 'vigilantes' and 'death

1 Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 21–63.

2 While there are many features that distinguish paramilitary groups from official security forces, key characteristics include their different forms, from large-scale vigilante groups to small-scale death squads, unclear or lack of legal status, autonomous and flexible hierarchical relations with one another and with government agencies, and their pro-state and pragmatic ideological and economic motivations.

squads'.³ Both qualitative and quantitative research indicates that such paramilitary groups have been widely used around the world, particularly from the 1980s.⁴ Paramilitary groups in general tend to adopt a pro-state position in civil wars and internal conflicts; thus, they may operate as part of the state's counterinsurgency strategy in asymmetric warfare.⁵ Although there are exceptions, members of paramilitary groups are commonly trained by serving or ex-army officers. From the late Ottoman period to the present, Turkish ruling elites have similarly used and formed armed groups with paramilitary characteristics.

The still unresolved civil war between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), began in the mid-1980s. The most intense period of the conflict came in the 1990s, which also saw the height of Turkish paramilitary activity.⁶ When the PKK made its declaration of war in August 1984, one of the first responses of the Turkish state was to establish or a pro-state armed group with paramilitary characteristics, re-organize its own paramilitary and collaborate with other groups that used violence in its East and especially the Southeast (alternatively, Turkish or northern Kurdistan), where the conflict was sited. The Turkish state already had a large conventional army, of course, but this was organized for a conventional fight (in the Cold War context) and was unsuccessful when faced with the PKK's guerrilla strategy.⁷

In this article, I will focus on four paramilitary groups that operated as pro-state forces in Turkey's war with the PKK. These are the Village Guards (*Köy Korucuları*) established for the war, in 1985, and reorganized in 1991; the Special Operations Police Units (*Polis Özel Harekat Timleri*) originally established in 1982 but reorganized for the war in 1985, and then again in 1993; the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism (*Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele*, JITEM), established in 1987 (which included the 'repentants' (*itirafçılar*), former members of the

3 Üngör, *Paramilitarism*, pp. 6-13.

4 Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, 'Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59.5 (2015), 850-76.

5 Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 5.

6 I do not distinguish on the basis of ethnicity when considering Turkish paramilitarism, which is characterised rather by the creation and/or usage of the groups by the Turkish state; in fact, almost all of the members of the two groups considered here - the village guards and Hizbullah - were ethnically Kurdish.

7 Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 43.

PKK; and Turkish (or Kurdish) Hizbullah, which can be defined as a subcontractor group that cooperated with government's security units between 1991 and 1995.

The primary function of these paramilitary units was not to fight against the PKK guerrillas but to break the linkage between the PKK and that part of the Kurdish society in northern Kurdistan that supported it. This involved a variety of missions, such as gathering intelligence, guiding security forces in conflict zones (especially in rural areas) and intimidating people (to get them to drop their pro-PKK activities, such as housing supplies and giving haven to fighters). After the early 1990s, these missions were radicalized to include kidnappings and assassinations ('hits', the actions of death squads). Again, the main targets of these actions were civilians.

This article looks at the state formation and/or emergence and deployment of these semi-formal and informal paramilitary groups, further to its already extensive official security forces including the gendarmerie (militarised police with jurisdiction in rural areas) and regular (urban) police in addition to the military. The article also examines the structure, member profiles, ideological and economic motivations and relationships with government agencies of these paramilitary groups. Overall, therefore, the purpose here is to describe four pro-state paramilitary groups and how they operated in the case of Turkey during the 1990s.

The Legacy of Turkish Paramilitaries

The employment of paramilitary groups in domestic political issues was not new for the Turkish state. It is possible to trace a history of paramilitary group establishment and usage by the Turkish ruling elites back to the late Ottoman period.⁸ In 1891, Abdulhamid II had formed an irregular militia unit of predominantly pro-state Sunni Kurdish tribes called the 'Hamidiye Regiments' in the eastern part of the Empire, aimed at preventing the rise of Armenian nationalism and limiting and controlling the national awakening of the Kurds. After Abdulhamid, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) came to power and continued a similar politics,

8 Şemsa Özar, Nesrin Uçarlar, and Osman Aytar, *From Past to Present a Paramilitary Organization in Turkey: Village Guard System* (Diyarbakır: Disa Yayınları, 2013); Mehtap Söyler, *The Turkish Deep State: State Consolidation, Civil-Military Relations and Democracy* (Routledge, 2015).

establishing a paramilitary group called the 'Special Organization' (*Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*), which was the main perpetrator of the genocide of the Armenian, Syriac and Greek Christian communities carried out before and during the First World War.⁹

After the Ottoman defeat in WWI, former CUP cadres established the Republic of Turkey, in 1923. Pro-state militia groups and gangs were used during the Kurdish revolts, massacres and genocides that followed, carried out against the Kurds during the Republic's single-party period (1923-50).¹⁰ In 1950, there was a regime change and switch to a multi-party system. This is regarded as the start of the democratic period in Turkey, but the tradition of using paramilitary groups continued. Pro-state far-right and Islamist youth groups were used in pogroms against non-Muslim communities and Alevis (a heterodox religious community to the dominant Sunnis), also against leftist youth movements and Kurdish political parties.¹¹

Accordingly, it may be concluded, the Ottoman-Turkish state elites had established and used different kinds of paramilitary groups to fight 'threats to security' for a century, regardless of the type of state (empire or nation-state) and governing regime (monarchy [sultanate], single-party dictatorship or multi-party system). It was in this context that the Turkish state's ruling elites also established semi-formal and informal paramilitary units – on different grounds, but especially national security – when the PKK launched its armed struggle against the state in the 1980s.

