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**Against All Odds**  
**Enduring Turkish state repression and the loss of Öcalan**



**Universiteit Leiden**

Bachelor Project: Political Violence and Social Movements

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## 1. Introduction

Social movements originate from the grievances of an oppressed group that mobilises its resources to change the status quo of its perceived mistreatment (Carey, 2006, p. 3). This pattern can also be seen during the formulation of the PKK (*The Kurdistan Workers Party*) which originated in the 1970s in Türkiye and consists of mainly Kurdish communities (O'Connor, 2021). Members of the organisation have used violent tactics to reach their goals of greater autonomy and confronted the Turkish state to mitigate the cultural and human rights oppression (Gürcan, 2016, p. 48). This made the group a target of Turkish state repression which aims to dismantle its structures (O'Connor, 2021, p. 1). Oppressive measures against the Kurdish organization have been continuously pronounced, most recently when Erdogan vowed to “wipe out” the PKK following a car bombing against Turkish security personnel (Paksoy, 2015). Curfews, closure of cultural centres, replacing democratically elected Kurdish officials and urban warfare in South-East Türkiye are attempts of the Government to demobilize the movement and raise the costs of its collective action operations (Bowen, 2016; Kuntz, 2016; Letsch, 2017). It is therefore puzzling that the PKK has continued its activities for almost half a century and has not collapsed, even though most violent movements are successfully oppressed, and the Turkish state allocates many military resources to eradicate it (Alemida, 2019, p. 124; Kuntz, 2016). This research paper, therefore, poses the question: *“Why is the PKK able to continue its operations despite heavy state repression?”*

The research will focus on the availability of a movement's resource infrastructure during state repression and the effect it has on its resilience. It will build on the previous literature to determine how much of the relation between the variables can be explained by the rational choice theory. Many scholars ignore the economic structural aspects of an organization and focus on individual physiological reasons to understand a movement's reasons for conducting collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1215). Overly prioritizing the personal grievances of activists thus ignores factors outside of individual participants which are relevant to the resilience of the opposition. Moreover, the communities that endure state repression are understudied, as most scholars focus on counterinsurgent strategies by the government, even though their agency and choices influence the tactics of the elite too (Nepstad, 2022, pp. 4-5).

Using the PKK as a case study thus helps to gain insights into the relevance of resource infrastructure for the resilience of a social movement that suffers from heavy state

repression. This paper will fill the gap using rational choice theory and an in-depth within-case congruence analysis.

## **2. Literature Review**

The following section will present the arguments that the alteration of the resource infrastructure has a decreasing or increasing effect on resilience to determine which one prevails.

### *2.1 Decreasing Resilience*

Many scholars argue that heavy state repression will have a demobilizing effect on social movements (Nepstad, 2022). First, oppression minimizes the available resource infrastructures and raises the costs for participants to conduct collective action (Nepstad, 2022, p. 1; Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 522). These can include the embeddedness of a movement into the wider population, the behaviour of the leadership and the human and social capital (Almeida, 2019, p. 56). Heavy suppression can thus cause uncommitted members to be less inclined to continue their activities in the organization, as the personal expenses become too high (Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 524). Being shamed by their community for engaging with the movement or psychological consequences such as hopelessness or fear can additionally negatively impact an individual (Bob & Nepstad, 2007, p. 1374). The resource of social unity would thus be reduced. This argumentation aligns itself with the inverted U-shape concept. It suggests that early state suppression mobilizes the population up until a threshold, after which the dismantling efforts of the government will deconstruct the movement and cause its diminishing operation capabilities (Nepstad, 2022, p. 2).

Second, the elite and the state dominate the social and economic environments, as they have a great number of available resources and can obstruct the efforts of the movement to rival them (Almeida, 2019, p. 124). Moreover, eliminating the leader of the organization can cause infighting among senior ranked members to become the head of the collective (Bob & Nepstad, 2007, pp. 1377-1378). If the leader was crucial in connecting opposing factions within the community, their killing would then reduce the unity and potentially cause its demobilization (p. 1381). This was the case after the leader of the PKK, Öcalan, was imprisoned in 1999 by the Turkish state. The influential commanders of the group fought one another to replace him, nearly breaking the resistance (Romano, 2006, p. 61). This type of repression would damage the leadership resources.

Third, the social and human capital resources can be reduced by violently repressing social movements. Killings or imprisoning their members reduces the available skills such as smuggling goods or managing the different branches (Finkel, 2015, pp. 339-341). Indiscriminate violence in particular diminishes the likelihood of learning these abilities which are crucial for the success of an organization (p. 341). The Turkish government, for instance, implemented month-long curfews for residents of villages and cities to control the movement of its inhabitants (Bowen, 2016). Such measures reduced the daily face-to-face interaction and the spread of information in a community, which are important in high-risk resistance, as trust between the members is necessary to overcome collective action difficulties (Loveman, 1998).

## *2.2 Increasing Resilience*

Counterarguments exist that explain how state repression will increase the resilience of a movement and resource infrastructures. Such argumentation aligns with the U-shape concept that predicts initial repression will have a demobilizing effect on a social movement until a threshold of brutality is reached which causes a backfire effect, increasing the resistance against the government (Nepstad, 2022, p. 1). Targeting the human and social capital of a movement, which involves attacking non-violent activities is deemed delegitimizing for a regime (Carey, 2006, p. 1). Unlawful attacks against a community are considered too costly for the individual to bear since they endanger their well-being, thus increasing the incentive for resistance (Moss, 2014, p. 262). Moreover, repression of the leadership resource by elimination also creates a backlash if they are considered a “prophetic leader” by their followers (Bob & Nepstad, 2007, pp. 1377-1378). Such action increases the visibility of the movement's cause and motivates external actors who identify with the head of the organisation to support them too (p. 1379). Additionally, a culture that is familiar with the concept of martyrdom minimizes the costs of militancy, as the leader has already paid the prize for their community and few remaining strategies are perceived to be available to be protected from the violent regime (pp. 1374, 1380).

