From Terrorism to Legitimacy?
Lessons from Turkey’s Kurdish Problem

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POLS 596 – Capstone, Dr. David Shirk
April 28, 2016
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I. Introduction

The Kurdish question has been one that has plagued Turkish domestic and foreign policy since the country’s inception in 1923. While the Kurds had enjoyed relative autonomy under the Ottoman millet system, Ataturk’s push to create a new, unified Turkish nation meant that the Kurds would be forced to assimilate and reject their Kurdish heritage. As Ataturk famously stated, they were not Kurds but “Mountain Turks.” This ideology was further reinforced after the military coup of 1980 and the subsequent draconian constitution of 1982. Just two years later, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) would become the face of the Kurdish problem as it began its violent uprising in 1984. For the first decade and a half of its insurgency, the PKK earned its designation as a terrorist organization through its targeted attacks of civilians—and even fellow Kurds—both within Turkey and abroad. However, 1999 marked a turning point for the PKK as they seemed to shift its strategy away from “terror tactics” and instead focus on more legitimate means of achieving its goals. Three key events that took place that year served as catalysts for this shift: the capture of their leader, Abdullah Ocalan; the success the pro-Kurdish HADEP party had in local elections; Turkey’s recognition as a candidate for full membership to the EU. This is not to say that the PKK have rejected the use of violence as a means to an end. However, since 1999, their attacks have largely been against combatant (Turkish military or police) targets within Kurdish-dominated regions. Additionally, whenever the government has seemed legitimately willing to come to the negotiating table, the PKK has called for several unilateral ceasefires so that a peaceful resolution may be reached.

Turkey, for their part, has traditionally attempted to address only the symptoms of the struggle through framing their policies within the context of a public security dilemma and ignoring any of the sociocultural aspects. However, the 2000s brought with it a new hope for a resolution between Turkey and its Kurds. Renewed talks for Turkey to access to the European Union coupled with the electoral victories made by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) brought with it new hope for the opening of a dialogue between the two sides. The head of the AKP, and Turkey’s new Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan became one of only two Turkish leaders to call attention to the Kurdish problem and to admit that a military solution would not be sufficient. While Erdogan has made attempts to address the Kurdish problem, such as the 2009 “Democratic Opening” and the 2012 “Re-opening,” the battle still wages.
While it would be ideal to be able to solve the Kurdish problem once and for all, that is not the goal of this paper. Instead, the object of this paper is to look at snapshots of the decades-long struggle between the PKK and the Turkish government in order to identify if and when changes in the PKK’s strategy took place. This approach will hope to identify answers to two key questions: 1) why did the PKK decide to change their strategy; and 2) what can the Turkish government due to further encourage an end to violence.

In order to answer these questions, this paper will first look at the historical background of the relationship between the Turks and the Kurds from Ottoman times through the capture of Ocalan in 1999. Next, I will use data on PKK attacks gathered from both the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and my own independently-collected database to attempt to identify trends or shifts in the PKK’s use of violence. I will then look at the events that took place between the PKK and the Turkish government from 2000 until present day and use the results from the data analysis in an attempt to correlate decreases in the PKK’s use of violence to specific events that took place. Finally, I will draw conclusions based on an analysis of all of the information and give recommendations on how issues might be able to be resolved.

II. History of Kurds/PKK

Relative Autonomy to Forced Assimilation

In order to understand the motivations of the modern Kurd, it is necessary to first understand their history. The Kurds are a distinct ethnic group in the Middle East which has existed for millennia. They are indigenous to the region now commonly referred to as Kurdistan which occupies the Mesopotamian plains and highlands which now span across southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran. They have their own unique culture, traditional dress and language—Kurdish—which is most closely related to Persian and Pashto. Kurdish specialist Michael M. Gunter best describes the Kurdish nation throughout history in the following passage:

The Kurds themselves claim to be the descendants of the Medes, who helped overthrow the Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE, and recite interesting myths about their origins involving King Solomon, jinn (supernatural beings that can take human or animal form and influence human affairs), and other magical agents. Many believe that the Kardouchoi—an ancient people believed to be the ancestors of the Kurds—gave his 10,000 Greek mercenaries a terrible mauling as they retreated from Persia in 401 BCE. In the seventh century CE, the conquering Arabs applied the name Kurds to the mountainous people they Islamicized in the region. Although semi-independent
Kurdish emirates such as Ardalan existed into the middle of the nineteenth century, there has never been an independent Kurdistan (literally, land of the Kurds) in the modern sense of an independent state.¹

Until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of Kurds would live under Ottoman rule where they enjoyed relative autonomy under the millet system. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire post-WWI, the Today, the number of Kurds—although somewhat difficult to quantify—has been estimated around 30 million, making them the largest stateless nation in the world.