Reasons for the Formation of Paramilitary Groups in the 1980s

The Turkish state, it may be argued, established these paramilitary groups for three main reasons. The first was the perception of a threat to the state (the aim of the PKK was, after all, for independence from

9 Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Gaunt, Jan Bet-Şawoce, and Racho Donef, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006).

10 Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'Dersim 1938: A Genocide of Modernity,' in *Dersim 1938 Genozid, Vertreibung und die Folgen: Achtzig Jahre Danach = Dersim 1938: Genocide, Displacement, and Repercussions: Eighty Years Later* (Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2018), pp. 48-54; Zeynep Türkyılmaz, 'Dersim Soykırımı ve 'Kötülüğün Sıradanlığı', *Agos*, 29 November 2019, <<http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/23286/dersim-soykirimi-ve-kotulugun-siradanligi>> [accessed 14 March 2021].

11 Suavi Aydın and Yüksel Taşkın, *1960'tan Günümüze Türkiye Tarihi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014); *Ülkücü Komando Kampları: AP Hükümetinin 1970'te Hazırlattığı MHP Raporu* (Kaynak Yayınları, 1997).

what it saw as a colonising power). The second was the weakness of the irregular warfare capacity of the state. Finally, there was deniability (paramilitaries are, by definition, opaque and unaccountable, and thus can act extra-legally). While there were other reasons, including various economic motivations, these three reasons can be identified as the most pronounced for the creation and use of paramilitary groups in Turkey during the 1980s.

Considering the first of these, internal threats to national security, both real and imagined, are one of the main reasons for the formation of paramilitary groups in general. Paramilitary forces often emerge in response to the rise of dissident movements and armed opposition forces.¹² In this case, in the historical context and for the reasons given, the strategic employment of guerrilla warfare by the PKK in Turkey prompted the state response. Established by the military-backed government in the wake of the 1980 coup, the Turkish National Security Council (NSC, *Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*) periodically redefined the organizations and ethnic and religious groups that were deemed to threaten national security.¹³ The NSC characterized these internal and external 'threats' in the National Security Policy Document known as 'The Red Book' (*Milli Güvenlik Siyaset Belgesi*), and set policies accordingly.¹⁴ According to the NSC, internal threats were composed by those ethnic, class and/or religious armed and unarmed groups that did not accept state authority in the state-controlled lands, which thus opposed the sovereignty and integrity of the state and threatened national security.¹⁵ This characterisation was, at the same time, used to legitimise the persistent state violence against oppositions. Accordingly, internal oppositions were used to identify supposed threats to the state, ranging from small, informal opposition groups to mass resistance movements.

12 Bruce B. Campbell, 'Death Squads: Definition, Problems and Historical Context,' in *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability*, ed. by Arthur D. Brenner and Bruce B. Campbell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 1-26; Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009); David Kowalewski, 'Counterinsurgent Vigilantism and Public Response: A Philippine Case Study,' *Sociological Perspectives*, 34.2 (1991), 127-44.

13 Egemen B. Bezci and Güven Gürkan Öztan, 'Anatomy of the Turkish Emergency State: A Continuous Reflection of Turkish Raison d'état between 1980 and 2002,' *Middle East Critique* 25.2 (2016), 163-179 (p. 165); Hamit Bozarslan, '"Neden Silahlı Mücadele?" Türkiye Kürdistanında Şiddeti Anlamak,' in *Türkiye'de Siyasal Şiddetin Boyutları*, ed. by İbrahim Şirin and Güney Çeğin (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), pp. 149-163 (pp. 152-55).

14 İlhan Uzel, 'Ordu Dış Politikanın Neresinde?,' in *Bir Zümre, Bir Parti: Türkiye'de Ordu*, ed. Ahmet Insel, Ali Bayramoğlu, and Ömer Laciner (İstanbul: Birikim Yayınları, 2004), pp. 89-92.

15 *Devlet'in Kavram ve Kapsamı* (Ankara: Milli Güvenlik Kurulu Genel Sekreterliği Yayınları, 1990), pp. 42-44.

These internal ‘enemies’ were generally defined by the state in the context of ethnic, religion and class conflicts.

In an examination of some 3500 sources, Carey, Mitchell and Lowe determined that there were 332 paramilitary groups (pro-government militias) operative in 88 countries between 1981–2007. These paramilitary groups were active within their own country borders.¹⁶ Although states may maintain the monopoly of violence, Campbell argues, they also secure this through the establishment of death squads acting as sub-contractors to which the usage of violence is delegated, as with other pro-state paramilitaries, in order to suppress armed opposition movements without the liability of being accused of war crimes or human right violations.¹⁷ Therefore, it can be said quite broadly that in situations where internal oppositions have risen, the state has established paramilitaries as an important deterrent instrument.

Regarding weakness of the state, Ann Hironaka argues the characteristic features of this to be the lack of an autonomous, rationalized bureaucratic structure, of military capability, of territorial control, and the cohesion and organization of the opposition.¹⁸ Turkey in the 1980s partially fits this definition. After the 1980 military coup, the country was ruled by martial law, many political parties were closed, the economy collapsed, torture in prisons was routine and widespread and universities and the press were under serious pressure. In this condition of massively restricted political space, it may be anticipated that rebellious movements against the state would employ violence – and that paramilitary groups would emerge to compensate for the lack of means to respond to them. Besides, the use of paramilitary groups compensates for the lack of economic means of the state. In comparison to regular armed forces, militias are cheap instruments for the projection of state power.¹⁹

While discussing the reasons for the establishment of global paramilitary forces, Jasmin Hristov argues that the weakness of the state is one of the most important factors, with first, ‘the paramilitary as a logical outcome of a weak state’, and second, ‘the paramilitary as a criminal

16 Sabine C. Carey, Neil J. Mitchell, and Will Lowe, ‘States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence: A New Database on Pro-Government Militias,’ *Journal of Peace Research*, 50.2(2013), 249–58.