Similarly, excessive state repression that aims to diminish the unity of a movement can increase the commitment of the activists. This is because they are already subject to violent treatment and seek protection in the collectives of militant social movements that can oppose the state (Mason & Krane, 1989, p. 175; Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 523). Lack of economic opportunities combined with the threat of indiscriminate attacks mobilizes recruits and transforms them into career activists, as they offer selective material and social incentives for

their members (Lichbach, 1994, p. 393; Tezcür, 2016, pp. 248-250). This dynamic facilitates micro-mobilisation processes in which the targeted individuals seek other like-minded people to increase their numbers and effectively resist the state (Sullivan & Davenport, 2017, p. 40). Such groups enjoy social desirability in the wider population, as their activities strive to obtain public goods, which is the reduction of social grievances and the increase of material and social privileges (Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 527). However, members of these organization also provide incentives for each other, as they encourage protest and resistance behaviour, thus adding to the benefits for individuals to join a movement and reducing the participation costs (p. 526). This forms a connected community with shared experiences and goals which enables members to efficiently identify free riders and improve their ability to share information without detection (Clarke, 2018, p. 619; Larson & Lewis, 2017 p. 350). The unity of an oppressed community would thus be increased.

Having reviewed both stances, it is apparent that the strategies for reducing a movement's resource infrastructure influence its resilience by multiple factors. Such repression does not exclusively break an organization or facilitate its rise, it rather can do both (Lichbach, 1987). Rational Choice and resource infrastructure are crucial to understanding which circumstances are important and how they affect each other.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This section will present the relevant concepts, variables and theory that facilitate the case analysis.

#### *3.1 Mobilization*

Mobilization relies on the ability to overcome collective action issues and have efficient access to resource infrastructures, particularly during times of open confrontation. This involves engaging in obtaining public goods (Clarke, 2018, p. 619). An issue of communal activities is that rational individuals can free-ride from the accomplishment of other actors who seek public goods, as there are only a few incentives to participate in costly operations (Ostrom, 2000, p. 138). These can be overcome by offering members selective incentives for participation, which range from material benefits to social recognition (Lichbach, 1994, pp. 416-418). Public goods are non-rival and non-exclusive, making them public and available for everyone, whilst selective incentives are private goods that are exclusive and strategically given to motivate membership (p. 386; p. 406). However, overcoming collective action issues and the resilience of a movement also depend on the



availability of various resource infrastructures, which will be further elaborated upon in the next section (Almeida, 2019, p. 56; Clarke, 2018, p. 619).

### *3.2 Resilience*

The resilience of a movement will be defined by its ability to mobilize recruits to its cause despite the suffered repressions that aim to reduce the availability of a movement's resource infrastructure. This is because the ability to fill the ranks with new members is crucial for the operational capabilities of the organization (Ovalle, 2017, p. 527). Such deficiencies would limit the human capital of the group, depriving them of crucial skills that determine the success of their efforts (Almeida, 2019, pp. 70-72). Movements that use violent resistance strategies rely on a constant stream of recruits since they experience permanent losses in their memberships which require replacements (Ovalle, 2017, pp. 537-538). An organization that can attract new members also displays their position in the broader population, how they are viewed by them and how successful the efforts to limit recruitment by the state are (Sarbah, 2021, p. 82). A community may identify with the insurgents, but the costs of joining them are set too high by the opposing government, thus hindering them from becoming members too (Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 522). But if the oppressed movement can lower the given mobilisation costs by various initiatives and convince individuals to participate in their high-risk resistance, their resource infrastructure is high enough to overcome the state persecution (Loveman, 1998, pp. 483-484).

### *3.3 Resource Infrastructure*

Scholars have identified the relationship between a movement and the population to be a key factor in understanding the dynamics of resource infrastructures on the resilience of organizations (Loveman, 1998, p. 485). O'Connor (2021) argues that the ability of insurgents to integrate and help the daily lives of oppressed communities is a crucial indicator of whether they enjoy sympathies with the wider community (p. 45). Such components are important, as the support of the people a movement claims to represent can determine how many individuals will participate in the collective action and what the likelihood of that is (Jasper & Polletta, 2001, pp. 289-290). Moreover, conducting collective action initiatives becomes less difficult if these can originate from individuals from established organizations or social ties (Almeida, 2019, p. 48). This is because a degree of trust between insurgents and sympathisers is necessary to lower the costs of mobilization, which is already present at previously constructed communal institutions (p. 48). The embeddedness of a social movement and

potential recruits is thus a resource that allows it to broaden its support and improve its resilience.

Leadership is also considered a critical resource that influences the mobilization efforts of a movement (Finkel, 2015, p. 350; Clarke, 2018, p. 619). Bob and Nepstad (2007) differentiate between an administrative and a prophetic leader, in which the former is involved in the organizational and structural aspects of a movement and the former is a motivator and founder (pp. 1377 – 1378). Depending on the category, the loss or change of the leader's involvement can cause the collective to increase its resistance efforts or its demobilisation (p. 1390). How embedded the leader is with the broader community is similarly important as the cohesion of the social networks. This is because the ability to represent oppressed people shapes how much support their movement receives from non-members too (pp. 1379- 1380).