Within the Ottoman Empire’s millet system, the Kurds were treated as a distinct group and were allowed to operate with relative fiscal, judicial, and administrative autonomy. In return, they provided the Empire with taxes and soldiers while providing stability along the Empire’s borders. This is not to say that the relationship was not without its transgressions, especially for the non-Sunni Kurds.² However, the conditions of the relationship between the Ottoman’s and their millets served to quell any potential “national” awakenings.³ This mutually beneficial relationship would last until the mid-19th century when the Ottomans began attempting to homogenize and centralize their state in order to stave off potential nationalistic movements which could chip away at their empire. Even so, the reforms put in place during the 19th century were aimed predominantly at unifying the legal system and not at creating a single, Turkish identity.⁴ Yet once the Revolution of 1908 took place putting the Young Turks and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in power, assimilation policies aimed at creating a national Turkish identity (the so-called Turkification of the state) were instituted; all Kurdish schools in Istanbul were closed down by 1909.⁵

After WWI and the resulting dissolution of the Ottoman Empire by the Allied powers, there was a brief glimmer of hope for the creation of an independent Kurdistan. Under the newly-adopted Wilsonian ideals of self-determination, it was argued that the various nations which had formerly existed under Turkish rule “should

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³ Maya Arakon, “Kurds at the Transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic,” Turkish Policy Quarterly 13, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 140.
⁴ Tas, 512.
⁵ Arakon, 143.
be assured...an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.”6 In fact, the 1920 Treaty of Sevres which abolished the Ottoman Empire included a provision for the creation of an autonomous Kurdistan.7

However, the Kurds faced several hurdles which stood in the way of their path to autonomy. First, unlike other nations emerging from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds found few patrons in Europe who were who were willing to support—either financially or militarily—a separate Kurdistan. Second, the Kurds were impeded by a lack of nationalism: “[t]he doctrine of nationalism only found fertile ground as a reaction to attempts by Turkish, Arab, and Iranian nationalists to assimilate the Kurds whom they looked upon as primitive tribal peoples in need of the benefits of their more highly developed sense of nationalism and modern development.”8 Third, the Kurds themselves still remained divided along tribal, religious and geographic lines which prevented the creation of any centralized Kurdish authority which could speak on their behalf. Finally, in the aftermath of the war, the Kurds weren’t quite sure where their loyalties should lie: should the trust the British, the Turks, the Bolsheviks, the Armenians or themselves? When the Greeks invaded Anatolia in 1919, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk played into the religiosity of pious Kurds—who viewed the invasion as a conflict between Islam and Christianity—to gain their support.9

When Ataturk had successfully pushed back both the Greeks and the British, the Treaty of Sevres was tossed out and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne was negotiated which dashed any Kurdish nationalist hopes. Ataturk would thus come to power in the newly created Turkish republic, bringing with him a vision for a homogenous, secularist, modern Turkey. Ethnic differences were no long recognized and the existence of Kurdish culture and language was completely ignored. Kurds were no longer classified as Kurds; they instead became categorized as “Mountain Turks.” All geographical places in Turkey which bore Kurdish names were replaced with names in Turkish.10

From this point until 2002, any demands for Kurdish autonomy were looked at by the government as threats to Turkey’s national security. For a time, it seemed that Turkey had solved its Kurdish problem with the brutal suppression of attempted Kurdish revolts in both 1925 and 1938. However, the 1970s ushered in a renewal of Kurdish nationalistic fervor with new socio-political developments inside of Turkey and

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8 Gunter, “Unrecognized De Facto...,” 165.
10 Phillips.
the declaration of Iraqi Kurdish autonomy.11 Riding this new wave of nationalism, Abdullah Ocalan would establish an organization in 1978 which has since become synonymous with the Kurdish cause: the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). In the PKK charter, Ocalan “condemned the repressive exploitation of the Kurds” by the Turkish government while calling for the creation of “a democratic and united Kurdistan.” At this point, the PKK was little more than a non-violent leftist group seeking the promotion of Kurdish rights. However, a military-led coup in 1980 put a military regime in power who then passed a new constitution which reversed the country’s more liberal one instated in 1961.12