17 Campbell, p. 17.

18 Ann Hironaka, *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 69–80.

19 Corinna Jentsch and others, ‘Militias in Civil Wars,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59.5 (2015), 755–769 (p.764).

actor that is a product of a weak state'.²⁰ Due to the low democratic capacity of state institutions, the weak state already has a significant potential for internal conflict, and its weakness includes that of not being able to respond well to internal conflict through established, democratic means. In the case of Turkey, and further to the lack of parliamentary power and independence due to military intervention, the weakness of the state's democratic capacity included an inability to represent social differences in the parliament and the obstruction of the work of NGOs. In short, one may say, the Republic lacked a foundation in democracy, and the democratising move after WWII eventually, in the 1980s, led to another round of political tightening that, while apparently strengthening the state, in fact further rigidified and weakened it.

Following Michael Mann, the Turkish state can be described as mainly using *despotic power* against opponents, due to the weakness of its infrastructural power, or democratic capacity.²¹ This should not mean that the state does not perform the role of ideology, but rather that the Turkish state employed a despotic power under the influence of ideology, for which its infrastructural power was insufficient. Thus, the state used despotic power against groups considered to be threatening due to the democratic shortfall. Accordingly, the lack of capacity of the state institutions was an important cause for the emergence of paramilitary groups in Turkey generally and during the period considered in particular.

In addition, there was a lack of military capacity. Until the 1990s, the military institutions, which were the instruments of the state's despotic power, were also weak, particularly their irregular warfare capacities. In the interviews and their memoirs, high-ranking Turkish officers much discussed the lack of the military capacity of the security forces for the requirements of guerrilla warfare.²² The large Turkish army was a conventional and unwieldy force structured to fight against the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc. Although many Turkish officers had received individual, NATO-backed training from the 1950s in counterinsurgency warfare techniques, the security forces as a whole

20 Jasmin Hristov, *Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism: Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), p. 46.

21 Michael Mann, 'The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,' *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie*, 25.2 (1984), 185–213.

22 Fikret Bilâ, *Komutanlar Cephesi*, 2. baskı (İstanbul: Detay Yayıncılık, 2007); Mehmet Ali Kışlalı, *Güneydoğu: Düşük Yoğunluklu Çatışma* (Ümit Yayıncılık, 1996).

had remained weak against a mobile guerrilla movement operating on its own terrain, like the PKK.

Finally, avoidance of responsibility and the freedoms this allows provides a third major reason for the establishment and usage of paramilitaries. Indeed, the phrase ‘plausible deniability’, one of the main terms in discussions around this subject. Regarding pro-government militias, Carey and Mitchell argue that these can generally be placed into two categories: semi-official and informal.²³ The fact that paramilitary groups and pro-government militias have somewhat detached, semi-formal or informal relations with the state increases deniability in terms of the consequences of their actions: ‘One way to establish deniability is to have the killing organized and done by people who are not formally or officially associated with the state’, wrote Campbell.²⁴ Furthermore, according to Wolpin, states establish death squads, particularly against leftist and ethnic opposition movements, one of the most important features of which is deniability.²⁵

State agents can publicly absolve themselves of responsibility for violent acts and their consequences on the basis of the non-transparent or simply denied ties with the perpetrators of the violence. Thus, the denial of any part in or knowledge of the actions of paramilitary groups is used as an important tool in extra-legal operations against oppositions without modifying the legal boundaries of the state. Dissidents can be eliminated outside the rule of law, for example, without acknowledgement of authoritarian procedures and thus maintaining an official façade of liberal pluralism.

Deniability can be regarded as a very important reason for the Turkish state establishment and support of paramilitary groups.²⁶ Perhaps its most extreme form, the death squad, was used by the state in Kurdish provinces in the 1990s, in the form of JITEM.²⁷ The actions of this state-affiliated group were discussed in many Turkish

23 Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, ‘Progovernment Militias,’ *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20.1 (2017), 127-147 (p. 130).

24 Campbell, p. 6.

25 Miles D. Wolpin, *State Terrorism and Death Squads in the New World Order* (Dundas, Canada: Peace Research Institute-Dundas, 1992).

26 Zerrin Özlem Biner, ‘From Terrorist to Repentant: Who Is the Victim?’, *History and Anthropology* 17.4 (2006), 339-53; Söyler.

27 Özgür Sevgi Göral, Ayhan Işık, and Özlem Kaya, *The Unspoken Truth: Enforced Disappearances* (Istanbul: Truth Justice Memory Center, 2013); Özar, Uçarlar, and Aytar; Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Turkey’s Death Squads’, *Middle East Report*, 199 (1996), 20-23.

parliamentary research commissions and cases,²⁸ yet the state ruling elites still denied its existence.²⁹ This denial of the existence of the JITEM led to impunity for their actions. Thus, (state) denial operates at different levels. These include non-public recognition of particular violent actions (which themselves are mostly hidden and ‘covered up’, in one way or another) and non-recognition of the specific perpetrator of any one action (investigations into violent acts are either not opened or fail, for one reason or another), in addition to denial of the (state) linkages to the perpetrator group and extending even to denial of the knowledge of the existence of a group (which state agents may themselves have established).