Human and social capital are similar to the previous resources, as they intersect with leadership and social networks. The former will be defined as the skills of the members and leaders in adapting to state repression and organising the movement in a cost-efficient manner (Almeida, 2019, p. 56, 70). The latter is specified as the cohesion within a movement and how well the group can overcome collective action issues such as free riding (pp. 70-72). Moreover, the skills include keeping relevant information hidden from the state, mobilizing weapons for violent resistance and having well-hidden hide-out locations (Finkel, 2015, p. 340-341). The costs of collective action would be high without these abilities.

External support is found to be a crucial resource for social movements (Loveman, 1998, p. 485). This is because third-party support influences the cost calculation, as they provide possible recruits and means of evading government repression with hideouts (Romano, 2006, p. 60). Such aid varies depending on how much foreign actors identify with the group which itself relies on the leader's ability to connect and inspire a broad coalition of oppressed communities (Bob & Nepstad, 2007, p. 1380; Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 526).

### *3.4 Rational Choice*

This paper will use the assumptions of Rational Choice to assess how a social movement's resilience is impacted by state repression. The theory argues that actors are driven by self-interest to maximise their benefits, which is determined by calculating the costs and gains of their actions against each other (Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 522). These can include material and non-material ones such as farmland or social desirability (Carey, 2006, p. 3; Lichbach, 1994, p. 395). Repression is considered an increase in costs for collective

participation, which is already costly without external pressures as it suffers from free-riding issues (Ostrom, 2000). Forming an organization and working together is done to obtain public goods that are nonrival and nonexcludable such as changing discriminative state policies (Lichbach, 1987, p. 275). However, achieving these targets requires the mobilization of multiple activities whose participation must be motivated, as it is rational for them to not participate and still benefit from the public goods (Lichbach, 1994, p. 402). This can be done by providing private goods for members, these need to be rival and exclusive, as non-members would otherwise benefit from them too (p. 391). There are multiple methods to provide such goods, leaders can focus their efforts on collecting public goods and distributing private ones, a movement can monopolize access to specific cost-reducing items and it could offer activism careers to its most valued members to bind them long-term (Clarke, 2018, p. 619; Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 523).

The theory suits the research question because it helps to explain the reasons for sustained participation in social movements (Lichbach, 1987, p. 293). Assuming that individuals are rational actors who base their decisions on a cost-and-benefit analysis enables researchers to methodically assess the strategies of movements to resist state repression (p. 284). This is because it includes concepts such as collective action which argues with defined difficulties of mobilization and how to overcome these (Ostrom, 2000). Analysing an organisation's ability to solve these issues allows scholars to determine a movement's resilience based on specific strategies, such as finding and minimizing free-riding activity (p. 138). Moreover, the theory also accounts for the interdependence of the state and movement relation, as one action against the other will influence the cost-benefit calculation of the rational individual (Carey, 2006, pp. 8-9). The inclusion of resource infrastructures additionally assists in answering the research question. The availability of resources is a cost that can determine the resilience of a movement and the effectiveness of government suppression. Mainly because a reduction of them limits conducting collective action and thus makes an organisation vulnerable to state oppression (Mcadam et al., 2001, p. 41).

### *3.5 Variables and Hypothesis*

The independent variable in this paper will be the availability of the resource infrastructures of the PKK and the dependent variable will be the resilience of the movement. As previously mentioned, these will be analysed under the assumption that both the state and the insurgents are rational. The former aims to raise the costs of the organization's mobilization capacities with its different forms of oppressive tactics. This is done by

decreasing the cohesion of the social movement, limiting the interaction between its members and the broader population, severing the leader from their supporters etc. (Nepstad, 2022, pp. 1, 5). Having established relevant points of analysis and assuming the importance of resource infrastructure for the resilience of an organisation, the following hypothesis will be constructed:

*“The effective use of the resource infrastructures by the PKK allows it to overcome the increasing collective action costs.”*

## **4. Methods**

### *4.1 Research Design*

This research will conduct a congruence analysis to determine the ability of Rational Choice theory to predict the relation between the independent variable, the availability of resource infrastructures and the dependent variable, the resilience of a movement. Moreover, it provides additional information that extends above correlational relations that often derive from large-n analyses (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 5). Using the extreme cases of the different experiences of the PKK and Turkish state repression will strengthen the explanation validity of Rational Choice and control ability of the research, as the case presents an outlier for the theory that has not previously been explored (Van Evera, 2016, p. 52)

### *4.2 Operationalisation*

The dependent (DV) and independent variables (IV) need to be categorized into measurable entities (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 12). The IV, availability of resource infrastructure, will be measured by analysing them individually and how the PKK used these. First, the leadership source will be assessed by reviewing Öcalan’s speeches and commands after his imprisonment during the trials of his legal case. Whether his followers adhered to his demands of laying down arms and committing to a peaceful solution determines how effective the resource for the PKK remained, as ignoring his instruction would equal the loss of Öcalan’s influence within the movement. Second, the geographic location and the amount of financial and material support for the organisation will be used to measure the extent of the external aid resource. Moreover, the official statements of relevant political actors such as the European Court of Human Rights are also included in this category, as they can conduct supportive policies for the insurgents. Third, the embeddedness of the PKK members in the wider population can be understood by the frequency and impact of the interaction between

the two which consists of integrating into regular village activities or solving local disputes. Finally, the social capital will be analysed by the amount and importance of eliminated insurgents and the human capital by the movement's ability to offer private incentives to recruits which would lower free riding and positively impact the cost calculation.

