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## **Peace Processes and the Integration of Pro-Government Militias**

Balta, Evren; Yüksel, Murat; Acar, Yasemin Gülsüm

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## TITLE PAGE

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### **Peace Processes and the Integration of Pro-Government Militias: The Case of Village Guards in Turkey**

***Abstract:** Militia groups have only recently started to attract scholarly attention in the literature on internal conflicts. This attention is mostly focused on either the causes of their emergence or their functions and performance during conflict. The role of militia groups in post-conflict processes, however, has not been adequately addressed. This article intends to fill this gap by analyzing the case of village guards, a type of pro-government militia system in Turkey, based on qualitative evidence from field research. While the dominant narrative in the literature identifies militia groups as spoilers in peace processes, the article shows that militias do not act as spoilers under certain conditions. In the case of the village guard system in Turkey, the permanent integration of militias into the state's regular military apparatus prevented militia groups from acting as spoilers. It then argues that the permanent integration of wartime militia systems is a consequence of two factors: militia networking and a lack of comprehensive peace-building structures.*

### **Keywords**

pro-government militias, village guards, peace process, Turkey

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **AUTHORS' BIOS**

### **Corresponding Author: Evren Balta**

Department of International Relations, Ozyegin University, İstanbul, Turkey

E-mail: [evren.balta@ozyegin.edu.tr](mailto:evren.balta@ozyegin.edu.tr)

Evren Balta is an associate professor of politics at Ozyegin University, İstanbul Turkey. She holds a Ph.D. in political science from The Graduate Center, CUNY (2007) and received the Distinguished Alumni Award of the Political Science Program in 2018. She was a Fulbright visiting associate professor at New York University during the 2017-2018 academic year. Evren Balta is the author and editor of six books. Her most recent co-authored book titled “The American Passport: Citizenship and Belonging in the Age of Global Empire” will be published by the UPenn Press in Fall 2019.

### **Murat Yüksel**

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Adana Science and Technology University, Adana, Turkey

E-mail: [myuksel@atu.edu.tr](mailto:myuksel@atu.edu.tr)

Murat Yüksel is an assistant professor of political science and sociology and chair of the department of urban studies at Adana Science and Technology University, Turkey. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University. His main research interests are focused on state formation, political migration, and social and political movements in Turkey and the Middle East.

### **Yasemin Gülsüm Acar**

Department of Psychology, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

E-mail: [Yasemin.g.acar@gmail.com](mailto:Yasemin.g.acar@gmail.com)

Yasemin Gülsüm Acar is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Dundee. She received her PhD from Claremont Graduate University in 2015, where she specialized in social identity and identity politicization through collective action. Her research interests include political protest and its consequences, political solidarity, social identity, and intergroup conflict.

## **Peace Processes and the Integration of Pro-Government Militias:**

### **The Case of Village Guards in Turkey**

***Abstract:** Militia groups have only recently started to attract scholarly attention in the literature on internal conflicts. This attention is mostly focused on either the causes of their emergence or their functions and performance during conflict. The role of militia groups in post-conflict processes, however, has not been adequately addressed. This article intends to fill this gap by analyzing the case of village guards, a type of pro-government militia system in Turkey, based on qualitative evidence from field research. While the dominant narrative in the literature identifies militia groups as spoilers in peace processes, the article shows that militias do not act as spoilers under certain conditions. In the case of the village guard system in Turkey, the permanent integration of militias into the state's regular military apparatus prevented militia groups from acting as spoilers. It then argues that the permanent integration of wartime militia systems is a consequence of two factors: militia networking and a lack of comprehensive peace-building structures.*

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On May 4, 2009, masked assailants with grenades and automatic weapons attacked an engagement ceremony in southeastern Turkey, killing 44, including six children and 17 women. The attack was acknowledged by the Turkish government authorities to be one of the bloodiest involving civilians in Turkey's modern history. State authorities initially presented it as a manifestation of archaic identities and customs, of tribes and blood feuds.<sup>1</sup> It was soon discovered, however, that both the attackers and the attacked belonged to the village guard forces, which is a semi-official, locally-recruited (and active) armed group linked to the government, but which remain outside the regular military apparatus. The village guard system was originally set up by the Turkish state in the mid-1980s to protect southeastern towns and villages from the attacks and reprisals of the armed militant organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK*). It is an example of a pro-government militia that is locally recruited and organized under the government to support the regular military.

Pro-government militias in various forms have become important and sometimes powerful actors in intrastate conflicts, especially in counterinsurgency efforts. They were present in 81 percent of intrastate conflict zones between 1981 and 2007, and more than half of these groups emerged during civil wars (Carey, Colarasi, & Mitchell, 2015; Carey, Mitchell, & Lowe, 2013). In all cases, ironically, after the military conflict is over or the intensity of the conflict decreases, controlling or dissolving these groups becomes a new issue for state control and sustaining peace-building processes. Indeed, some peace-building perspectives focus on the importance of dismantling all types of militia systems that have emerged throughout the conflict and warn against the possible permanent integration of former militias into the state's regular military apparatus (Alden, Thakur, & Arnold, 2011).