Although the reason for the establishment of paramilitary groups may be characterised principally through these three categories of threat to and weakness of the state and deniability, the groups are nevertheless created in order to participate in collective acts of violence, as Alex Alvarez stated.³⁰ This also applied to Turkey in the 1980s – where, during the 1990s, state paramilitaries were to become the *leading* actors in and perpetrators of collective violence.

Types of Paramilitary Groups

Ayşegül Aydın and Cem Emrence argue that Turkish state has a long history in the deployment of the counterinsurgency strategy; although different strategies have been tried at different times against insurgent movements (including ideological and administrative policies), ‘the most common strategy has been a military response’.³¹ Among these military responses, there has usually been the creation or utilisation of pre-existing paramilitary groups, including the reorganisation of state forces.³² In the middle of the 1980s, when the PKK launched its guerrilla war against the state and the Turkish state again adopted this strategy, the following semi-formal and informal paramilitary organisations

28 Serap Işık, ‘JITEM Ana Dava Geniş Özeti’ (Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi, 2014), ‘Ülkemizin Çeşitli Yörelerinde İşlenmiş Faili Meçhul Siyasal Cinayetler Konusunda Meclis Araştırma Komisyonu’ (Ankara, 10 December 1995).

29 Söyler, p. 166.

30 Alex Alvarez, ‘Milicias and Genocide’, *War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes Against Humanity*, 2 (2006), 1–33.

31 Ayşegül Aydın and Cem Emrence, *Zones of Rebellion Kurdish Insurgents and the Turkish State* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 73–134.

32 Ayhan Işık, ‘The Emergence, Transformation and Functions of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Kurdistan (Eastern Turkey) in the 1990s’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2020).

were created/supported by the state in northern Kurdistan: JITEM, the Special Police Team, the Village guards, and Hizbullah. These forces had quite different characteristics from one another.

JITEM

JITEM was most well-known (and notorious) for its informal death squads. The date of its establishment, whose existence was continuously denied by government members, military personnel and (other) representatives of state institutions, is still unclear.³³ Arif Doğan, a colonel in the Turkish army, has claimed, 'I founded JITEM.' According to Doğan, JITEM was hierarchically placed under the Gendarmerie Public Security Corps Command, established in 1987 in Diyarbakır.³⁴ However, another Turkish officer, Major Ahmet Cem Ersever gave an interview in June 1993 in which *he* claimed, 'I am boss of JITEM and I founded this institution.'³⁵ Ersever was killed five months later.³⁶ His killing was later reported as a revenge assassination undertaken by the paramilitary organisation the Special Warfare Department (*Özel Harp Dairesi*, ÖHD) on behalf of various paramilitary units within the state.³⁷ The competing claims of the two officers about the establishment of JITEM may have been related to the names of formal and informal gendarmerie intelligence institutions. There had previously been an intelligence unit in the gendarmerie that was used to fight against smuggling, and when the PKK emerged, a new organisation was formed, with the same political and military mission but extended to cover the new 'threat'.

When martial law was finally abolished, in 1987, a state of emergency was declared in the Kurdish provinces.³⁸ In the same year, the Gendarmerie Public Security Corps Command was established in Diyarbakır, where JITEM's office was located, according to a repentant.³⁹ The interview with Ersever in which the officer claimed to be the JITEM founder also included discussions about why this unit was founded. Ersever said that government institutions, especially the intelligence agency, had

33 Çetin Ağaşe, *Cem Ersever ve JITEM Gerçeği* (Istanbul: Pencere Yayınları, 1998), p. 11.

34 Arif Doğan, *JITEM'i Ben Kurdum* (Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2011), pp. 22–25.

35 Soner Yalçın, *Binbaşı Ersever'in İtirafı*, 8th edn (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1994), p. 45.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

37 'TBMM Susurluk Komisyonu Raporu', 3 April 1997, 216, <<https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/sirasayi/donem20/yil01/ss301.pdf>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

38 Bezci and Öztan, 174.

39 Uğur Balık, *Kerberos: PKK'dan JITEM'e Bir Tetikçinin Anatomisi* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2011), pp. 40, 173.

failed to fulfil their task, since they could not prevent the growth of the PKK, and Ersever had wanted to fight against the PKK with counter-guerrilla methods. Thus, the confessions also revealed the reason for the establishment of JITEM.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the emergence of JITEM is related to the inability of the existing armed forces of the state to overcome the PKK.

JITEM primarily consisted of ultranationalist Turkish officers within the gendarmerie, as well as repentants. According to the journalist Ecevit Kılıç and former repentant and JITEM member Abdulkadir Aygan, JITEM was located in many places in different parts of Turkey. Its headquarters was reported to be in Ankara. In northern Kurdistan, it was organised under the name of the Diyarbakir Group Command (Diyarbakir Grup Komutanlığı), and other JITEM teams in the Kurdish provinces were also affiliated with this.⁴¹

The repentants were usually employed in JITEM (pay presumably being offered an incentive).⁴² In 1985, the year after the PKK began its armed struggle, the parliament in Ankara introduced a law on 'remorse' (Pişmanlık Yasası).⁴³ According to this legislation, courts could reduce the sentences of former members of the PKK who surrendered to the state. Some repentants were hired as village guards and civil servants,⁴⁴ but they were often used as assassins in JITEM's secret operations. The repentants were not constituted as autonomous units but hierarchically positioned within JITEM. Although the law on remorse was passed in 1985, its effects, like JITEM activities, only became substantial in the late 1980s.⁴⁵ Like the foundation date, the number of JITEM members remains unknown, but considering the extent of their tasks, such as the performance of assassinations (as death squads), their numbers can be put at several hundred.

