Youth and Terrorism: Example of PKK

Necati Alkan, PhD
General Directorate of Security
Turkey

13-14 September 2007
HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY
Ankara/TURKEY
Youth and Terrorism: Example of PKK

Necati Alkan, PhD
General Directorate of Security
Turkey

Introduction

One of the most important problems that confront many countries in the 21st century is terrorism. Indeed in the recent years debates and researches on this problem as well as the search for an international co-operation to tackle have considerably increased. Particularly after the 9/11 the search for solution has further increased.

In Turkey, terrorism has been one of the biggest problems that threaten the general security for long years. Since years Turkey has been trying to tackle terrorism as a security problem and thus provide a solution. However, the recent researches indicate that terrorism is not only a security problem but a fact that is based on economic, social, cultural, political and psychological problems. (İlhan, 1998:5)

There are certain elements that keep terrorist organisations alive: ideology, internal and external support, funding and human. The last element, the human resources, is the most important element therefore, a terrorist group may have a very strong ideology, unlimited funding and domestic-foreign support but unless it has the human resource that will keep it going it is not possible for the group to continue existing.

In that context, one of the most significant topics that need to be addressed when examining terrorism is “the identity of the terrorist”. When the terrorist groups in Turkey which are separatists and disruptive and which exploit religious beliefs are analysed, it is observed that the main source of recruitment is the youth (Alkan, 2002; Cantekin, 2006).

This study constitutes of four main headings. First the “Profiles of the Militants Active in PKK” is addressed and then the “Correlation between the Youth and Terrorism” is discussed. This is followed by some attempts to explain the “Youth Organisations of PKK” and “The Methods PKK uses to Recruit the Youth”. In the conclusion, some suggestions and
solutions are given on the precautions that should be taken to prevent the recruitment of terrorists groups are given.

1. The Age, Education, Marital Status and Occupational Profile of the Militants that are Active in PKK”.

When Alkan and Yücel searched the Internet website of the terrorist organisation PKK [www.serixwehun.com/martyrs](http://www.serixwehun.com/martyrs) by (Alkan and Yücel, 2002), they found that the organisation was publicising information, such as the date of birth, recruitment date and date of death, pertaining to their so-called martyrs who lose their lives in armed conflicts with the law enforcement agencies.

By means of random sampling of the so-called martyrs album published on this website, the dates of birth, dates of recruitment and death of 216 militants were put through statistical analyses through SPSS program. This resulted in the production of the following profiles which indicates the ages these militants join the group and how many years they survive in average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Distribution</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unanswered</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 14-25</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>77,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 26-35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 36-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the average age of the 216 PKK convicts who were killed in an armed conflict with the law enforcement agencies while they were involved in PKK is analysed it is found that 77,4% of them joined the group when they were between 14 – 25, and 18,1% between 26-35. These facts are also supported by the findings in the research Cantekin (2006:117) made on the statements of the 97 PKK convicts who either surrendered to or were arrested by law enforcement agencies. Indeed, as per that research 77,2% of the PKK militants are between 14 – 25 years old.
The average time these militants who were assigned to the armed wing of the terrorist organisation PKK spend in the group is demonstrated in the table below.

**Table 2. The Survival Time Period of the Militants within the Terrorist Group PKK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long they stay alive within the group</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unanswered</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who die within 0-2 years</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who die within 2-4 years</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who die 4-8 years</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who live more than 8 years</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen in Table:2, 46.5% of the militants who join the armed wing of PKK either die in an armed conflict with the security forces or killed by the organisation within 0-2 years. Meanwhile 21.3% die in 2-4 years, and 21.3% in 4-8 years. These results indicate that 90% of the militants in the armed wing of PKK die within 8 years of their recruitment.

A survey carried out by the Counter Terrorism Command of the Turkish National Police (TEMÜH 1998) created the following table which demonstrate the distribution of the PKK militants as per their education level.