The resilience of a movement, the dependent variable, will be assessed by the continuity of its mobilization capabilities after Öcalan's imprisonment and the accompanying general state repression. The number of recruits before and after the case study will be compared, as this indicates whether the movement still attracted new members despite the increasing costs imposed by the government. Tezcür (2016) provides an extensive dataset that tracks the number of recruits each year until 2012. Moreover, the frequency of protests after the capture of the movement's leader will be analysed by the number of news reports on protests or similar displays of resistance within and outside of Türkiye and personal accounts of sympathisers that reacted to the loss of Öcalan. This provides information about public support for the leader of the PKK and the range of potential mobilization that was sparked by his capture.

### *4.3 Case Selection*

This research has selected the imprisonment of Öcalan in 1999 by the Turkish regime as a case study. This is based on the given criteria of Beach and Pedersen (2019) who state that the choice of a case should include the variables of the study, which are the alteration of the resource infrastructures and its influence on the resilience of the social movement (p. 161).

The imprisonment of Öcalan possesses both variables. State repression aims to increase the costs of collective action by altering the available resources which reduced the mobilisation capabilities and its resilience (Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 522). The leadership of a movement is considered a part of its resource infrastructure and a crucial factor in the human capital (Almeida, 2019, p. 70). The Turkish regime therefore aimed to confine Öcalan which they succeeded in doing in 1999 (Roman, 2006, p. 57). This is an alteration of the availability of resources. Moreover, the PKK's leader is a prophetic one, as he was the founder and crucial mobilizer for the party, which highlights his importance for the continuity of the organisation (Bob & Nepstad, 2007, pp. 1377-1378; Rudi, 2022, p. 84). Its resilience was thus affected, hence the dependent variable is also present in this case.

Finally, the additional criterion for choosing this case was that the PKK's ability to resist the demobilization efforts of the government presents it as an outlier compared to the longevity of other similar movements (Tezcür, 2016, p. 247). The FARC from Colombia, for instance, shares similar Marxist-Leninist ideologies to the PKK and was even called “the longest insurgency” by Leech (2011). Yet, this organization recently had to lay down its weapons and had its resilience broken. The Kurdish movement, however, continued its operations and increased its international standing and support by fighting ISIS during the Syrian Civil War (MacDiarmid, 2015). Analysing the circumstances of their resistance during the capture of Öcalan clarifies how the alteration of its resource infrastructures and the subsequent change of tactics or strategies allowed its mobilization efforts to persist.

#### *4.4 Data Collection*

The data for this research needs to fulfil two criteria for it to be chosen. First, to understand the availability of the resource infrastructure, information about the PKK's ability to efficiently exploit each of them will be collected. Primary and secondary data such as fieldwork from the affected Kurdish regions, news coverage or scholarly work will be amassed to analyse the range of resource utilization. Information about the alteration of resources such as human capital is provided by Tezcür's (2016) “KIM” dataset which displays the annual losses of the PKK.

Second, the data needs to provide information on the resilience of the movement. Specifically how its members were affected by the imprisonment of Öcalan and if the collective action initiatives were altered because of it. The number of recruits will serve as the prime source for this variable. Again, the data formulated by Tezcür (2016) provides extensive information about the yearly membership numbers of the PKK. Finally, primary and secondary data will also be used to assess the frequency of protests, similar acts of resistance and personal accounts that reacted to the loss of the PKK leader. If many news outlets report about such events and an increase in public outrage at the same time, one can assume that the number of protests or their intensity has increased.

## **5. Analysis**

### *5.1 Historical Background*

The PKK was formed in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan and ideologically aligns itself with Marxist-Leninist ideas whilst using a mix of insurgency and terrorist tactics to fight the

Turkish government (Radu, 2001, p. 48; Unal, 2012, p. 435). The usage of such violent methods caused the organization to be heavily oppressed (Gürcan, 2016, p. 57). Despite the attempts to raise participation costs the mobilisation capabilities of the PKK and their resilience remain unbroken even if their recruit numbers are declining (Tezcür, 2016, pp. 260-262). The movement's goals have shifted over the years from spreading socialism in the Middle East to establishing state structures for Kurdish minorities in Türkiye (Romano, 2006, p. 48).

Abdullah Öcalan visited Ankara University to study political science during which his left-leaning Kurdish and nationalistic political ideas began to originate (Romano, 2006, p. 70). He and a core of like-minded individuals left the institution in 1975 for the majority Kurdish region of Southeast Türkiye (see Figure 1) where they began to attract individuals to their cause and convinced them of their ideology. This resulted in a steady rise in their numbers (pp. 71-72). The military coup in 1980, however, forced the organisation to move its centres to Syria to avoid violent crackdowns on opposition factions (p. 50). This situation was maintained until the Turkish government threatened the Syrian regime with invasion if they would not cease the asylum of Öcalan, which they quickly did (p. 57). He then departed and unsuccessfully sought refuge in numerous European countries (“Global Plot”, 1999).

**Figure 1:**

*Visual representation of the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited region in the Middle East*



*Note:* The map displays the geographic location of the Kurdish majority regions across multiple countries with the largest one residing in Türkiye. Source: Encoclypida Britannica, 2019.