40 Yalçın, pp. 67, 107, 123.

41 Ecevit Kılıç, *Jitem: Türkiye'nin Faili Meçhul Tarihi* (İstanbul: Timaş, 2009); Timur Şahan and Uğur Balık, *İtirafçılar: Bir JITEMci Anlattı* (Diyarbakır: Aram Yayınları, 2004).

42 For more information see Yeşim Yaprak Yıldız, '(Dis)Avowal of State Violence: Public Confessions of Perpetrators of State Violence Against Kurds in Turkey' (unpublished PhD thesis University of Cambridge, 2018), pp. 172–201.

43 'Kaçakçılık Yasası Çıktı', *Milliyet Gazetesi*, 8 May 1985, <<http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr/Ara.aspx>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

44 Özar, Uçarlar, and Aytar, p. 186; Balık, p. 40.

45 See Balık.

Village Guards

The auxiliary, semi-formal organisation of Village Guards was the largest paramilitary formation in Turkey during this period. Its development was strongly influenced by local dynamics. Social and political divisions during the civil war (the web of pro-state and pro-PKK tribes, families and individuals in Kurdish society), the state's traditional tribal politics (such as had informed the make-up of the Hamidiye Regiments a century before), and organised mafia crime networks in northern Kurdistan (including cross-border smuggling) all played significant roles in the emergence of the Village Guards. The organisation was established in March 1985 as a semi-formal paramilitary structure through an amendment to the 'Law of Village Guards' instituted in 1924. According to the amendment, the purpose of the establishment of a Village Guard was to be expressed as the conditions that required the declaration of a state of emergency and the increase of violence in the village and its periphery.⁴⁶ Therefore, the Village Guard system was established as a first reaction to the emergence of the PKK by reorganising an old law:

The legal basis of the Temporary Village Guard System was the Village Law numbered 442 that was legislated in 1924. On March 26, 1985 with the amendment made to the Article 74.3 a paramilitary structure comprising temporary and voluntary village guards was established. (...) The village guards were under the command of the village headman administratively and the Commander of the Gendarmerie Squad in professional matters.⁴⁷

Some Kurdish villagers became volunteer village guards, while others accepted the role under duress (mostly due to pressure from military forces). In the 1990s, military and paramilitary forces burned and evacuated more than 3,000 Kurdish villages in a strategy of territorial control that forced people to decide whether to become village guards or leave their village. Large numbers of people migrated to the regional and western cities as a result, while others had to accept being enrolled as village guards.⁴⁸ Scholars argue that the emergence of the Village Guard system had three main aims: first, to establish a force capable

46 GÖÇ DER, *Türkiyede Koruculuk Sistemi: Zorunlu Göç ve Geri Dönüşler* (İstanbul: GÖÇ DER, 2013), p. 3.

47 Özar, Uçarlar, and Aytar, p. 9.

48 Joost Jongerden, 'Village Evacuation and Reconstruction in Kurdistan (1993-2002),' *Études rurales*, 186 (2010), 1-22.

of struggling against a small number of guerrillas in the local area without changing the conventional structure of the army; second, to gather quick, accurate operational information through local actors; and third, to identify loyal and enemy groups through this cooperation system.⁴⁹

The introduction and implementation of the Village Guard system dramatically increased pro- and anti-state polarisation in Kurdish social structure beyond that already stimulated by the conflict between the state and the PKK. Indeed, one might argue that one of the reasons for the establishment of the Village Guards was to divide of the Kurdish people social and politically. Certainly, the members of this paramilitary group consisted almost entirely of Kurdish peasants, numbering more than 65,000 members in the mid-1990s, when the war was at its most violent. Villagers were also attracted by the economic benefit, since guards received state payments. The region was very poor, in general, with little development and few means to secure financial income. While the guards received rights to bear arms, which were supplied by the state, however, the security of the 'guarded' villages was often not improved, as they now became targets for PKK attacks.

Special Operations Police Units

Due to the lack of local and irregular warfare capacity of the Turkish official armed forces, special police units were also established as a new, semi-formal irregular force. They would contribute to urban operations alongside the regular police and in the rural areas alongside the gendarmerie, army and village guards. As a semi-formal paramilitary organisation, the Special Operations Police Units consisted of the ethnically Turkish youth of the leading nationalist political party, the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). Its history dated back to 1982, when a special operations unit was established by the police to counter the (illegal) Armenian nationalist organisation The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenian (ASALA).⁵⁰

When the conflict between the PKK and the state began, the members of this unit began to be trained by the ÖHD, which, together with the army, had initiated small-unit operations against the PKK.⁵¹ Hasan Kundakçı, a former ÖHD commander, says in his memoir that the

49 Evren Balta Paker and Ismet Akça, 'Askerler, Köylüler, Paramiliter Güçler: Türkiye'de Köy Koruculuğu Sistemi', *Toplum ve Bilim*, 126 (2013), 7–34 (p. 11).

