



# Arming Civilians for Counter-terrorism: Turkey's Village Guard System

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**Originally set up in the mid-1980s, the temporary village guard system's purpose was to act as a local militia in towns and villages, protecting against attacks and reprisals from the insurgents of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Has this system been successful as a counter-terrorism strategy and does it still have a role in the Turkey of today?**

In any counterinsurgency strategy, the separation of “bad guys” from the rest of the population is a significant objective which has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the campaign. To achieve this objective, forming, arming and using local militias may be a viable strategy, particularly in rural, remote, harshly mountainous and tribal contexts in which security forces face difficult challenges to reach the local population. In recent years, the “Sons of Iraq” or the “Anbar Awakening” case in Iraq and the “Tribal Security Forces (*Arbakai*)” case in Afghanistan are contemporary examples of this strategy.

Does the strategy of forming local militias yield successful results? The existing, yet limited, literature on this subject has opened the door to speculations and interpretations that are more journalistic than scholarly. To better elucidate the effectiveness of forming local militias, this article presents the case of the “Temporary Village Guard System” (*Geçici Köy Koruculuğu Sistemi*) in Turkey, which was first initiated in 1985 and has been fully active since.

### Turkey's Village Guards System

Since being founded in 1978, Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has caused approximately 20,000 fatalities, including about 11,000 civilians and

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9,000 security personnel. In the meantime, about 20,000 PKK members were killed and about 6000 were captured and imprisoned. In order to thwart PKK-initiated violence, Turkish authorities have implemented many different countermeasures ranging from repressive to accommodative strategies, including the village guard system. As of January 2016, the monthly salary is approximately the equivalent of U.S. \$400, along with clothing expenses and some social security benefits that came with passage of the amendments between the 74<sup>th</sup> article and 82<sup>nd</sup> article of the Village Law on March 26, 1985.

With this legally founded, centrally appointed, and state-paid “security force,” the Turkish government created a civilian militia in the Kurdish populated southeast provinces of Turkey. Except for 300 Ulupamir Guards, who immigrated to the Van province from Kyrgyzstan, all village guards are ethnically Kurd. To supplement the employed village guard system, a “voluntary village guard” program was added in 13 more provinces, which led to the expansion of this system to 22 provinces in 1993, the year in which violence reached its peak level over the course of the conflict with the PKK. The difference between the two programs is that, while the employed village guards receive monthly salary and health benefits, the voluntary village guards do not receive a salary but are entitled to health compensation and benefits. The size of temporary and voluntary civilian armed force reached almost 60,000 by the end of the 1990s, accounting for almost one-third of the armed forces in the Kurdish region.

As of August 2013, Muharrem Güler, then the Interior Minister of Turkey, announced that there are currently 65,456 village guards, 46,113 of whom are employed (interestingly 337 of them are women) and 19,343 of whom are

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voluntary (161 of them are women). Currently, the village guard system is implemented in 23 provinces. Most of the village guards are employed on the border between Iraq, Iran, and in the extremely mountainous provinces of Hakkari, Sirnak and Van because PKK has been using safe heavens in Iraq and Iran for years.

All village guards, whether voluntary or hired, work under the supervision of the provincial Gendarmerie Commands and receive two weeks of basic military training from their provincial governor immediately after joining.

To better understand the debate, it may be useful to examine the existing arguments for and against the Village Guard System.

### ***Arguments Favoring the System***

1. The village guard system has been seen a success story in Turkey's strategy against the PKK-initiated violence to such an extent that it has become one of the main pillars of counterterror strategy. If the village guard system had not been initiated, the state authority in the region would have eventually collapsed.
2. The village guards have first denied the mobility of the PKK both by separating them from the rest of the population as a bottom-up means of isolating them, and then prevented them from gaining territorial control.
3. The village guards have provided intelligence to the security forces both on the territory and the activities of the PKK.
4. The village guards have not been forced by the security forces to join this system. The existence of more than 25,000 voluntary village guards, who are not paid by the government, is a proof of this.

5. PKK's numbers has never exceeded the number of the village guards, even during the early 1990s, the period in which the number of the armed terrorists reached its peak level of 11,000. This is an indicator showing the low level of popular support to the PKK.

### ***Arguments against the System***

1. The state pitched brother against brother. If it hadn't been for the village guards, this conflict would have never reached this intensity.
2. The village guard system is a typical reflection of state tradition on the Kurdish issue. Enmeshed in the Kurds' tribal networks, it exacerbated the tensions in the region. The equipping of the village guards, who were without even basic military training, increased instability in the entire region. The guard system introduced virtually extinguished social order in Kurdish daily life.
3. The village guard system was used by the state officials as a repressive mechanism to recruit villagers.
4. The village guards are poorly disciplined and inadequately trained.
5. The village guards have been accused repeatedly in past years of drug trafficking, corruption, theft, rape, and other abuses. Inadequate oversight exacerbated the problem, and in many cases the security forces allegedly protected village guards from prosecution.
6. [Several reports](#) document concerns regarding human rights violations resulting from the village guard system in Turkey.
7. The village guard system has been responsible for deepening mistrust and ethnic divisions in an already troubled region.
8. The village guards have moved with their families into villages that were evacuated in the 1990s and now the original villagers are returning to their

villages to find the Village Guards already living there.