The Greek government supported Öcalan's struggle against Türkiye and offered him protection in their embassy in Nairobi, Kenya (Smith, 1999). Yet, pressure from the US and the Turks forced him out of the state facilities, after which he was captured by a group of Turkish armed forces ("Global Plot", 1999). His imprisonment sparked global outrage among the Kurds and PKK sympathisers (Romano, 2006, p. 163; "Woman Burns", 1999). The embassies of Greece, Kenya and Israel across the world, whose secret service is believed to have helped the Turkish state capture Öcalan, faced violent protests ("Three Kurdish Protestors Shot", 1999). Their staff was in some instances taken hostage by his supporters and the violent clashes between PKK members and Turkish security personnel increased ("Avenging Ocalan", 1999). The Turkish state believed that it had permanently crippled the organization, but despite sustained setbacks, the Kurdish movement was able to continue its operation after the capture of Öcalan (Romano, 2006, p, 181).

## *5.2 Case study, Öcalan's Imprisonment*

Having explained the historical background of Öcalan's capture, the argument for the importance of the resource infrastructures for the resilience of the movement will be elaborated upon. The dependent variable, resilience, will first be assessed after which the independent variable, resources, are listed and to what extent they were available to the organization. A comparison with an alternative explanation will be conducted to strengthen the robustness of the argument, ensuring the validity of the relationship between the variables and the rational choice's ability to explain the case.

### *5.2.1 Resilience After Öcalan's Capture (DV)*

The loss of the PKK's leader was accompanied by state repression, as the state of emergency in the South-Eastern regions was still ongoing, Kurds within Türkiye continued to be internally displaced and the number of violent clashes in 1999 numbered 488 (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Therefore, the following analysis will include his imprisonment and general oppression. These state actions did not break the resilience of the movement, rather a backfire effect can be seen. Mainly because of an increase in global pro-Kurdish protests, the rising number of recruits, and a continuation of fighting capabilities that occurred.

Tezcür's (2016) data displays that fewer people joined the PKK until 1999 when the numbers were boosted by well-educated Kurds which highlights the mobilizing effect of the event (p. 257). Thousands of members remained active in Europe, Türkiye and Iraq and the organisation's capabilities to resist and conduct operations were also not dismantled (Aydin &



Emrence, 2015, p. 28; Yavuz, 2001, p. 13). This can be seen by actions such as the killing of 13 civilians in Istanbul after the imprisonment by the “Revenge Hawks of Apo” or continuous attack on Turkish military personnel in eastern Türkiye (“Avenging Ocalan”, 1999; Gunter, 2000, p. 851). The remaining leaders of the PKK were even able to credibly threaten further escalation of the conflict if Öcalan were to be executed (“PKK calls for moderation”, 1999).

Öcalan’s capture sparked global demonstrations and violent attacks against the embassies of the countries that assisted Türkiye in trapping him (Hooper & Kundnani, 1999). These included the ones in Kenya, which was the country of the leader's imprisonment. Still, these events also occurred all over Europe such as in Berlin, Germany (“Three Kurdish Protestors”, 1999). The reporters even witnessed the self-immolation of multiple Kurds as a show of defiance (“Women Burns”, 1999). UN institutions such as the UNHCR were attacked by protesters which led the remaining leadership of PKK to call for a halt of such activities (“PKK calls for Moderation”, 1999; “Three Kurdish protestors”, 1999;). Headlines such as: “Arrests sparks fury” further display the effect of Öcalan’s imprisonment at the time and allow for the assessment that the operation to eliminate the leader of PKK led to a backfire effect instead of its demobilization (“Arrests sparks fury”, 1999). Considering these sources, the Turkish plans to dissolve the PKK via the capture of their leader and continuing repression against the Kurdish regions failed.

## 5.2.2 Resource Infrastructures (IV)

This section will elaborate on the resources available to the movement and argue that their efficient use resulted in the resilience of the organization.

The Turkish state aimed to increase the costs of collective action by eliminating the leader of the organization and assumed that this would cripple them, an expectation that was shared by many observers (Romano, 2006, p. 60). He was sentenced to death, representing the strategy of stripping the PKK of their leadership resource. However, multiple factors caused the sentence to be replaced with a life in prison judgment, which enabled his survival and the opportunity to continue directing the movement. These include the threats of the organization to escalate the conflict if he were to be murdered, which was taken seriously as the PKK was still able to conduct confrontational operations (“Öcalan warns court”, 1999). The cultural importance of Martyrdom among Kurds also caused anxiety in the Turkish elite, as they feared that Öcalan could become a symbol of resistance and increase the efforts against them (Rudi, 2022, p. 92).

Worse for the Turkish government was that Öcalan transformed his trial into a platform to express his new teachings to a wider audience (Gunter, 2000, p. 853). His lawyers additionally ensured that his ideas would be heard by the PKK and the global news agencies (“Öcalan warns court”, 1999). He realized that the violent struggle of the PKK would not lead to the fulfilment of its goals and or save himself, therefore, a new strategy was expressed in the tribunal (Gunter, 2000, p. 853). A demand for the PKK to lay down its weapons and negotiate a peaceful solution to the conflict was pronounced which would lead Türkiye to a democratic future (p. 855). He expected some of his followers to hand themselves into the Turkish authorities to express a willingness to non-violence and a retreat from Türkiye, which was respected and executed (p. 861). The continuation of the leadership resource became further exacerbated after the PKK’s remaining officers formed a presidential council in which they unanimously elected Öcalan as their leader (p.850). Moreover, the presence of his brother as a senior commander for the PKK also allowed him to continue his influence on the movement (“PKK members attempt to”, 2013). A family status with Osman Öcalan may have ensured unquestioned loyalty between the two.