The case of the village guard system in Turkey confirms the pattern of permanent integration of militias into the state's regular military apparatus during peace processes. Turkey's village guards were established in 1984 as a temporary security measure to increase the tactical performance of the Turkish military against the PKK. Based on the two-dimensional typology of militia systems developed by Carey & Mitchell (2017), we classify village guards as a pro-government militia that is semi-official and locally recruited/active. During the conflict, the Turkish government recruited militias from the local population and established semi-official links with them. Over time, however, the recruitment and use of village guards has become a channel to transform the one-dimensional space of ethnic identity (Turk/Kurd) into a two-dimensional political space (ethnicity plus loyalty to the state) (Kalyvas, 2008). During the 2000s, the conflict in Turkey's southeast had eased and the Turkish government and the PKK held several peace talks. However, despite several peace initiatives and demands for the demobilization and disarmament of the village guards, the Turkish government preferred not to disband the village guard system, but responded by increasing its attempts to integrate it into the formal structure of the Turkish armed forces. As a result, what was believed to be a temporary security measure has become a permanent part of the Turkish state's security architecture. Thus, the case of village guards not only provides us insights on the role of militias in peace processes, but also on the transformation of military structures as a consequence of internal war-making.

What factors account for the integration of militia groups into states' regular armed forces during peace processes? Even though the literature on militias has burgeoned in the last decade, the main focus has been mainly on the causes of their emergence (Ahram, 2011a, 2011b, 2015; Mazzei, 2009; Staniland, 2012, 2015), and their functions and performance during conflicts (Aliyev, 2017; Barter, 2013; Clayton & Thomson, 2014; Carey et al., 2015; Carey et al.,

2013; Cohen & Nordas, 2015; Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015; Koren, 2017; Mitchell, Carey, & Butler 2014; Peic, 2014; Stanton, 2015). The role of militias and their transformation during peace processes, however, have not been adequately addressed. As Jentzsch et al. (2015:9) observe, little is known about what happens to militias once conflict is eased and peace process is started.

By focusing on a pro-government militia during a peace process, this article explores a working hypothesis: permanent integration of wartime militia systems into the regular structure of state security forces is a consequence of two factors, wartime militia networking and lack of substantive peace-building structures. In fact, pro-government militias, who built dense networks among themselves and with state authorities during wartime, are hard to dismantle. Lack of substantive peace-building structures to promote peace negotiations also encourages the integration of militia systems into the regular armed structure of the state. In the absence of substantive peace-building structures, building the initial trust for peace is difficult for both state authorities and the pro-government militias.

The article also debates whether militias are ‘spoilers of peace.’ Indeed, in the existing literature, militia groups, including the pro-government militias as a subtype, are mostly framed as ‘spoilers of peace’ or ‘veto-players,’ with an almost exclusive emphasis on the need to fully disband them to achieve sustainable peace. It was argued that since a viable peace would decrease the need for such militia groups and thus present a threat to the interests of these groups, militias would most likely work against peace and actively promote war (Carey & Mitchell, 2017; Steinert, Steinert & Carey, 2018). In contrast, our empirically-based discussion on Turkey’s village guards shows that integration of militias

to the formal security structure can solve, at least in the short term, spoiler problems that such groups may cause while at the same time transforming the security structure.

### **Methodology**

Militias are among one of the most inaccessible groups for qualitative research. The dearth of militias' own perspectives is a fundamental problem in the study of militias, and by including their voices in our study we aim to address this limitation. We have taken the village guards as a relevant and useful case study to explore the role of militias in peace processes (see Yin, 2014). As this is a new area of inquiry and rarely addressed in the literature we employ exploratory research by developing a working hypothesis (Shields & Whetsell, 2014; Shields, Rangarajan, & Casula, 2019) regarding the role of militias in peace processes.

This article is based on field research conducted in 2014 to identify the attitudes and beliefs of village guards regarding the peace process (Balta, Yüksel, & Acar, 2015). A total of 101 participants (96 men, 5 women) were interviewed in six provinces in southeastern Turkey, namely Şırnak (20), Mardin (25), Hakkari (22), Van (30), Diyarbakır (1), and Siirt (3). The provinces were chosen based on their proximity to Turkey's south eastern border; with these areas once being conflict locations, experiencing high levels of conflict, and being home to the majority of village guards. Out of the 101 participants, 70 were village guards, with 51 on active duty, 8 who had quit, 4 who were discharged and 7 who were retired.<sup>2</sup>

Given the sensitive nature of the research, access to interviewees was implemented through multiple and different entry points at each locale. Local research assistants with dense local networks were collaborated with at each locale. Since village guards are



regarded as state employees, we also needed to secure permission from local state and security officials. While our focus was on the village guards themselves, in order to gain the perspective of other actors, we also conducted additional interviews with local community leaders, local state authorities and people who felt victimized by the village guard system. The relatively relaxed political climate of 2014 and then ongoing resolution process enabled us to conduct this research.

The three researchers coordinated data collection teams in each of the provinces, with one researcher and their team in one province at a time. Data collection took place sequentially in all six provinces in November and December 2014. Previous work on conducting qualitative research in conflict contexts (Moss, Uluğ, & Acar, 2019; Sriram, King, Mertus, Martin-Ortega, & Herman, 2009) has noted the importance of gaining and maintaining participant trust. In line with this, while most participants were interviewed alone, if participants felt more comfortable being interviewed in a more public place or with family or friends present, the researchers allowed it. Interviews were generally conducted in Turkish, though if necessary, Kurdish-speaking assistants would confirm meaning of questions for participants.

Since we wanted to achieve a minimum level of qualitative representativeness of our sample, we tried to maintain diversity of our interviewees as much as possible in terms of the recruitment processes of the guards (forcibly recruited vs voluntary recruitment and new and old recruits) and their conflict experience (exposure to violence and perpetrators of violence). Since we cannot claim full representativeness of our sample, ours is an attempt for limited but analytical generalizability, which does not entail making generalizations for all militia groups across a wide spectrum, but a context-based analysis, inductively identified from the data aimed

at uncovering the processes of inclusion and exclusion and positions of semi-official and locally recruited village guards regarding the peace/resolution process.