**Table 3. The Distribution of PKK Militants as per their Education Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University Graduate or Student</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-school Graduate or Student</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School Graduate</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School Graduate</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>39.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>19.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As per this table, 11% of the PKK militants are university graduates or students; 16% are high-school graduates or students; 13% are secondary school graduates and 39% are primary school graduates. The KÖK Social and Strategic Researches Foundation’s study on 1003 PKK members between 1994 – 1996 shows that 4,6% of the PKK members are university graduates; 14,4% are high-school graduates; 12,3% are secondary school graduates and 47,2% are primary school graduates (Özönder, 1998:3003). Meanwhile Cantekin (2006:122-123)’s research observes that as the education level decreases, the number of people who join the terrorist group increases.

Cantekin (2006:125)’s research also indicates that 90,7% of the active militants in PKK are bachelors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Correlation between the Youth and Terrorism

As the researches prove, the terrorist organisation PKK recruits young, single and unemployed people who have little knowledge and almost no life experience with a low level of education. That is because the youth constitute the most dynamic, active, sensitive and self-sacrificing – when guided well - group of the society.

As well known, the human being develops recesses and collapses at certain ages of his/her life. These ages known as the childhood, youth, adulthood and old age are not distinguished from one and other by means of precise borders. The preceding age has an influence on the succeeding age. That is why the childhood creates the youth and the youth creates the adulthood (Köknel, 1979:27).
The youth is the period where the human being biologically, psychologically, intellectually and socially matures and thus moves into the realm of adulthood (Yavuzer, 1999:277). Many academicians, philosophers and researchers studied the youth. While the famous philosopher Plato called the youth “a spiritual drunkenness”, Aristotle defined it as “impervious creatures” (Erjem and Kızılçelik, 1996:230).

As per UNESCO’s definition, youth is “a person between the ages of 15 and 25 who still studies, who does not work for a living and does not live in a separate address” (Kışlalı, 1974: 15). Meanwhile, Yörükoğlu described the youth as “the period of development, spiritual maturity and preparation for life between the childhood and adulthood”. The rapid development that starts with puberty ends with the physical, sexual and spiritual maturity at the end of the age of youth. The age of youth which generally starts with the first signs of puberty continues till the development ceases and includes the ages between 12 and 21. (1993: 13).

Within the framework of these definitions, the youth is a social category which consists of individuals who are generally studying, who do not work for a living, who are sensitive to the problems of the society they live in and who are demographically between the ages of 14 and 25 (Erjem and Kızılçelik, 1996:230). In this statement, the individuals between the ages of 14 – 25 are considered the youth.

While the psychologists describe adolescence as the most beautiful, happiest and strongest time of the human life, they also talk about it as a period of “crises” and “depression” (Kırbaş, 2002).

During this period, the young consider themselves worthless and felt insecure. Their emotions tend to shift quickly therefore they feel happy, sad and angry all at once and make problems out of the simplest of things. This is why their reactions cannot be predicted. Since they constantly have ups and downs and an exultant spirit, most of the time they are capricious. There are many things they want to do but they are indecisive and impatient and since they are impatient they want to immediately see the results otherwise they give up on whatever they were involved in. They become selfish and more demanding and consider the rules set for them nonsense and the rights given to them insufficient. They are ardent; they are daydreamers and idealists. They faithfully defend their emotions and opinions; adopt a
relentless stance against injustice; without paying much attention to the existing facts and realities they want that the current social order be instantly changed and the inequalities be eliminated (Yörükoğlu, 1993; Onur, 1987: 105 – 140)

Along with these inconsistent behaviours, the youth have some positive characteristics as well: “being energetic and lively; having a high sense of perception and sensitivity; being fair and tolerant; being flexible, bold, honest, optimistic and charitable; feeling sincere concern for the future of the country and the world and exerting a sincere effort for development” are among those characteristics (Onur, 1986:9). The most important emotion in this age of learning and dynamism when the courage overcomes timidity; desire for adventure overcomes comfort and feelings overcome logic is the feeling of wanting to be freed from authority. Therefore, at this age the young tend to upraise against everybody who is an authority figure – from the parents to the state.

We can say that the terrorist organisations and the organised criminal groups exploit these characteristics the most. Indeed the terrorist group PKK has been using the youth as its human resource since 1984, the year it launched its attacks.

