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The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Conflict, Asymmetric Strategies, and the Politics of Insurgency

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

For more than four decades, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has survived one of the Middle East's most sustained counterinsurgency campaigns. Turkish forces have dismantled networks, captured senior leaders, denied territory and repeatedly pushed the organisation away from its traditional strongholds. Yet the PKK has endured. Its resilience lies not simply in its ability to fight, but in its ability to adapt. From rural guerrilla warfare in the mountains of southeastern Turkey to urban combat, decentralised political mobilisation and transnational networks, the PKK has repeatedly changed how it pursues its objectives while preserving the political grievances that sustain the conflict. Understanding this evolution offers a broader insight into why modern insurgencies can survive even when they remain militarily inferior to the states confronting them.

Introduction

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is one of the Middle East's longest-running insurgent organisations, having maintained an armed campaign against the Turkish state since 1984. Despite decades of military operations aimed at dismantling the organisation, the PKK continues to exert influence across Turkey, northern Iraq, and parts of Syria. Its longevity raises an important analytical question: why has the organisation survived despite sustained

counterinsurgency pressure?

The PKK's resilience cannot be explained solely by military capability. Rather, its survival reflects a combination of ideological adaptation, organisational flexibility, and the persistence of unresolved political grievances surrounding the Kurdish question. Since its formation in 1978, the organisation has evolved from a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist movement seeking an independent Kurdish state into an organisation that publicly advocates decentralised self-governance under the concept of democratic confederalism.

The Kurdish Question

The Kurds constitute one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world, with an estimated population of between 25 and 45 million spread across southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, northwestern Iran and parts of Armenia. Although united by a shared cultural identity, history, and linguistic heritage, Kurdish communities remain politically divided among several nation-states.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, Kurdish aspiration for statehood was never realised. Instead, the new political boundaries established by international agreements left Kurdish populations divided across multiple states. Successive governments, particularly in Turkey during much of the twentieth century, pursued assimilationist policies that restricted Kurdish language, culture, and political expression.

These conditions contributed to the emergence of Kurdish nationalist movements, among which the PKK became the most prominent armed organisation and the evolution within the PKK's framework of low-intensity warfare, in which political objectives rather than battlefield victories drive military strategy using urban warfare as a distinct operational environment while changing methods in Turkey and neighbouring countries.

Unlike conventional warfare, success in this domain is rarely determined by territorial conquest alone. Instead, it depends on influencing political legitimacy, controlling populations, and shaping domestic and international perceptions. Conflicts of this kind commonly take the form of insurgency, counterinsurgency, or counterterrorism. Their defining characteristic is ambiguity: while combat is intermittent, the actors involved are frequently non-state organisations, and violence is calibrated to serve political ends while avoiding open interstate war.

Rural Insurgency

For the first three decades of the conflict, the PKK relied primarily on rural guerrilla warfare, exploiting the mountainous terrain of southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq to sustain the campaign. Rather than seeking decisive military victory, the organisation pursued a strategy of strategic defence, preserving its organisational capacity, imposing continuous costs on Turkish security forces, and maintaining political relevance among Kurdish communities through prolonged low-level conflict.

Turkish authorities initially underestimated the insurgency, treating it as a limited criminal threat rather than an organised political-military movement, a misreading that delayed a comprehensive counterinsurgency response until the late 1980s. From 1987 onward, the state expanded its response through emergency rule, increased troop deployments, village guard militias, and forced village evacuations, aiming to separate the PKK from its rural civilian support base and reassert control over contested territory.

Strategic Transformation

The capture of Abdullah Ocalan in 1999 prompted a fundamental revision of PKK strategy. Rather than seeking decisive confrontation with the Turkish Armed Forces, the organisation adopted a longer-term approach combining limited armed

violence with political mobilisation. The revised objective centred on democratic autonomy within Turkey rather than outright territorial independence, and this redefinition of aims changed how force itself was used; armed operations became one component of a broader campaign to shape the political environment and strengthen Kurdish political organisation, rather than the primary route to political goals.

Between 2005 and 2007 the PKK restructured its command accordingly, and the creation of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in 2007 institutionalised the change by integrating military, political and civil structures across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

The KCK allowed armed activity and political mobilisation to be coordinated rather than run in parallel, so that military operations reinforced political objectives instead of pursuing them independently. This amounted to a transition from an “out fighting” strategy exhausting Turkish forces through ambush, raid, and sabotage in mountainous terrain to an “out administrating” one, in which the PKK sought to contest state authority by building parallel political structures while retaining a selective capacity for violence.

At the tactical level, this was accompanied by a greater reliance on asymmetric attacks requiring few personnel but generating disproportionate psychological and strategic effect, reducing PKK fighters' exposure to Turkish conventional superiority while imposing continuing security costs on the state, decentralised operations and selective violence that sustained political pressure. PKK’s adoption of tactics such as urban bombings, targeted assassinations, suicide attacks, and geographic expansion beyond its traditional strongholds reflects the defining features of asymmetric warfare.

The Marching Towards the North Initiative, which expanded operations into the black sea region in 1994, exemplifies this strategic departure from the traditional Maoist model of insurgency.

The shift to Urban Warfare

The collapse of the peace process in July 2015 marked a decisive transformation: fighting moved from remote terrain into majority Kurdish towns and cities across the southeast. The most significant example occurred in Sur, the historic district of Diyarbakir, where government forces conducted prolonged house-to-house operations against PKK-linked fighters entrenched behind barricades in residential neighbourhoods.

The Sur operation displayed the defining features of urban warfare in practice: combat embedded within civilian neighbourhoods, the difficulty of distinguishing combatants from civilians, and a marked increase in the symbolic and political stakes attached to territorial control.

The shift to urban warfare can't be explained by military factors alone; it also reflected broader changes within Kurdish politics. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Kurdish political actors had largely framed their demands in terms of European democratic norms, with the EU’s Copenhagen criteria and debates on local self-government serving as key reference points for expanding cultural and political rights within Turkey.

Within this changing environment, the PKK’s adoption of urban guerrilla tactics represented an attempt to extend the conflict beyond rural strongholds and increase pressure on the Turkish state. This strategy sought to undermine public confidence in the state’s ability to provide security while imposing greater political costs. Consistent with the concept of rural-based guerrilla warfare, which says rather than replacing rural insurgency, urban operations complemented it by stretching state security resources across multiple theatres, allowing the PKK to exploit the interaction between rural and urban battlefields while compensating for its conventional military inferiority.

Present Situation

The recent peace initiative and Ocalan's renewed call for a legal framework indicate a possible shift from armed confrontation towards a political negotiation. However, the process also highlights a central feature of low-intensity conflicts: their resolution depends not only on military developments but on addressing the political grievances, institutional arrangements, and social conditions that sustain conflict. From an insurgency rooted in rural guerrilla warfare and cross-border sanctuaries, the PKK adapted its method over time, incorporating urban operations and asymmetric tactics in response to changing military pressures and political conditions. The trajectory of the conflict after the collapse of the 2015 peace process illustrates that violence was not solely a contest for territorial control but also a struggle over legitimacy, representation, and political influence. The PKK case therefore demonstrates that contemporary insurgencies operate across interconnected rural, urban, and transnational spaces with political, military, social, and informational dimensions interacting in ways that any analysis of armed conflict in Turkey and the wider Middle East must take into account.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.

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