In what follows, we first discuss the case of village guards as a classic counterinsurgency strategy whereby state agents try to transform the relative costs and benefits of supporting the insurgency and then how the crucial roles that militias perform during counterinsurgencies abruptly shift in post-conflict periods. In the next section, we shift our focus to Turkey's village guard system as a case of pro-government militia system and situate it in the conflict history of Turkey. Through a discussion of our case, we show Turkey's village guards' pro-peace attitudes are significantly related to the rights they receive and widely correlated with their perceptions of inclusion. During the peace process, recruitment, training and welfare benefits of the guards significantly transformed and become more inclusive of the guards' demands, resulting from their permanent integration into Turkey's security architecture. We then discuss the importance of wartime militia networking and lack of peace-building structures as important factors that triggered granting of more rights to village guards, and as a result their permanent integration to Turkey's security architecture.

### **From Militias to Civil Servants**

When states face serious internal, locally-supported challenges, they may resort to delegating their monopoly of violence to informal local allies. These local allies, including pro-government militias, can sometimes be crucial for the governments' ability to maintain their monopoly on legitimate violence (Aliyev, 2019a). Collaborating with locals provides a variety of benefits, such as offering the state an extra level of security and improving the battlefield performance of regular armies against insurgents (Carey et al., 2015; Lyall & Wilson, 2009;

Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004); providing the counterinsurgents with crucial information about geography, insurgent enclaves and intelligence about the identity of insurgents and their supporters (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006; Lyall, 2010); employing selective violence (Branch & Wood, 2010; Lyall, 2010; Valentino et al., 2004) and distributing benefits (Leites & Wolf, 1970; Shafer, 1988; Wolf, 1967). Finally, states may delegate their monopoly on violence to militias to distance themselves from human rights violations and abuses of civilian population, in order to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens and the international community (Carey et al., 2013; Carey et al., 2015). Overall, it seems that the short term benefits of establishing local allies in different forms seem to outweigh their potential long-term costs in most counterinsurgency efforts of states.

The role that militias perform during counterinsurgencies usually shifts during peace processes. Most peace-building perspectives focus on the importance of dismantling militia systems because they would threaten state authority in the long run. The argument is that, while local collaboration benefits counterinsurgents during the conflict, it creates serious problems for state consolidation after conflict eases. In fact, by empowering local groups and delegating their monopoly over the use of violence, states undermine their own aim to establish their long-term authority. This is a classic state-in-society argument that rests on the paradox of state rule. According to Joel Migdal (1988: xv), “states try to strengthen their support among the local communities by cutting deals with local strongmen.” As such, they “have persistently and consciously undermined their own state agencies – the very tools by which they could increase their capabilities and affect their policy agendas” (ibid.). Post-conflict situations are thus periods when states should strengthen their capacity by regaining control over these local strongmen. However, by failing to move beyond this normative proposal, the state-in-society literature fails

to provide any model as to how and under what conditions state authorities are willing or capable of doing so.

In the rare instances in which the literature on militias moves from this normative debate, the role of militias during peace processes and in post-conflict periods is mostly discussed with reference to the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants (Alden et al., 2011; Aliyev, 2019a, 2018b; Berdal & Ucko, 2009; Daly, 2016; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Jentzsch et al., 2015). Despite their qualitative differences from rebel organizations and anti-government militias, however, pro-government militias are usually lumped into the same general category of ex-combatants, and their role in post-conflict processes is analyzed as such. In practice, however, very little is known about the actual practices and attitudes of these groups during peace processes and in post-conflict periods. Some case studies have shown that they follow parallel disarmament and reintegration processes of rebels after conflict ends (Mazzei, 2009). Like rebels, they sometimes develop into political forces or become formalized and permanently integrated as part of the state's security structures (Aliyev, 2019b). However, the patterns and processes of formalization and permanent integration, let alone the contributing factors that led to this formalization, are not adequately addressed in the existing literature.

In the existing literature, moreover, militias, including pro-government militias, are mostly identified as spoilers of peace or veto-players (Alden et al., 2011; Aliyev, 2019b; Cunningham, 2006; Newman & Richmond, 2006; Pearlman, 2009; Reiter, 2016; Stedman, 1997; Steinert et al., 2018; Zahar, 2012). In his classic study, Stephen Stedman (1997) argues that actors who are not satisfied with the terms of an agreement will engage in spoiling behavior unless they are suppressed, accommodated, or co-opted as appropriate to address their total, limited, or greedy goals. Stedman's external utility model is built on correct identification of the

motivations of potential spoilers of peace and matching it with the most appropriate management strategy.

Similarly, Steinert et al. (2018) argue that, since militia members derive material and non-material benefits from fighting in armed conflicts, they are likely to develop a strong incentive to spoil peace after the conflict's termination. Their analysis reveals the potentially destructive impact of pro-government militias by increasing the risk of conflict recurrence across diverse peace processes and post-conflict environments. Fighting insurgents under the protection of the government brought several material and non-material benefits to militia members, which they are likely to lose once conflict ends. Therefore, militia groups may not only have a distaste for peace but have strong incentives to reignite armed conflict, especially during peace processes, which are highly transitional in nature, not only because they do not want to lose their privileged status but also because they lack any other viable alternatives. Peace threatens the political, physical, and economic empowerment that militia members enjoyed during the conflict and exposes them to marginalization. Additionally, since militias are usually excluded from peace negotiations and are left out in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, this leaves them no option but to spoil peace efforts.