3. **PKK’s Youth Organisations**

The terrorist group PKK was established by Abdullah Öcalan, a student at the Faculty of Political Sciences, and his friends as a youth organisation. Öcalan describes the reasons for this structuring as follows: (EGM, (TNP) ?:126):

...the activities were mostly carried out among the intellectual youth. The intellectual youth has a character of its own. For one thing, as a social category the youth is open to revolutionary ideas; it can easily absorb them. Secondly, since they are the intellectual youth, they constitute a group that is most open to science, that touches base with science the most and that is most prone to adopt the revolutionary ideas. Thirdly, the youth has characteristics that is dashing, ardent and that does not recognise any barriers or obstacles. With respect to these, it was natural and obligatory to conduct activities among the youth.

On the other hand, PKK which states that the youth has the strength and the energy it requires for its fight considers the youth as the vanguard of the fight. Claiming that the labour, tradesmen, etc fight for their own interests, PKK asserts that a fight mainstreamed on
economy would be narrow-minded and limited (Özgür Gençlik Manifestosu, 2004:44). On the other side the youth is considered a force that will fight without any personal or economical interests.

In this context, PKK that wants to organise and use the youth, established and launched the Youth Council of Kurdistan (YCK) in abroad on 25 October 1987, during its 3rd Congress, with a view to organising and recruiting the youth more systematically. After this date, YCK began to organise de facto. It mostly focussed on recruiting members for PKK. Furthermore, around this time they also began to issue their first magazine for the youth in Turkey; “The Revolutionary Patriot Youth” (Özgür Gençlik Manifestosu, 2004:44).

The youth organisation which increased the level of its activities after the 90’s intensified its activities mostly at high schools and universities. Indeed, the organisation experienced the highest number of recruitment after the 90’s from the high schools and universities in abroad and in Turkey. Many young people who lived their first revolution experience under YCK later joined the organisation’s mountain cadres.

The organisation held the Youth Congress between 03-15 August 2003 at its camps in the Northern Iraq during which it terminated YCK and established the Free Youth Movement of Kurdistan (TECAK). It was decided that TECAK would operate in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Europe under the following structures (EGM, 2004:79);

- The Independent Youth Movement in Turkey (BAGEH),
- Democratic Youth Movement in Iran,
- Independent Youth Movement in Iraq (TCM),
- Free Youth Movement in Syria (TCA),
- The Free Youth Movement (ÖGH) in Europe and in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

TECAK was restructured as the Democratic Youth Confederation (DEM-GENÇ) within the framework of a new organisation model established on 20 March 2005, “Democratic Confederation of Kurdistan”. It was stated that as a cultural, flexible and federal organisation this re-structuring should embrace the youth in all layers of the society (TEMUH, 2007:1-2).
Between 26 July – 06 August 2005, TECAK held its 2nd Usual Congress and changed the name of its branches operating in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria to the “Democratic Youth Confederalsm of Kurdistan / Komalen-Ciwan). In December 2005, as the conclusion of the meeting that was held under the name “BAGEH Turkey Conference” with the purpose of restructuring BAGEH and DEM-GENÇ, the organisation terminated BAGEH and replaced it with “the Free, Patriot Youth Movement” (YÖGEH) (TEMUH, 2007:4-6).

In this context, we observe that recently the terrorist organisation PKK has been conducting its attacks against the city-buses in the Metropolitans and its recruitment and propaganda activities in the universities and faculties through YÖGEH.

4. The Methods PKK uses in Recruiting the Youth

In a research on the “police statements” of the arrested PKK members, it was identified that a majority of the young people who operated in PKK had not joined this terrorist group willfully on their own accord. Even if a young individual wants to join PKK, since the group operates covertly it does not very likely that he/she will find them (Alkan, 2002:143).

Equally, Özönder’s research on 1003 PKK convicts verifies this finding. According to this research, 71% of the convicts stated that the members of the organisation have found them and they joined the group though those members (Özönder, 1998:295).

So, being a terrorist is not an inherited trait but a “process of construction”. PKK implements this process of construction by using one-to-one propaganda techniques. The following diagram depicts this process:
The terrorist organisation PKK communicates with a young individual that it wants to recruit, by using friendship, kinsmen, townsmen, social and cultural activities, religious values and ethnic roots. Once it communicates to the individual by using one or more of these values, it gathers rough information on that individual. This information includes the individual’s family structure, vulnerabilities, current friends, economic standards, religion, ethnic and cultural roots, physiological, psychological and social needs (Recruiting Sympathizers and Cadres – I; 2000:189).