Abdullah Öcalan therefore remains a crucial factor in the national identity of the Kurdish people (Gunter, 2015, p. 849). He dismantled the traditional tribal links of the community and introduced the ideas of socialism and the anti-colonial struggle against the Turkish state to many communities (Yavuz, 2001, p. 12). His followers study his teaching, texts and speeches while his authority and leadership remain unquestioned (Rudi, 2022). The hopes of the Turkish government to strip the PKK of their leadership resource and thus increase the costs of collective action failed. Instead, the ability to efficiently exploit the resources allowed the movement to keep collective action costs low and prevent them from becoming too high. If costs were increased by the repression, countermeasures allowed them to lower them again. The insurgents were, for instance, unsure about laying down their weapons once Öcalan asked them to do so, yet he communicated with his followers well enough for the leadership resource and his charismatic effect to not cease (Gunter, 2000).

The Turkish government successfully reduced the external support resource for the PKK by increasing its political pressure on Syria, Greece and Iraq which were previously openly harbouring Öcalan and the PKK (Romano, 2006, p. 51). The organization was thus weakened, as parts of their support basis were dismantled, thus raising the costs of conducting collective action (Yavuz, 2001, p. 15). Yet, the Kurdish diaspora offered a counterweight to that loss and continued its financial and institutional support for the movement (Aydin &

Emrence, 2015, p.26). The former is done by participating in trafficking drugs and extorting money from local business owners, which accumulates to millions of US dollars annually. This material support is used to purchase weapons or pay the salary of its members (Bernd & Ekberg, 1999). Moreover, the PKK attempts to become the representative voice for the Kurds in Europe and successfully recruits additional members for its cause (Kelly, 2000, p. 163).

The latter is facilitated by connecting with political actors on the supranational level in the European Union (Kelly, 2002). The PKK had already made these contacts with individuals from the European Socialist faction or the European United Left (p. 92). This was done to increase pressure on the Turkish government to not execute Öcalan and to improve the human rights situation in the Kurdish regions of the country (p. 91). This became effective as Türkiye was committed to becoming a member of the EU and thus was sensitive to keeping the positive relationship with Europe (p. 91). The ability to influence the membership negotiations was understood as a tool to realize the goals of the PKK, the execution of Öcalan for instance was successfully hindered by the European Court of Human Rights and EU officials (p. 114). It can be concluded that the external support resource was diminished after his capture, but the efforts of the diaspora meant that these structures of foreign aid did not cease to exist, thus having the collective action costs low enough.

A social movement is strengthened if many individuals have had similar experiences as this facilitates its embeddedness into the larger community (Almeida, 2019, p. 70). Extreme measures to diminish the social cohesion of the Kurdish communities were discussed by the Turkish government which included deporting them across Türkiye, yet these did not materialize on a large scale (Jongerden, 2001, p. 82). Instead, Kurdish villages were armed by the state to defend themselves against the PKK, which was an attempt to create disunity among the communities (Human Rights Watch, 2000). However, the base support for the insurgents was high enough that these state efforts and Öcalan's capture did not lead to a reduction of its popular support. Rather, the village guard system was abused and often terrorized the local communities. This made the PKK appear to be the liberator and Öcalan's imprisonment backfired. Additionally, measures such as the existence of marital law, the killing of civilians, and a ban on the Kurdish language in public spaces provided Kurds who wanted to practice their culture with shared grievances (Human Rights Watch, 2000) These experiences caused the different Kurdish communities in Türkiye to experience a collective trauma and thus increased their feeling of unity and solidarity to each other (Human Rights Watch, 1999; Tezcür, 2016, pp. 247-250). Öcalan himself claims that the cohesion of his

people was strengthened the most by the Turkish repression, as it gave many families a martyr and a reason to want revenge (Aydin & Emrence, 2015, p. 32).

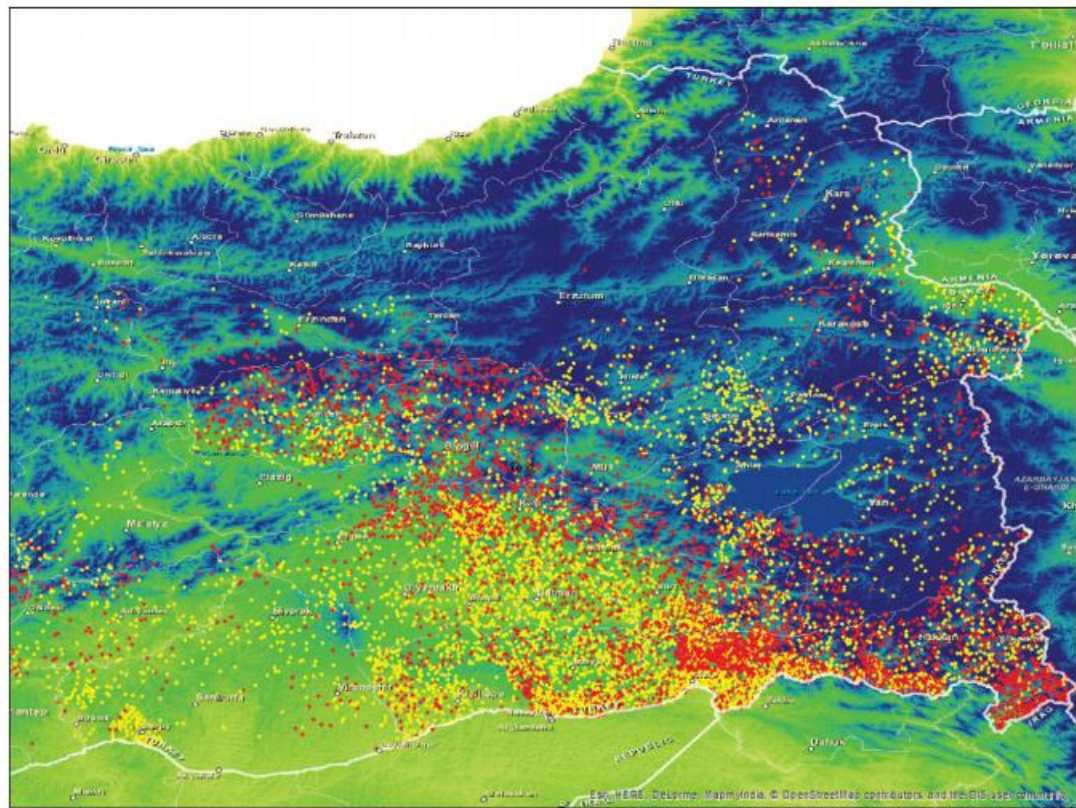
The PKK is aware of the importance of social cohesion amongst the Kurdish population which is why they incentivise their guerillas to spend time in various villages and interact with the locals (O'Connor, 2021, p. 135). They additionally use the diversity in backgrounds of their members by mixing them so that people, who would otherwise not have met, construct bonds. This was hoped to increase the unity of the movement and Kurds (Tezcür, 2016, p. 250). Moreover, they successfully became the main representative of the Kurdish struggle inside and outside Türkiye (O'Connor, 2021). The organization offered services to many villages that did not experience the benefits of state institutions, mixed its diverse members and highlighted the universal cultural and economic grievances of the Kurds against the Turkish state (Tezcür, 2016, p. 250; O'Connor, p. 83). The PKK thus became well embedded into the larger Kurdish community in Türkiye. The Turkish repression that aimed at reducing this connection severely backfired and led to the strengthening of the bond between the guerillas and the population. They efficiently used their resources to their advantage and increased their resilience.