A slightly different version of the same argument regarding the role of militias in intrastate conflict termination was recently developed by Huseyn Aliyev. Aliyev proposes that militias involved in intrastate conflicts tend to act as proponents of 'no peace, no war,' favoring low-activity violence and ceasefires over other conflict outcomes (Aliyev, 2019b). Militias, Aliyev argues, increase the likelihood of civil wars culminating in a stalemate or low-intensity violence because neither peace agreements nor absolute victories by either side of the dyad are in the militias' interests (ibid). The 'no peace, no war' model contends that the reason that civil

wars involving militias are unlikely to end in a peace agreement between government and rebels is not because militias desire long-lasting, high-intensity conflicts. Indeed, such conflicts are not always advantageous for militias since militias involved either in large-scale combat activities or long-lasting insurgencies constantly suffer casualties or remain under the threat of physical destruction, while failing to meet their patron's expectations may lead to their demobilization. Finally, along with the threat of demobilization and destruction in combat, long and active conflict creates obvious obstacles for militias' illicit economic activities. Therefore, they do not prefer such conflicts. Instead, ceasefire agreements with continuous low-intensity conflict suit militia interests more than anything else (ibid.).

One significant problem with the spoiler perspective, however, is that it does not consider external constraints and opportunities, such as shifts in power balances after a conflict ends, as well as the effects of militias' wartime experiences and relationships with their state patrons and local communities. Notwithstanding their presumed motivations and interests in maintaining some level of conflict, militias' actual strategies as spoilers are constrained by both the state and local communities. Thus, along with militias' own interests and agency, the strategies of state actors are crucial for understanding the role of militias in conflict termination and peace building-processes. Challenging the view that states are either unable or unwilling to control militia groups, Jessica Stanton (2015) argues that states can and in fact do control and manipulate them. When militias become too uncontrollable or redundant, or when governments choose to democratize and transform relationships with their political opponents, militias can be disbanded (Stanton, 2015). Similarly, Staniland (2015) argues that regime ideology shapes how governments perceive and deal with militias. Varying regime ideological projects, according to Staniland, contribute to different patterns of militia-state relations. Depending on how state

authorities perceive the militia, they can be suppressed, contained, incorporated, or colluded with (ibid).

The case of village guards in Turkey presents a challenge to the dominant view in the literature that sees militias as spoilers of peace, veto players, or no war, no peace proponents. Most village guards that were interviewed for this research stated that they would prefer any peace to no peace, provided that they are not excluded from the peace negotiations and have continued security assurances and welfare benefits from the government. In this regard, the promised incorporation of village guards into the formal security forces had a serious impact on their stance regarding peace and directly affected their attitude towards peace. Integration, however, cannot only be explained by state capacity (or lack of it) or state ideology. The case of village guards shows that integration is directly related to forms of militia networking, levels of trust towards the peace process and lack of sustainable peace building structures. In what follows, we first discuss the origins of the village guard system, followed by an examination of the process of its professionalization and integration into the formal security apparatus.

### **The Village Guard System in the 1990s**

The village guard system was initiated by the Turkish parliament in 1985 after the first attacks of the PKK on military bases in Southern Turkey and subsequent clashes. Fear that clashes would spread to villages resulted in reinstating the village guard system based on village laws from the early republican period.<sup>3</sup> Holding villagers responsible for their own security made logistical sense to state authorities, as villages were scattered around rural areas and beyond routine surveillance by the security forces. The system was initially thought of as a temporary response to a temporary inadequacy of the state security forces. Through legal amendments to the

relevant law in 1985, village guards were thus recognized as *de-facto* armed government employees. The main goal of the new system was to have village guards prevent PKK's infiltration into their own villages (Balta 2019).

However, as the conflict intensified, the village guard system expanded far beyond the stipulations stated in the law. Village guards were expected to participate in organized military operations outside of their villages since they knew the routes that the PKK used. They were also used as guide soldiers in cross-border warfare in Northern Iraq. Guards had also become crucial actors in collecting intelligence about the identity of the PKK members and their supporters and provided information to the state authorities about the identities of those joining the PKK (Balta, 2004; Gürcan, 2015). The village guard system thus offered the government the benefits of localization as foreseen by the literature on counterinsurgency: access to information about the rebels' identity and an enhanced ability to collect local intelligence (Balta, 2019).

Initially, the most valuable reward given to locals who opted to act as guards was greater autonomy and immunity (Balta, 2010). The right of guards to bear arms and the associated immunity became a factor even in minor interpersonal disputes: quarrels between children, fights at a soccer game, and altercations over business (ibid). Immunity was also a crucial factor in the guards' increased involvement in cross-border smuggling, which provided a means to accumulate wealth (Balta & Akça, 2013). The economic rewards were not only informal: guards are state employees, and as such receive a monthly salary from the government. In many cases, however, the salaries of individual guards were collected by *aghas* (tribal chiefs) who also acted as head guards and were responsible for distributing the monthly salaries of their clan's village guards. This eventually enabled a significant transfer of wealth to them, thereby reinforcing their local power networks and influence.