1980-1999 - The Regime Strikes Back

The new military regime hoped to break the Kurdish resistance through banning both written and spoken Kurdish and also prohibited any cultural activities which could be interpreted as undermining the state. Additionally, any expression of religious, ethnic or cultural differences all became classified terrorist activities as they threatened they too threatened the integrity of the Turkish state. In addition to measures aimed directly at the Kurds, the military regime also instated reforms to curtail public freedoms for all citizens. Civil liberties were limited, the freedom of the press was curtailed and in the influence of trade unions was significantly reduced. Consequently, Europe would become the site of a massive diaspora as hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens—including many Kurds—fled to countries like Germany, Belgium, France and the Netherlands in an attempt to escape persecution.13 As we will later see, exposure to European institutions and legality through the diaspora would lay the groundwork for Kurdish attempts at legitimacy.

Back in Turkey, the newly instituted draconian measures only served to accelerate the use of violence between both sides. Again, Turkey’s response to the “Kurdish problem” was to either deny or belittle the problem altogether and, if met with resistance, use military force. Ocalan and the PKK’s used the actions of the Turkish government towards the Kurds as reason to deny the legitimacy of the Turkish government which, in their eyes, validated both the PKK’s use of violence and its separatist intentions. So, in 1984, the PKK began their first campaign of violence in their fight for rights and recognition.

The Turkish armed forces would wage a war on the PKK militia in the Kurdish

11 Ofra Bengio, “The ‘Kurdish Spring’ in Turkey and its impact on Turkish Foreign Relations in the Middle East,” Turkish Studies 12, no. 4 (December 2011), 620.
13 Eccarius-Kelley, 92.
dominated southeast of the country from 1984-1999, with the exception of a brief respite during the Ozal presidency in 1992. The Turkish military and its allied “village guards” attempted to break the PKK and root out any sympathy that remained among the remaining Kurds. They burned and razed hamlets suspected of harboring or aiding Kurdish guerrillas.\textsuperscript{14} The village guard was the Turks attempt to divide and conquer the Kurds. They consisted of Kurdish families employed by the Turkish government for the purpose of rooting out PKK strongholds and to hopefully put an end to PKK sympathy. Kurdish families who refused to serve as village guards were deemed subversives and were forcibly displaced.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, nearly 37,000 people died with and hundreds of thousands more forced to resettled over the 15 year period.

It should be noted that there would be a glimmer of hope for a Kurdish opening during this time period under the presidency of Turgut Ozal. Ozal had been able to survive the coup in 1980 as the military asked him to remain on as deputy prime minister. He would hold the deputy post until 1983 when he was elected as Prime Minister. Ozal was known for his economic liberalization policies and, in 1987, would sponsor Turkey’s first attempt to join what was the the European Community (EC). When Ozal became president in 1989, he would continue his progressive vision for Turkey and, for the first time since the country’s inception, attempt to address the Kurdish problem.

In 1992, Özal would be the first to no longer frame Turkey’s Kurdish policies within public security concerns. Being of Kurdish heritage himself, he supported the idea of finding a solution to the question by addressing cultural, economic, social and political measures, noting that military solutions alone would not resolve the problem. Ozal suggested taking various political steps, including a general pardon for PKK militants. Additionally, Kurdish reality, Kurdish identity and language would be recognized and some political rights would be granted.\textsuperscript{16} He would even send mediators to negotiate a ceasefire with Ocalan which he agreed to in March 1993 for approximately one month.\textsuperscript{17} Unfortunately, Ozal’s attempts at the first Kurdish opening would be dashed by his death in 1993. Interestingly, there would be many theories revolving around Ozal’s death with many insinuating that murder had been the cause. This ultimately led to his body being exhumed and autopsied in 2012 with the results showing that he


\textsuperscript{15} Bengio, 622.

\textsuperscript{16} Efegil, Ertan, “Analysis of AKP Government’s Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue,” \textit{Turkish Studies 12, no. 1 (March 2011)}, 30.

had high levels of strychnine (a chemical typically found in rat poison) in his system.\(^{18}\)

While no one was ever implicated in his death, one can draw their own conclusions about what may have happened.

Interestingly, it was also during Ozal’s presidency that a 1991 Kurdish report was prepared by the Welfare Party’s Istanbul Provincial Head, under the leadership of one Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The report called for “the end of punitive measures upon local people, ensuring regional economic development, the improvement of human rights, development of the Kurdish culture, the establishment of a Kurdish institute, the free publication of Kurdish newspapers and journals, the formation of local parliaments, decreasing the central government’s powers and allowing the free use of the mother tongue.” The report would go on to stress “the need to find a solution within the framework of full democratic, cultural pluralism and noted the reasons for the problem were denial, assimilation, and the suppressive policies of the central government.”\(^{19}\)

These conclusions would be similar to ones held by Erdogan upon coming to power a little over a decade later.