After collecting this information, PKK withdraws the individual it wants to recruit into a group dynamism the scenario, actors and stage of which have been pre-set up. Because, in order to make a terrorist organisation or an extremist tendency successful, it must have the power to establish a covert (closed) network right from the start and dissolve and integrate all of its supporters in this network so that they become an indispensable part of the organisation. (Hoffer, 1980: 63).

We can briefly summarise the structure and the functioning of the “group dynamism” in PKK as follows:

a. PKK is a covert organisation that operates in “cell” system. Therefore, PKK builds a wall between its members and the outer world by means of group dynamism. So, not every body is included in the terrorist group at any time he/she wants: because
PKK has covert operations and they approach any willing individual suspiciously. However, they trust those they recruit through their existing members.

b. PKK meets all sorts of physiological, social and psychological needs of its militants in its network. In that context, it finds employment for the unemployed members, it meets their need for affection, respect and belonging, and it provides them an opportunity to live him/herself. Along these, it gives an identity and personality to its members.

c. An individual recruited by the PKK cannot leave the organisation as he wishes; when he wants to leave, the group never lets him go. Therefore, apart from physical torture he/she is subjected to psychological torture as well. At this point, PKK uses two major emotions of the human being; hope and fear. Until it recruits an individual it appeals to the hope but then, once the person has become a member it appeals to the fear in order to keep him/her in the network. Additionally, it marks those who want to leave the organisation with humiliating adjectives such as “fluke” or “traitor” (Ünes, 1999:32-33).

d. PKK has its own system of norms and values. Although these norms and values are not generally in writing, there are a few on paper as well. By means of this system of norms and values the organisation assimilates its members to each other just like in an organic solidarity. In other words, it transforms human beings into a fabricated product.

e. PKK has its own organisation functioning, stereotyped values, purposes and an order of relation. In that respect, it has a solidarity, unison and job sharing in the group and separate expectations from its members.

f. An organisational group has a collective mind, approach, stance and behaviour (Sincar 2001:26). Therefore individuals in the PKK network cannot act as they wish; cannot read the books they like; cannot meet with the people they choose, and; cannot marry the people they want. (Acarsoy, 1987:25). Because the mechanism that directs the lives of the individuals, that thinks and makes decisions on behalf of them, is the collective mind, stance and behaviour of the organisation.

g. There is no place for individualism in PKK, which is an organisational group. Individualism is constantly humiliated while collective organisation is praised / blessed. Rather than the “I” “we” is used. The organisation is everything. Therefore, individuals can always be sacrificed for the higher good of the organisation. (Acarsoy, 1987:25-26).
h. Organisational groups have a very strict hierarchical structure. This structure is built on a cell type group structure and each militant of the organisation can only know the militants in his/her group. The instructions of the organisation’s leader are conveyed to the subordinates through the group coordinators. The information sent to the seniors by the subordinates is again transferred in the form of a report through the group leaders (Sincar, 2001:54).

i. With respect to its hierarchical structure PKK is under the complete control of its leader Öcalan and managed by a monopoly. Öcalan is everything the group has and he has immunity in the organisation: he cannot be criticized and he has absolute domination over the organisation (Deniz, 1996:53).

These conditions which PKK systematically construct remove the individuality of the members as a psychological person and cause them lose their personal identities and characters. In this context, an individual withdrawn towards the group by PKK can no longer think and act on his/her own will. Because the system of common norms and values has already been activated. Therefore, the sole patron and director of the thoughts, emotions and actions of the individual is the group he/she belongs. From now on the individual whose world of thoughts, heart and spirit are trapped/stereotyped acts with a “collective logic”.

By means of using the group dynamism the terrorist organisation PKK changes the stances and perception systems of its recruits and brainwashes and conditions them in line with its ideology. The main purpose in all of this is to erase the identity and the personality the individual has gained from his family and social environment then to replace it with the identity and personality of a militant. The most important purpose of PKK in providing a new identity and personality to its militants is its desire and wish to ensure that all individuals will become a part of the collective organisational identity and personality. (Kişilik Dönüşümü Üzerine Kimi Vurgular III, 2001:50-52). In other words, it is to ensure that the young people will become the threads of an organisational gear.