In the 1990s, the Turkish government's counterinsurgency strategy shifted towards population control. In this period, the inter-tribal competition to participate in the village guard system continued, but thereafter the village guard system began to be used primarily as a mechanism of identification and a way to establish locals' loyalty to the state (Balta, 2010). During this period, villagers had avoided repression through their participation in the system, since refusal to participate was taken as an indication of support – whether active or passive – for the insurgency (Balta & Akça, 2013). By changing the relative costs and benefits of supporting the counterinsurgency through local collaboration mechanisms, security forces tried to make non-participation extremely costly for ordinary locals. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of village guards increased enormously, reaching 63,000 (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997). The conflict escalated throughout the 1990s, claiming somewhere between 44,000 to 55,000 lives (Budak, 2015), creating an estimated one to four million internally displaced people (Jongerden, 2001; Kurban, Yüksek, & Çelik, 2007; McDowall, 2004), and 1,300 enforced disappearances (Hafıza Merkezi, 2019). The role of the village guards in state repression and civilian abuse has been widely reported (Kurban, 2009; Özar, Uçarlar, & Aytar, 2013), creating significant resentment among the civilian population against the village guards.

The turning point in the Kurdish issue was 1999. Fighting and violence started to significantly diminish after the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK's declaration of unilateral ceasefire in 1999. As early as 2000, the Council of Ministers announced that the government would no longer recruit temporary village guards so as to allow a slow dismantling of the system (Kurban, 2009). The state of emergency, which was originally declared in 1987 in eight southeastern provinces and was gradually expanded to cover 13, was lifted in 2002 (Balta, 2004). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of that

period also used its parliamentary majority to ram through several reform packages that aimed to soften the grievances of the Kurdish population (ibid). Starting from 2008, the AKP government also pursued a political process with the PKK, known by the Turkish public as ‘the resolution process’, with the stated aim of resolving the long-lasting Kurdish question of the Turkish Republic (Özkan 2018; Özpek 2017; Yeğen, 2015a).

The first round of peace talks with the PKK took place in 2008, when state officials contacted the PKK and had consecutive meetings in different locations in Europe. These talks were followed by subsequent meetings organized by the Interior Ministry in 2009 with journalists, intellectuals and NGOs to start a public debate on the resolution of the Kurdish question. The second round of talks took place between 2010-2011 and a roadmap was announced by the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. The first two rounds of talks collapsed and were followed by brief periods of escalation of violence and termination of ceasefire as a result of the indeterminate and flimsy nature of the process (Yeğen, 2015b). However, they were followed by a third round of talks in 2013, which was the most comprehensive among the three and unrivalled in the history of Turkey’s search for resolving the Kurdish issue. These attempts, however, also came to a halt in 2015, and a new cycle of conflict has started. Hundreds of people, including civilians, have died as a result of the clashes between the security forces and the PKK since then. The Kurdish issue has once again become completely securitized and framed not as a problem of democracy and democratization, but one of terror and separatism. In fact, this swing of the pendulum occurring over such a brief period of time shows the volatile and non-inclusive nature of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process.

In all three rounds of talks, disarmament of the village guards was an important issue, especially for the parties representing the Kurdish side. Despite the clearly stated intention of not

hiring any additional village guards, the Turkish government continued to recruit new village guards throughout the 2000s. In 2014, there were 47,800 village guards on government paycheck and 25,000 volunteer guards. After the reescalation of the conflict, by November 2016, the number of village guards reached to 69,210 – a figure slightly higher than the 1990s average. In May 2018, the Turkish government announced that they had hired an additional 21,716 guards after allowing early retirement to 18,480 by lowering the average age of village guards to 32. The total number of the village guards peaked again at approximately 72,446.<sup>4</sup> This perpetual increase in the number of village guards was an important feature of the peace process and interpreted as the government’s unwillingness to pursue a sustainable peace. However, the policies towards the guards did not only include a continual procurement of new guards, but also involved the granting of more welfare and security benefits to the guards, which initiated the first steps for their integration into the formal security architecture.

### **Integrating the Guards through Recruitment, Training and Welfare Benefits**

Before the 2000s, recruitment to the village guard system was mostly done collectively either through consulting the whole village, through tribal networks or by personal decision. Joining the guards system had important consequences for both immediate family members and the collective, ranging from access to resources to increased risks of suffering from insurgent violence. The collective nature of this decision (and the collective nature of the consequences of this decision) both strengthened existing social networks and created dense new networks among the village guards. In fact, the first village guards were selected from the tribes of Hakkari and Şırnak, near the northern part of the Iraq-Turkey border, where the PKK’s first military actions took place. Our interviewees often emphasized the importance of the role of the *aghas* in these

regions in the recruitment process. For Ahmet, who acted as a village guard in one of the provinces of Van, it was his *agha* that convinced everyone in the tribe to join the guards:

The state called the heads of families in 1989. We all met as the elders of the tribe and were offered to act as village guards. At first, 31 of us became guards. We created the system here and made it fit the necessities of local life here. It was a collective decision as well. Some individuals within the tribe refused to become village guards. We convinced them to become guards (Ahmet, November 22, 2014).

Recruitment was also coupled with local norms. In some cases, it was decided that one person from each family would become a village guard. This decision was either at the family's discretion or a village rule that the eldest son of each family should become a village guard. Another village guard, Akif, explains this situation vividly:

I was the eldest child of the family. My father came and said, "We decided, from every household, the eldest son of that household will be a village guard. He will support his family and protect his village." Your father, your village, asks this of you. I wasn't even 18 years old yet. Our tribe decided to be guards; our village decided to be guards. How could I say no? I accepted. I accepted with honor and I have looked after my family since then (Akif, November 24, 2014).