The Turkish regime committed indiscriminate violence in the Southeastern regions of Türkiye (see Figure 2) with the hopes of eliminating the PKK insurgents and dismantling the human capital resource (Jongerden, 2001, p. 80). Such strategies could have led to the loss of important individuals who possessed crucial management skills and tactical knowledge of guerilla warfare (Finkel, 2015, p. 342). Kurdish insurgents enjoy a level of basic education and skills in guerilla warfare, which increases their adaptability and effectiveness in opposing the Turkish regime (Rudi, 2022, p. 87). Even though the state eliminated large amounts of insurgents annually, they failed to reach a critical threshold which would have led to the group's dismantlement (Tezcür, 2016).

**Figure 2:**

*Visual representation of killed insurgents and their birthplaces in Türkiye from 1984-2012.*

**FIGURE 3. Geographical Variation in Insurgent Recruitment and Deaths in Turkey (1984–2012)**



*Notes:* Source: KIM dataset. The map focuses on eastern Turkey. Yellow dots represent the birthplaces of insurgents; red dots their death places. Each dot stands for one insurgent. Bluish areas are high altitude and greenish areas are low altitude.

*Note:* This map encompasses the region of South-Eastern Türkiye which is the epicentre of the Kurdish population in the country. The Yellow dots display the birthplaces of the PKK insurgents while the red ones where they were killed. Source: Tezcür, 2016, p. 258.

Critically, the senior officials whose organizational skills and experience were heavily relied on were not killed (Gunter, 2000). They restructured the chain of command after the loss of their leader so that they could facilitate their collective action efforts without Öcalan’s direct involvement. Moreover, they were adept enough to implement his new orders. They succeedingly convinced their fighters to cease violent resistance against the Turkish regime in favour of a peaceful solution (p. 861). Being able to fulfil the transformation in strategies and not fall into infighting displays, the PKK’s skills of altering their methods according to the situation and that the movement is united to the same principles. The potential costs of infighting or the loss of leadership were thus omitted whilst the human capital resource was effectively used.

The previously mentioned state repression also influenced the cost calculation of potential PKK recruits and members, as participating in the collective action in the movement

would mean violence from the Turkish government. Raising the costs of association with the movement can increase free-riding and reduce membership numbers (Opp & Roehl, 1990, p. 522). Such dynamics lower the social capital resources and resilience. However, the repression resulted in a backfire effect again, as the PKK exploited the lack of institutional services in Southeastern Türkiye and offered a wide range of private goods (O'Connor, 2021). This allowed them to continuously attract new members and decrease the effects of free-riding.

For instance, an incentive for Kurdish individuals who felt excluded by Turkish society would be that they were offered a welcoming community and a sense of belonging by the PKK (Yavuz, 2001, p. 11). They also facilitated cultural expression, such as openly using their language or celebrating Kurdish holidays without fearing persecution (O'Connor, 2021, p. 135). Someone who values these aspects would include them in their cost calculation and deem them low enough to join the movement. Additionally, since the fighters often have a higher educational background than many rural Kurds or were educated by the movement, they also help with bureaucratic and medical issues (p. 45). When the Turkish government fails to adhere to its responsibilities as a state, such as judicial services, the PKK steps in and settles local disputes (p. 136). Economic incentives are also given to its members, which is particularly important for the poverty-ridden Kurdish regions (Tezcür, 2016, p. 256).