9. The establishment of village guards made civilians more vulnerable to attacks.

### **Has the village guard system in Turkey really worked as a counterterror strategy?**

In military terms, and despite its drawbacks and unintended consequences, the village guard system in Turkey worked well as a counter-terror strategy between 1985 and 1993 and achieved the objectives of separation of the local population from the terrorists and denying the PKK control of their hoped-for secessionist territory. Early success gained just after the implementation of the militia system needed a follow-up before the insurgency adapts. In the following years, however, it gradually waned in effectiveness when considering the increased number of PKK attacks in the period of 1993-1999, and caused increasing socio-economic and political micro-level cleavages in the region. As the big inertia in a dispersed system means resistance to change, the guards system could not easily be modified, meaning the strengthening of the existing micro-cleavages and the emergence of the new ones.

### **Reasons for the decline in effectiveness**

The village guard system in Turkey was originally initiated under the assumption that the emergent threat (PKK bandits) was so local and small that it was not considered to require commitment of national security forces. This perception of PKK fighters as “a few bandits” led the Turkish government officials to the authorization of the system in a temporally (initially, the system was designed for a two-years long period ) and spatially (only in three provinces) limited setting. However, there emerged many institutional problems



as the number of village guards was enormously expanded from 800 men to 40,000 men only within a one-year-long period. The primary sources of these shortfalls would be sorted as follows: the absence of comprehensive vision at the national level and the implementation of the planning and recruitment strategy of the system at the provincial level. The absence of a national-level institutional framework which would standardize the system led to the differentiating practices in the provinces. The dramatic rise within a short period of time, when combined with the attempt of government to micro-manage the village guard system at the provincial level, led not only to confusion about the rights, missions and responsibilities of the village guards but also caused different (sometimes contradicting) practices in the following years. Fast expansion meant both weak control at the national level and different interpretations of the operational use of the guards at the provincial level.

Furthermore, the formation of local militias may not only have pros and cons in the sphere of security but also may lead to implications in the socio-cultural sphere. The persistent characterization of the village guards as “traitor,” and the prevalent use of the term “*Jash*” (a Kurdish slang word for *donkey*) by PKK supporters to refer to Kurdish village guards, indicates the significance of the local political structure when analyzing the local dynamics of the conflict in Turkey. It is not hyperbole to suggest that the system has also changed the nature of conflict by first pushing the conflict into new areas and creating new micro-cleavages (whether tribal or at the family level) in the provinces. These results, which clearly emphasize the explanatory power of local political structures in an ethnic conflict, confirm Stathis Kalyvas’s theorization. That is, when examining the dynamics of an ethnic conflict in a comparative perspective, Kalyvas [points out that](#) local political structures and rivalries

among local groups have a great impact on shifting alliances, which are considered as acts of treason by rival factions.

The allegation of human rights violations by militias seem to be inevitable. The absence or lack of sufficient legal mechanisms to investigate accusations, especially in combination with low levels of transparency and accountability, may lead to structural legal problems and emotional conflicts over justice in the Afghan and Iraq cases as in the Turkish case.

### **To demobilize or not to demobilize?**

The Turkish government has been in a dilemma when deciding on the fate of the village guard system. Opinions about this issue highlight two options for the government, each of which can take two forms.

The first option is demobilization. One form of this option is “honorable demobilization,” which implies that the government will end the guard system after providing all material and social rights and benefits to the retired and serving guards, and publicly elevating the history of the guards for their role in the Turkish state’s armed struggle against the PKK. The other form, “dishonorable demobilization,” implies that the government will end the guard system with few rights and benefits for retired and serving guards, and will meticulously search the history of the guards to bring to justice those who allegedly committed crimes. Interviewees who favor dishonorable demobilization argue the need to establish memorial sites for those crimes and brutalities allegedly committed by the guards, with periodic visits by government officials to these sites to keep the collective memory fresh.



The second option is to maintain and continue the guards system. With this option, there again appear to be two alternative forms. One form is the maintenance of the system after a comprehensive revision that examines the strengths, drawbacks and consequences of the system in the domains of security, law and politics so as to make it more effective and efficient. The other form is the maintenance of the *status-quo* which implies the continuation of the village guards as an open-ended commitment not restrained by definite limits, restrictions, or structure.

Currently, the Turkish government seems to embrace the last alternative; that is, maintenance of the system as it is in an open-ended process. With the information at hand, it is difficult to predict which option the Turkish government will embrace in the near future. Sooner or later, however, when the government decides on the village guard system, this decision will surely be a strategic one which directly affects the evolution of ongoing clashes.

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