In the 2000s, however, as the conflict eased, recruitment was dramatically transformed into a kind of tenured position, based on an openly advertised application and examination. As

for any other civil servant position, when new guard positions were announced, individuals would gather the necessary paperwork and fill out an official application. Then, if their application was accepted, they would be called for a written and an oral exam. Only those who passed the exams could be employed as guards.

All the village guards we interviewed who were hired after 2005 stated that they went through a formal application process. However, this formal application process did not mean that the job was open to everyone. Almost 90 percent of our interviewees who were appointed as village guards after 2005 stated that the primary reason for them to apply for the position was their links to the already serving village guards. Because there were other village guards in their close circles (their families or villages), becoming a village guard was a more tolerable option, as their families and villages were already known as ‘village guard families.’ Only in the regions where the intensity of the conflict was relatively low did individuals with no prior connections to the already serving village guards apply to the position. For them, the primary motivation to become village guards was largely due to the high levels of unemployment and poverty. In other words, our interviews showed that in locales with a history of intense conflict, becoming a village guard was still considered a political decision stigmatized by the community, despite the fact that becoming a village guard has now become a routine. Only in locales with low levels of conflict history was becoming a village guard seen as an ordinary job.

During the 2000s, the government not only tried to standardize the recruitment process, but also the training and job responsibilities of the guards. All of our interviewees stated that they were no longer part of military operations, and their main tasks were guarding public buildings, subject to routine hours. They stated that the region’s civilian authorities, together with the security forces, determined which areas the guards should keep watch over. For each

guard unit the head guard was responsible for creating weekly or monthly timetables for keeping watch. Ali, head of one of the village guard units, explains how he assigned tasks to other guards under his supervision:

I created a weekly shift schedule. Everyone's time, day, and location were known. For example, I know who is guarding the governor's building. Everyone comes and signs the schedule. In the past, these things were very arbitrary. Not any more (Ali, November 23, 2014).

Parallel to the standardization of job responsibilities, the training and promotion systems of the village guards also started to become standardized in this period. None of our interviewees who became village guards before the 2000s mentioned anything related to job training. They did not receive any standard training but learned their duties on the job. This was one of the main sources of complaints we received from the security forces we interviewed about village guards: being undisciplined, uninformed, and incompetent.

During the 2000s, both the political elites and the security forces stressed the importance of village guards passing through standard training. All of our newly-recruited village guard interviewees mentioned that they all passed through approximately one month of standardized training, which was both theoretical and practical, and that they learned their rights and responsibilities as well as how to use weaponry. However, a young recruit, Aydın, still complained about the inadequacies of the training system:

Training was conducted only once in a year, every May. There is weapons training, the guards are trained at the police station they are connected to. But the content always kept changing and was also not enough to learn the job (Aydin, 11 November 2014).

New recruits also stated that the training they received not only created a diverging perception of being a guard between the old recruits and them but also made them more sensitive towards infringements of their rights - something which they complained the old recruits did not have. Old recruits also complained about how these new ways of recruitment and training were creating hierarchies between the old and the new generation. The old recruits saw the younger generation as individuals who were exploiting the benefits of the older generations' conflict experience. According to the old recruits, no training would provide these new recruits the experience that they had in active combat and conflict. Many younger guards, however, shared the opinions of the regular security forces towards the old guards: being undisciplined, uninformed, and incompetent.

Another important aspect of the integration process relates to the regulation of village guards' welfare benefits. Until 2005, as temporary state employees, village guards did not have any social security benefits. Our interviewees stated that it was only through the good intentions of some government officials and authorities, who would make requests to public hospitals on their behalf, that they and their families could receive care. This situation made guards dependent on government officials, without granting them any institutionalized rights. Starting from 2005, however, village guards began to receive green cards, normally provided to people under a certain income. Guards and their immediate family members without any social security could

all receive medical care with the green card. Thus, healthcare rights of the guards were taken under the protection of Turkey's social security institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Other strong signifiers of standardization were retirement benefits and salary payments. In 2007, those over 55 years of age who had been working at least 15 years were given the right to retire and receive a monthly pension from the Social Security Administration.<sup>6</sup> Salary collection was also very important in the standardization of the system. In the 1990s, the tribal chiefs (usually also the head village guard) themselves would receive the total salary for several guards. This ensured that leaders could seize the guards' salaries to keep them under their hegemony. This also strengthened the power of tribal chiefs. This situation changed in 2001 when salaries began to be deposited directly into individual village guards' bank accounts, which created more autonomy in the job by decreasing the control of tribal chiefs. There has also been a significant increase in the salaries of the village guards since the beginning of the resolution process. They received an 85% increase in 2015, which made their income close to the minimum wage, but still amounting to 1/3 of the salary of the lowest ranking military personnel.<sup>7</sup> The welfare benefits of the village guards were further regulated in recent emergency decrees that came to effect in 2016. Under Decree Law 690 in 2017, village guards were provided with social security benefits within a month of starting their position, while on duty village guards who reached the age of 55 with a minimum of 15 years-service as a village guard were given the right to retire with pension. Our interviewees, however, perceived the changes in the welfare system as a necessary but insufficient development. They constantly compared themselves with other security personnel and questioned why they were not receiving similar benefits. They felt grossly underappreciated compared to the stigma they had to endure as a result of becoming village guards. This was the case with Muhammed, an older recruit in Hakkari:



I have a green card, but beyond this we don't have any social security, any insurance.

And it is completely insufficient. It doesn't work everywhere. We can't use it in a lot of places (Muhammed, November 30, 2014).