50 Ecevit Kılıç, *Özel Harp Dairesi* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2010), p. 272.

51 Kılıç, 273.

special police units were sent to the conflict zone to perform special operations in late 1985 and early 1986.⁵² A former special unit member, Ayhan Çarkın, said in an interview:

I was in the special operations group of 320 people who were first sent to Southeast in 1986. I stayed in the region until 1990. We were all covered in blood. Terrible things were done to those people.⁵³

As an organisation, the Special Operations Police Units was first assigned under the General Director of Security and Gendarmerie Command in the Kurdish provinces⁵⁴ and then reorganised, in 1993, by Mehmet Ağar, Chief of the General Directorate of Security, and Tansu Çiller, the Prime Minister.⁵⁵ From a few hundred in 1986, the numbers of recruits to the units of the special police units reached twenty thousand in the mid-1990s. The officers of the ÖHD who trained the special units were also reported to have provided training for *Hizbullah* members.⁵⁶

Hizbullah

Hizbullah has been shown to be responsible for the killing of many pro-PKK Kurdish civilians in northern Kurdistan in the 1990s.⁵⁷ It can be included among the pro-state paramilitaries from this period because it was allegedly used by the state military and paramilitary forces in the first part of the 1990s.⁵⁸ There are different claims regarding the founding date of Hizbullah. According to Ruşen Çakır, the group emerged in the early 1980s as an Islamic illegal organisation in the Kurdish provinces.⁵⁹ Mehmet Kurt, however, argues that Hizbullah was established in 1979.⁶⁰ Both authors refer to the 1980s as the estab-

52 Hasan Kundakçı, *Güneydoğu'da Unutulmayanlar*, 4th ed. (Istanbul: Alfa Yayıncılık, 2004), pp. 157–60.

53 Dincer Gökçe and Enis Tayman, 'Susurluk'un İtirafı İfade Verecek!', *Radikal*, 26 March 2011, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/susurlukun_itiraf_lari_ifade_verecek-1044155/> [accessed 15 March 2021].

54 'Bölücülere Karşı 'Özel Polis', *Milliyet Gazetesi*, 7 October 1986.

55 'EGM - Özel Harekat Daire Başkanlığı', <<https://www.egm.gov.tr/Sayfalar/%C3%96zel-Harekat-Daire-Ba%C5%9Fkanl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1.aspx>> [accessed 20 March 2017].

56 Orhan Gökdemir, *Pike: Bir Polis Şefinin Kısa Tarihi* (Istanbul: Chiviyazıları, 2001), pp. 87–88.

57 Funda Danışman and Rojin Canan Akın, *Bildiğin Gibi Değil: 90'larda Güneydoğu'da Çocuk Olmak* (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2011), pp. 32–39; Namık Kemal Dinç ed., *Stories of Migration 'One Who's Seen Pain Doesn't Inflict Pain Upon Others'*, trans. by Kolektif Atölye (Istanbul: Göç Der Yayınları, 2008), p. 108.

58 TBMM Darbe ve Muhtıraları Araştırma Komisyonu Raporu (Ankara: Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2012), 98 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/arastirma_komisyonlari/darbe_muhtira> [accessed 20 March 2021].

59 Ruşen Çakır, *Derin Hizbullah: İslamcı Şiddetin Geleceği* (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2011), p. 58.

60 Mehmet Kurt, *Din, Şiddet ve Aidiyet: Türkiye'de Hizbullah* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2015), p. 45.

ishment period of the group and the 1990s as its period of violence and to the building of an Islamic state as the purpose of the organization, motivated by the Islamic revolution in Iran.⁶¹ Hizbullah's founder and leader, Hüseyin Velioglu, was an active member of one of the radical Islamic paramilitary student union in the 1970s.⁶²

A former government minister, Ismet Sezgin, has admitted that the organisation was used by the state,⁶³ while Arif Doğan, one of those claiming to be the JITEM founder, stated that Hizbullah was established by the state to fight against the PKK.⁶⁴ The relationship between the Hizbullah and state institutions seems quite complicated, however, with Hizbullah claiming to be neither part of nor dependent on state institutions or JITEM.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, this group and the state collaborated against the 'common enemy, the PKK', which meant that while there may have been no agreement between the state and the Hizbullah officially, there was cooperation. After all, Hizbullah mostly targeted pro-PKK civilians and other Kurdish Islamic communities.

Because of its different philosophy and relationship to the state, Hizbullah can be handled separately from the other paramilitary groups listed here. Almost all its members, according to several thousand court documents were extreme Islamist Kurds.⁶⁶ Hizbullah could be characterised as a volunteer and a subcontractor paramilitary group that was used by the Turkish state in northern Kurdistan. It played an important role in the programme of eliminating PKK members and killing many civilians and generally frighten the populace.

Paramilitary Violence during the 1990s

The link between paramilitary groups and political violence is quite complex. Max Weber historicised the connection between modern state formation and violence in the beginning of the 20th century, explaining that in the early twentieth century, 'the monopoly of the legit-

61 Kurt, p. 47; Çakır, p. 55.

62 Kurt, p. 41.

63 Rengin Arslan, '90'larda Ne Olmuştu? Ismet Sezgin: Birtakım Öldürmeler, Hapsetmeler, Bir Mücadele', *BBC News*, 4 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150903_90lar_3_ismet_sezgin_roportaj> [accessed 14 March].

64 Doğan, p. 156.

65 İsa Bağcı, *Kendi Dilinden Hizbullah ve Mücadele Tarihinden Önemli Kesitler* (n.p.: n. pub., 2014), pp. 217-29.

66 Esas Hakkında Mütalaa-Hizbullah Terör Örgütü (Diyarbakır 6. Ağır Ceza Mahkemesi Esas No: /171 C. S av. Es. No:2000/559 2000).

imate use of physical force within a given territory and the state [was] considered the sole source of the “right” to use violence’.⁶⁷ However, flexible and ambiguous violence is an evolution of the monopolisation of violence used by modern states. When the control of violence becomes less clearly defined, ideas about interactions with other violent political subjects (other states, local powers, hijackers, bandits, paramilitary forces and so on) are also revised.