Furthermore, the insurgents offered the private good of protection for many Kurds since the usage of indiscriminate violence by the Turkish state left many civilians vulnerable (O'Connor, 2021, p. 45). It can be argued that the attempts to raise the costs with suppression lowered the costs of guerrilla participation. This is because the Kurds were exposed to constant threats to their life and material wealth, which are mitigated by membership. Finally, possessing a martyr in the family incentivises the remaining relatives to seek revenge, thus becoming an incentive which the PKK is the most capable of offering (Tezcür, 2016, pp. 248-250). As Öcalan was deeply embedded into the Kurdish identity, his imprisonment and possible execution also made him a martyr, additionally galvanizing individuals to seek retribution. This can be seen in Tezcür's (2016) interview with LXIII who explained that: *"She almost had a heart attack when she heard his capture. She decided to join the fight"* (p. 257).

Finally, eliminating Kurdish collaborators such as the ones who were integrated into the Turkish village guard system, free-riding, or being an opponent of the movement was disincentivised (Yavuz, 2001, p. 12). This, combined with the organization's ability to provide

private incentives to potential sympathisers or recruits and that the indiscriminate violence of the Turkish state, meant that the costs of joining the PKK were not as high and the benefits often outweighed the costs. The social capital was therefore efficiently used and the capture of Öcalan or the state repression did not reduce its exploitation.

### *5.3 Alternative Explanation*

Scholars such as Schoon (2015) argue that the legitimacy of the PKK in the eyes of the Kurdish population is the key component of its resilience (p. 267). This is because a social movement's access to material support, the willingness of its members, and other resources depend on the relationship between the organization and the communities it claims to represent (p. 268). The researcher highlights that the PKK's ability to exploit various sources of legitimacy allowed it to not become overreliant on a single group (p. 280). Such dynamics were achieved by emphasising the need for violent socialist resistance against the Turkish state which curtailed the heavily oppressed Kurds during the 1980s (p. 274). Or, by expressing the desire to resolve the conflict peacefully and achieve an equal democratic state in Türkiye in the 2000s, the group increasingly therefore became recognized by the larger moderate Kurdish population (p. 275).

Though presenting a reasonable argument, the claim ignores crucial factors that additionally allowed the PKK to continue its operations (Johnson et al., 2006). External support, for instance, is often necessary to purchase the arms to conduct violent resistance. Entirely relying on sympathisers within the Kurdish community reduces the availability of financial donors. Possessing multiple sources of assistance increases the movement's material wealth, receiving aid only from the represented population is thus not enough (Romano, 2006). Resource infrastructures include various factors that explain how an organization gains the means to fund its guerilla operations while the legitimacy argument puts too much emphasis on the dynamics between the insurgents and the wider population (Almeida, 2019, pp. 47-50).

Moreover, legitimacy does not take into account the cost calculation that rational individuals conduct to decide whether joining the collective action is worth it. Private incentives and measures that counter cost-increasing state repression must be conducted to tilt the judgement of potential members in the organisation's favour (Carey, 2006, p. 3). Little incentives would otherwise exist that could convince recruits to join the PKK. The movement recognized this and it accordingly offered economic or educational benefits (Yavuz, 2001, p. 11). Thus, legitimacy presents a valuable component in understanding the resilience of an

organisation under state oppression. However, its importance should not be overemphasized, as it is not enough to explain these dynamics entirely by itself. Rational choice and the resource infrastructure argument incorporate a wider range of critical factors that determine the success of overcoming government repression.

## **6. Conclusion**

### *6.1 Summary*

This paper answered the question of why the PKK was able to continue its operations despite heavy Turkish state repression. It used rational choice and its assumptions to answer this question. It explained that the failure to eliminate the resource infrastructures of the Kurdish movement facilitated its resilience and hindered the dismantlement efforts. Though the oppression raised the costs significantly, it stopped short of leading to total collapse (Aydin & Emrence, 2015; Romano, 2006). The PKK countered these measures with strategies to increase the efficiency of exploiting their resources. Öcalan continued his communication with his followers, external support via the Kurdish diaspora in Europe still operated, the loss of their leader motivated Kurds to join the organization and incentives and skills were present (Aydin & Emrence, 2015; Gunter, 2000; Tezcür, 2016; O'Connor, 2021). The posed hypothesis that: *“The effective use of the resource infrastructures by the PKK allows it to overcome the increasing collective action costs”* is thus supported by this paper.

The results of this research further highlight the relevance of Rational Choice Theory in the social sciences and its ability to explain complex and dynamic cases. Its baseline assumption can be used to explain outlier examples such as the resilience of the PKK under decades of heavy state repression and loss of leadership, which caused many similar left-leaning movements to dismantle (Ovalle, 2017). The findings additionally emphasise the importance of resource infrastructure in understanding how cost-benefit calculation shapes the choices of rational individuals. It shows that they are crucial to the success of resistance and efficiently using and exploiting them can allow a movement to overcome harsh environments.

### *6.2 Limitations and Future Research*

This paper made use of a single case study to answer the research question, which comes with some shortcomings. First, the generalizability of the results is limited, as there could be other factors and variables that influence the resilience of the movement during the case study. However, the PKK represents an outlier, as most similar organizations eventually



collapsed, thus reducing the severity of this limitation. Future research could use multiple single case studies to assess the relationship between two variables and the ability of a theory to explain it, improving the ability to control for confounding variables.

Second, the researcher's inability to fully comprehend Turkish academic papers reduced the available data. Collecting information from Turkish sources could be done by using sophisticated translation tools or conducting joint research with someone who speaks and reads the language fluently.

Finally, to strengthen the results of the paper, a comparative study with the PKK and a similar social movement that collapsed could be conducted. This would allow researchers to assess whether the availability of the resource infrastructures at the Kurdish organization was critical to explaining its resilience and why the other failed. The FARC from Colombia presents a potential case for such research since its ideology and tactics are similar enough (Ovalle, 2017).

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