These changes in the recruitment, training, job responsibilities, and welfare benefits not only standardized the village guard system but also made it a permanent part of Turkey's security architecture. In other words, what was meant to be a temporary solution to a temporary conflict was transformed into a permanent institution. In September 2016, the Ministry of the Interior also announced that village guards would no longer be called temporary but permanent and used Decree Law 678 to force early retirement on guards over the age of 50 while hiring approximately 25,000 young new guards. This move created a new type of militia composition in which many of the new recruits now do not have conflict experience and did not participate in the counterinsurgency practices of 1990s. The Ministry of Interior also announced that they would now have a Village Guards Department representing the village guards.

This section outlined the ways in which village guards were integrated into the security architecture of Turkey. In the next section we turn our attention to the factors that explain this transformation of Turkey's village guard system.

### **Explaining Integration**

As argued above, the case of village guards in Turkey challenges the dominant view in the literature that sees militias as spoilers of peace, veto players, or no war, no peace proponents. All of our interviewees, even the most anti-rebel ones, stated their support for the resolution

process and expressed their preference of any peace accord over no peace. However, their continued support rested on their not being discarded by the state. They emphasized their fear of an unbalanced peace that would not protect the guards and would leave them exposed to community (and the PKK) violence, since being a village guard is highly stigmatized within the local community and everyone knows who is who (for a further discussion of village guards' stigmatization, please see Önder, 2015; Özar et al., 2013).

Furthermore, our interviewees also stated that being a guard meant the loss of other sources of livelihood for themselves and their families. They emphasized the need for continued financial support and not to be seen as throwaways. Being aware of their crucial role in the counterinsurgency, they constantly compared their situation with that of other security personnel. They complained that they receive less pay and lack the welfare benefits enjoyed by the regular security personnel, even though they do the same work (and even sometimes more dangerous work, given that they are also locals). İbrahim, an old recruit who was about to retire, criticized the differences in the welfare benefits for different security personnel. Throughout his interview, he evaluated himself as part of the security apparatus and felt that differences in treatment between guards and other security branches were unjust:

Our interlocutors used to be the soldiers. We would tell them, but they say everything is in the hands of the politicians. You see that a sergeant is making a lot of money. They benefit from everything, and I do the same work, but I can't benefit from anything. I have no social security (İbrahim, November 26, 2014).

In other words, even though the village guards were not spoilers of peace and supported the peace negotiations between the government and the PKK, they were strongly against any proposal for dismantling of the village guard system without any benefits. They wanted more regulation that would make them both physically and financially secure. These requests were originated and widely circulated within the dense militia social network created during the conflict. In fact, in February 2000, as armed conflict seemed to ease along with rumors that the system would be abandoned, the first village guard associations were formed (Özar et al., 2013). For example, the Sason Village Guards Aid and Solidarity Association, founded in Diyarbakır in 2001, saw its membership reach 1,400 in less than a year. These efforts grew quickly due to support both from the government and the military. Until 2006, village guard associations were only active locally, but in 2006, a number of these organizations came together to form a national association. Today, there are over 90 associations and five federations in 22 provinces under the umbrella of the Confederation of Anatolian Village Guards and Martyrs' Families. Almost half our interviewees were members of these organizations. Those who were not registered members at least actively supported these organizations. All of them, without a single exception, thought that these organizations were necessary for increasing public awareness regarding the rights of guards and help guards to achieve further rights and benefits.

The Confederation has, since its founding, worked to protect and expand the rights of the guards as well as playing an active role in maintaining the village guard system. The organization has undertaken several campaigns, demonstrations, and collective visits to state officials, all emphasizing the danger of disarming and discarding village guards after using them in the conflict. For example, in 2014, the Southeastern Anatolian Village Guards Federation sued the Interior Ministry to expand welfare benefits for village guards. One of their main concerns

was their physical safety. Confederation President Ziya Sözen has repeatedly stated that if village guards were disarmed, the PKK may try to take revenge against them, meaning that village guards would be forced to defend themselves and drag the region back into chaos.<sup>8</sup> In other words, both at the macro and micro level, guards' attitudes towards peace directly correlated with their expectations over their inclusion into the post-peace structures and they actively campaigned for this purpose.

This activism has overlapped with state actors' distrust of the 'resolution process' and the intention to keep open channels for local collaboration. Indeed, village guards have never been just a short-term security solution, but a system which was intended to guarantee long-term collaboration. It is a network of allies that can be trusted in periods of crisis and conflict. Thus, the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP ) threw state officials into a panic when it established social reconciliation, dialogue and 'persuasion commissions' to convince guard tribes to shift sides just before the June 2015 elections (Taştekin, 2015). Permanent integration of the system to the security architecture represented a win-win strategy for the state, since it enabled state officials to individualize what has been one of the most defining characteristics of Kurdish society: collective tribal identification. Second, by placing guards under the command structure of the security forces with routine checks and established standards, state officials have become better able to limit the autonomy of village guards and control their indiscipline. Even though state officials were ready to let go the village guards who participated to the counterinsurgency effort of the 1990s by using early retirement packages, they were very reluctant to dismantle the system. As a result, the composition of the village guard system changed through new recruits who are young locals going through the formal application process and training.