Alvarez argues that paramilitary organisations are ‘created in order to engage in acts of collective violence’.⁶⁸ His definition can be strengthened as follows: the victims of collective violence as employed by paramilitary groups are mostly civilians – this stipulation being made in addition to the three reasons detailed above (perception of threat to national security, lack of irregular warfare capacity of the state, and plausible deniability). Thus, the paramilitary group becomes a partner to the state’s monopoly of violence for a period of time. Campbell focuses on a similar topic, the main character of the state and its use of death squads:

One of the central, defining characteristics of states is that they maintain a monopoly over the use of violence. In a sense, the prime task of modern states is to organize and control violence. And yet in tolerating or using death squads, states inevitable compromise their defining monopoly, often putting their very legitimacy into question.⁶⁹

Similarly, the Turkish state shared the tools of violence and its monopoly of violence with paramilitary groups. When the PKK began its guerrilla war, the first three paramilitary groups listed here – JITEM, the Village Guards and Special Operations Police Units – were all formed, mainly as auxiliary forces to gather intelligence and assist the state’s security forces as part of the counterinsurgency strategy. During this internal conflict, the parties implemented different strategies, and the main strategy of the state from 1991 was constructed around the Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) doctrine. As a part of this doctrine, JITEM and the Special Operations Police Units (and even, somewhat, the Village Guards) were largely transformed into death squads.⁷⁰ With the new LIC-based strategy, the actions and features of these groups became radicalised. *Hizbullah*, was used rather similarly between 1991 and 1995,

67 Max Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. by Hans H. Gerth and Charles Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 1.

68 Alvarez, 4.

69 Campbell, pp. 1-6.

70 See also A. Işık, pp. 85-109.

supported by the local military and administrative bureaucracy as a subcontractor armed group against pro-PKK Kurdish civilians. Together, these paramilitary groups were transformed into main actors in the war, using a range of intense violence, as mentioned (unsolved killings, torture, village evacuation and burning, etc.).

The LIC doctrine began to be debated in Turkey in the late 1980s by high-ranking soldiers, members of parliament and journalists through the concept of a 'territorial army'. Several authors have argued that the LIC doctrine was adopted by the Turkish state in 1991 but only fully implemented in 1993.⁷¹ The former Chief of the General Staff, Doğan Güreş, one of the founding actors in the establishment of the LIC doctrine in Turkey, has explained that he investigated the types of irregular warfare in different countries (the UK, US and Spain) to use against the PKK in 1991, and after this, the Turkish army and government began to implement the doctrine. With the introduction of the LIC-based strategy, civilians became the biggest target of the paramilitary groups.

Between 1984 and 1991, the Turkish government had thought it would defeat the PKK with the support of paramilitary groups alongside gendarmerie forces without undertaking a major change in the military's structure. However, both the PKK and the Turkish army were actually engaged in structural transformations during this period. On the one hand, the PKK grew rapidly in terms of both the number of guerrillas and mass support of the Kurdish civilians, enabling it to increasingly look towards the urban centres as a centre of operations.⁷² On the other hand, 'rapidly losing control of an undeclared war',⁷³ the Turkish army forces were modernised for asymmetric warfare. Additionally to the PKK insurgency, international political transformations also led the Turkish state to change its military and adopt a new strategy in the Southeast. Thus, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the Kurds in general and the PKK in particular becoming increasingly effective and visible in Turkey and the Middle East, the Turkish army was restructured away from its fixation on the

71 Elise Massicard, "Gangs in Uniform" in Turkey: Politics at the Articulation between Security Institutions and the Criminal World,' in *Organized Crime and States: The Hidden Face of Politics*, ed. by Jean-Louis Briquet (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 41–71 (p. 53); Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 67.

72 Cengiz Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 102–11; Murat Karayılan, *Bir Savaşın Anatomisi Kürdistan'da Askeri Çizgi* (Neuss: Mezopotamya Yayınları, 2011), pp. 190–95.

73 Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*, p. 43.

external to a focus on the internal threat, transforming the conventional army into a more mobile one. In short, the Turkish state responded to the rise of the PKK with a new concept of war.⁷⁴

The Turkish Republic and the PKK became locked in a vicious circle of escalation, violence, and counter-violence. According to Cem Ersever, at the beginning of the 1990s, the army had faced a serious lack of capacity against the guerrilla war carried out by the PKK; this was a strategic and the tactical insufficiency of the Republic of Turkey and had to be changed.⁷⁵ The army and paramilitary formations were transformed from the early 1990s.⁷⁶ The transformation radically changed the nature of the war, violence and the paramilitary forces. The change in the nature of paramilitary formations can be analysed as follows: the importance and numbers of people active in paramilitary forces increased substantially, these forces became even more autonomous and they came to operate predominantly as death squads.

The numbers of temporary village guards receiving salaries under the newly legislated arrangement was massively raised. In 21 Kurdish-dominated or at least populated provinces, village guard numbers were 14,818 in 1988 but 62,186 in 1995.⁷⁷ The police special operations units were also transformed numerically and institutionally.⁷⁸ According to the Susurluk Report, the total number of personnel trained in this organisational structure was 8,443;⁷⁹ according to scholars, this number was more than 20,000.⁸⁰ In the first half of the 1990s, the increase in the numbers of these two (semi-formal) paramilitary forces also gave some indication regarding the other two (informal) paramilitary formations.

There is not much information about the numbers of members of JITEM and *Hizbullah*. Arif Doğan argues that, together with the informants, it numbered some 10,000 people in total.⁸¹ If this claim is true, a very

74 Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*, p. 43.