In his book “True Believer” Eric Hoffer states the following (Hoffer, 1980:86):

“To develop a person in the path of self-sacrifice, it is necessary to separate the individual from his own identity and differences unique to his personality. He must be dissuaded from being a Hussain, an Edvar, an Ali, a Richar as an individual that is stuck between birth and death. The most effective means to
achieve this is to fully adapt the individual to a collective community. A fully adapted individual will no longer consider himself and others individual persons. When he is asked who he is, his automatic answer will be that he is a Christian, a Jew, a German, a Russian, a Japanese (a DHKP/C member, a Hizbollah member, a PKK member). He does not have any objective, value or destiny other than that of the collective community he belongs in. As long as this community lives, there will never be a real death for him.”

That is to say in order to prepare the PKK militants to kill and to die, they must be turned into “a true believer” by being given a new identity and personality.

Additionally, organisational identity and personality provide a legitimate ground for the committed murders. For instance, when an ordinary citizen kills someone even by mistake, his/her life is completely devastated with remorse and grief and in some cases they cannot even continue with their normal lives. However, when the brainwashing of the PKK members is fully completed, a militant will feel no remorse for the murders he/she will have committed. Indeed, after a while, the individuals who are brainwashed and whose spirits are conditioned will not be any different from a robot.

**Conclusion and Suggestions**

As mentioned before, there are certain elements that keep the terrorist organisations alive. These are ideology, domestic and foreign support, funding and members. The terrorist organisations may have an ideology, foreign support and even funding but despite all these without human resources it is not possible for that terrorist organisation to continue to exist.

When the 30 years of combat against the terrorist organisation PKK is analysed, it is observed that there is the misunderstanding which suggests that the problem can be solved only by operational activities. In such operations, the militants of the terrorist group who have been through the above explained phases are either arrested and sent to prisons or killed in an armed conflict. But has this prevented the entire scope of the organisation’s activities? It has not. Because the terrorist organisation PKK recruits a new militant who would fill in the empty place left behind every militant it has lost in the armed conflict. This is why its activities still continues today.
To have absolute control over and terminate the activities of PKK, social projects focusing on human should be developed and implemented. In other words, just like the practice in “Preventive Medicine in Healthcare Services”, the sections of the society which PKK uses as a resource for recruiting new members, particularly the youth, must be well informed about the activities of the organisation, and they must be taught of the methods and ways to avoid catching the “terrorism disease”. We may summarize what can be done to that extent as follows:

1. The most important human resource for the PKK is the youth at high schools and universities. So, each year conferences, training seminars, radio and T.V. shows can be organised for the students, their families and teachers to inform them about the activities and recruitment methods of PKK.

2. OSYM (The Higher Education Council) may attach to the university admission letters of the students pamphlets about recruitment activities of this terrorist organisation.

3. In coordination with the Provincial Departments of National Education, knowledge contests, football matches etc can be organised. These events can be celebrated in the form of a festival where the roles of the Turkish youth in the bright future can be stressed.

4. In coordination with the Provincial Departments of National Education, visits to sites of the Independence War and the War Cemetery of Çanakkale can be organised. Because the National Independence War and Çanakkale are an epic that was created by the whole Turkish society in unison and solidarity, from east to west, north to south. What holds the Turkish society together is in fact the brewing of this epic.

5. The young people who are known to have withdrawn the attention of the terrorist organisation must be identified by the intelligence services and their joining with the organisation must be prevented by means of contacting their families and schools if they are students. Similarly, by using these methods it can be ensured that the young people who are known to have joined the terrorist organisation and who continue to have contact with their families will surrender to the law enforcement agencies.

Briefly, we must not forget that counter terrorism is a whole. While trying to produce a solution to the economical, social, cultural, political and psychological problems that lay
underneath the problem of terrorism, we must continue to take preventative security measures. Additionally, the domestic efforts in counter terrorism must be supported by measures that will be taken in abroad.

References

Köknel, Ö. (1979), * Cumhuriyet Gençliği ve Sorunları*, İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi.
Sincar, V. 2001), *Eğitim ve Örgütlenme Üzerine*, İstanbul: Mem Yayınları.