The permanent integration of the village guard system was thus highly related to the nature of the peace process. During the three rounds of the resolution process, there were not only significant paradigmatic differences in the expectations and targets of the two sides (Yeğen, 2015b), but also the process remained “exclusively focused on talks between the PKK and the AKP government, without any measures to promote the construction of new narratives and routines” (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017: 280). It also left no room for non-state actors to interact and produce a stable peace (Özpek, 2017). Rumelili and Çelik argue that failing to create an altered sense of ontological security made the peace process highly vulnerable to spoilers on both sides, who saw opportunities for greater political and strategic gain by resuming the conflict, and facilitated a sharp and largely uncontested return to conflict narratives and practices when both parties left the negotiations (ibid). The question of dismantling the guard system has become one of the crucial aspects of this altered sense of ontological security and village guards were seen as the main potential spoilers. Despite this, however, and as discussed throughout this article, it was not the guards who acted as spoilers. In fact, it was the Turkish state who was reserved in dismantling the system and showed a preference towards keeping the village guards intact, but as a much more disciplined and standardized local security force under the direct control of the state. Recent developments regarding the village guards also point towards their further integration. In November 2017, The Ministry of Interior announced that they have opened the channels for village guards to become military officers.<sup>9</sup> In October 2018, on duty and retired village guards were given the right to possess and carry personal arms by a presidential decree.<sup>10</sup> The name of the system was changed from “village guards” to “security guards”<sup>11</sup> and their employment opportunity was extended beyond village borders. Originally established as a parallel security force, by 2018 the system was legally integrated in to the formal security

structure of Turkey. These overlapped with the guards' demands for inclusion in post-conflict structures. The result was not only the integration of the village guards into the Turkish military but also the transformation of the security structure of Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

The case of village guards in Turkey shows that the state-militia relationship can take a variety of trajectories both during and after conflict. As regimes change, so does the pattern of this relationship. Similarly, as dynamics of conflict change, so does the role of militias. In the literature on militias, the role of militias during peace processes and in post-conflict periods is mostly discussed with reference to the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants, and they are assumed to likely to develop a strong incentive to spoil peace after the conflict's termination. In practice, however, very little is known about the actual practices and attitudes of these groups during peace processes and in post-conflict periods. This article discussed the roles and attitudes of village guards in the peace processes by relying on their narratives, and thus contributed to fill this gap in the literature.

We showed that reintegrating militias in post-conflict societies cannot always be conceived of as a linear process requiring a sequential approach: disarmament followed by demobilization followed by reintegration. In the case of Turkey's village guards, integration happened without disarmament and demobilization. However, this pattern of integration cannot be explained by any single criterion, such as state weakness, the strategic and operational utility of militias or even state ideology. In fact, militias' own interests and collective agency as well as the strategies of state actors towards the peace process are crucial in explaining the integration of village guards.

This article further explored that under certain conditions militias may not be very likely to develop a strong incentive to spoil peace efforts despite the fact that peace efforts may threaten the political, physical, and economic empowerment that militia members enjoyed during the conflict. In fact, militias' spoiling incentives are constrained by both the state and local communities. In cases in which viable peace building structures are lacking but where networks among militias are dense, integration of militias into the formal military structure may provide a viable strategy for containing spoiling incentives of militias. By focusing on the permanent integration of militias to the security structures, the debate here has also contributed -albeit indirectly- how conflicts transform not only the military cultures but also the formal structures of the armies through inclusion of wartime structures. We, hence, suggest that scholars interested in the transformative power of conflicts with respect to social networks and political institutions should pay more attention to the role of militias in these transformations.

The long-term outcome of the permanent integration of village guards into the security structure of Turkey is yet to be seen. How this integration is going to be perceived by the Kurdish public, and probably more importantly by the PKK, will significantly affect the long term outcome. But so far, it seems that guards' integration into the Turkish military structure has, to a large extent, prevented their spoiling potential. Our findings from the case of village guards in Turkey suggest a high degree of correspondence between integration and spoiling potential of pro-government militias. Future research might extend these findings by exploring the extent to which integration of militias into formal security structures provides a viable strategy for containing spoiling incentives of militias during peace processes.

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## Notes

1. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-attack/family-rivals-kill-44-over-bride-feud-in-turkey-idUSTRE5436CD20090505> [04.10.2019]

<sup>2</sup> For a partial use of the research data from a different perspective see Acar, Y. G. (2019).

3. Changes to the Village Guard Village Law's 74th and 82nd clauses (3175/1) was approved by parliament on March 26th, 1985.

4. <http://www.kpsscafe.com.tr/kpss-haberleri/2018-de-guvenlik-korucusu-alimi-yapilacak-iste-sartlar-astsubay-h84554.html> [04.10.2019]

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(<http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.3.442.pdf>) [04.10.2019]

6. Law No. 5673, Official Gazette No 26540, June 2, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> In 2014 minimum wage was 890 Turkish Lira. Village guards' salary was 400, while the lowest ranked military personnel's' (corporal) 2000 (4 times the village guards). In 2015 guards' salaries increased to 740, minimum wage to 940, and corporals to 2500 (about 3 times the guards). In 2019 guards are receiving the minimum wage (2000 Turkish Lira) while corporals receive around 4200 Turkish Lira (2 times the guards). Overall, the salaries of village guards has increased significantly (500% between 2014 and 2019), and the wage gap has been closing down, but they still receive half of the lowest ranked military personnel.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150925\\_yeni\\_korucu\\_alimi](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150925_yeni_korucu_alimi) [04.10.2019]

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.diken.com.tr/soylu-duyurdu-koy-koruculari-subay-olabilecek/> [04.10.2019]

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.diken.com.tr/koruculara-silah-tasima-ruhsati-verilmesi-resmilesti/> [04.10.2019]

<sup>11</sup> Initially by an emergency governmental decree (Official Gazette No. 29872, October 29, 2016), and then by Law No. 7070 (Official Gazette No. 30354, March 8, 2018).