75 Yalçın, 47.

76 Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*, p. 67.

77 Özar, Uçarlar, and Aytar, p. 56.

78 Ertan Beşe, 'Office of Special Operations,' in *Almanac Turkey 2005: Security Sector and Semocratic Oversight*, ed. by Ümit Cizre (Istanbul: TESEV Publications, 2006), pp. 118–27 (pp. 118–19).

79 Kutlu Savaş, *Susurluk Raporu*, 1997, 6, <[https://tr.wikisource.org/wiki/Susurluk_Raporu_\(Kutlu_Sava%C5%9F\)](https://tr.wikisource.org/wiki/Susurluk_Raporu_(Kutlu_Sava%C5%9F))> [accessed 15 March 2021]; Beşe, p. 121.

80 Hamit Bozarslan, 'Why the Armed Struggle Understanding the Violence in Kurdistan of Turkey,' in *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, ed. by Ferhad Ibrahim and Gülistan Gürbey (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000), pp. 17–30 (p. 21); Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*, p. 70.

81 Doğan, p. 25.

large part of this number must have consisted of informants because the number of members of the JITEM who were positioned as death squads most probably did not exceed a few hundred, even in the early 1990s. Regarding *Hizbullah*, an assessment can be made based on the numbers detained by the state as Islamists in general became recognised as an increasing threat to the state, especially after *Hizbullah* turned its attention to that and way from the Kurds in the mid-90s. Altogether, between 1992 and 1999, more than 4,000 *Hizbullah* members were detained because of their actions against Kurdish civilians and members of the other Kurdish Islamist groups.⁸²

According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, the Turkish government began implementing a new counterinsurgency strategy against the PKK in 1992 and the role of paramilitaries (particularly the village guards) was crucial. Reports prepared at different times by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) – the national parliament in Ankara – also referred to JITEM and the counter-guerrilla (the ÖHD) as those responsible for the unsolved murders in the 1990s. The Human Rights Investigation Commission of the Assembly (*Meclis İnsan Hakları İnceleme Komisyonu*) prepared a report in 2013 stating that in the thirty-year conflict, 5557 civilians had been killed (i.e. further to the members security forces and PKK militants).⁸³ The overwhelming majority of these civilians were Kurds, and many of them were killed in unsolved murders or enforced disappearances. NGO work on this issue also shows that the paramilitary groups were largely responsible for the increasing number of civilian murders since the early 1990s. As stated, this change in the norm of political violence towards the citizen as target was not entirely new in terms of the history of paramilitary politics of the Ottoman- Turkish state, but it was a new phase of the conflict that started in 1984 (see table).

82 Çakır, p. 88; Kurt, pp. 61–71.

83 TBMM İnsan Haklarını İnceleme Komisyonu, 'Terör ve Şiddet Olayları Kapsamında Yaşam Hakkı İhlallerini İnceleme Raporu' (Ankara: Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2013), p. 78.

Type of violence	1980-1990	1990-2000	2001-2011
Enforced disappearances ⁸⁴	33	1283	33
Unsolved political murders ⁸⁵	103	3285	228
Evacuated/destroyed villages ⁸⁶	374	3197	3

Conclusion

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the war between the PKK and the state, different types of paramilitary forces were created and existing groups with paramilitary characteristics were (re)activated by state agencies. This process can be characterised as the first period of the war, in which paramilitary groups took an active role in the conflict. The role of the paramilitary groups during this period had mainly been to support the gendarmerie forces. However, Turkish state authorities made important decisions to change the character of the war, especially after 1991. These military and political transformations of the government agencies were mostly completed in 1993. This strategic transformation was referred to by different names; the doctrine of low-intensity conflict (LIC) is taken to be the most appropriate term here. Conceiving the adjustment in terms of a move to LIC makes it easier to understand not only the (para)military transformation but also the war strategy and paramilitary violence performed against civilians. Thus, while the state authorities determined the new strategy, they began to explore ways to separate civilians and the PKK guerrillas. Accordingly, the realisation of the new strategy meant that the PKK's relationship with the Kurdish population was hindered. This applied both to rural areas, where villages were burned and emptied, and then to the urban centres, as prominent public leaders were either killed or disappeared in various ways.

Going back to Ottoman times, the Turkish ruling elites have a long history of using different types of paramilitary groups when opposition groups rise against the state's politics. Most discussions on the founding and deployment of pro-state paramilitaries analyse

84 Görül, Işık, and Kaya, p. 24.

85 Zorla Kaybedilenler, Faili Meçhul Cinayet-Yargısız İnfazlar, Toplu Mezarlar Raporu, pp. 130-227.

86 Kerim Yıldız, *Ülke İçinde Göç Ettirilen İnsanlar: Türkiye'de Kürtler*, trans. by Emin Soğancı (London: KHRP, Haziran 2002), p. 23; Joost Jongerden, 'Village Evacuation and Reconstruction', 3-4.

the groups as auxiliary forces to those of the regular state forces as a temporary measure when necessary. Here, we see the continuity of Turkish paramilitary politics, albeit with breaks, with paramilitaries being regularly deployed parallel to the regular state forces and considered as the most reliable armed groups by the state elites during times of political crisis – which, given the historical weakness of the state, is to be regarded more as a condition than aberration. This article does not argue that Turkish paramilitarism is an established institution, like other legal security institutions of the state, but rather that the creation and usage of paramilitary groups is part of the state elite's traditional mentality. Paramilitaries in Turkey are habitually employed structures, shady emergency tools and yet key to the state.

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