### You Down With PKK?

For their part, the Kurds did more than enough during this time period to earn their designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The PKK’s original goal was to establish an independent, Marxist state in the southeast of Turkey. Shortly after the 1982 constitutional changes were passed, the PKK held its second congress in Syria during which it would outline a long term 3-stage program for what it called its “war of independence.” The three stages envisioned would be 1) strategic defense, 2) strategic balance, and 3) strategic attack. The first stage, expected to last roughly until 1995, would involve mostly urban guerilla tactics and would allow the PKK to gather strength. Stage two, taking the next five years, was to create liberated zones and establish an armed forces. The final stage would result in a full scale offensive that would lead to a popular uprising in the Kurdish-dominated southeastern region of Turkey.\(^{20}\)

The first stage was by far the most ruthless period in PKK’s history. During this time Ocalan and other PKK leaders openly condoned acts of terrorism. Female suicide bombers were celebrated as “feminist liberators,” while also targeting any Kurdish civilians who were thought to be colluding with the Turkish government.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) Efegil, 30.

\(^{20}\) Bengio, 621.

\(^{21}\) Jenna Krajewski, “What the Kurds Want,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 91, no. 4 (Fall 2015), 91,
schools were burned and Kurdish teachers were killed for teaching in Turkish instead of Kurdish. During the years of 1992-1995 alone, nearly 1600 people were killed and another 500 wounded at the hands of the PKK—over 400 of which were civilians.\textsuperscript{22}

However, it is of note that the PKK—hearing of Ozal’s new direction in addressing the Kurdish issue—announced a ceasefire in March of 1993 which was accepted by Ozal. Negotiations between the two parties were to be set, but Ozal’s death in April of that same year put an end to that discussion and the fighting continued at an even heavier rate.\textsuperscript{23}

The second stage, which ultimately lasted until 1999, would see the continuance of many of the same strategies used during the first stage. However, an evolution would slowly begin to take place due to three key factors. The first was that the Kurdish problem had gained first priority in Turkey, even if it were still looked at solely from a military perspective. Second was the quasi Kurdish state which had developed in Iraq after 1991 and would come to serve as a model to aspire to for the Turkish Kurds. Finally, and in my opinion most importantly, the Kurdish problem had extended into Europe and European countries began to link their policies towards Turkey to Ankara’s treatment of the Kurds.\textsuperscript{24}

It’s not difficult to understand the Kurds turn towards violence. They, like the IRA and PLO before them, were left to feel that resorting to violence would be the only way to get their voice heard. In fact, it could even be argued that the PKK had a just cause to embark on their campaign of violence. There has been a wealth of literature in recent years which has dealt with the legitimate use of violence by nonstate actors. Some scholars, like Andrew Valls, have concluded that some stateless groups have a just cause to use political violence whenever their right to self-determination has been frustrated. As such, Valls continues, “a representative organization can be a morally legitimate authority to carry out violence as a last resort to defend the group’s rights.”

To add to this sentiment, philosopher Annette Baier writes,

> It is fairly easy to say that the clearer it is that the terrorist’s group’s case is not being listened to in a decision making affecting it and that the less violent ways to get attention have been tried in vain, the more excuse the terrorist has; that his case is better the more plausible his claim to represent his group’s sense of injustice or wrong, not just his own; that the more limited, the less

\textsuperscript{22} Numbers calculated from data gathered from the “Global Terrorism Database,” \textit{University of Maryland}, last updated in 2015, accessed February 21, 2016.

\textsuperscript{23} Michael Gunter, “Reopening Turkey’s Closed Kurdish Opening,” \textit{Middle East Policy} 20, no. 2 (Summer 2013), 88.

\textsuperscript{24} Bengio, 621.
indiscriminate, his violence, the less outrage will we feel for his inhumanity.\textsuperscript{25} This is certainly not condoning the use of violence by any group, much less the PKK, but nonetheless shows that when a group who feels that have some right to self-determination (as the Kurds do) are repeatedly denied access to any avenues of redress, a turn towards violence is a potential expectation.

Thus, the second stage of the conflict would come to an end in 1999. With help from American intelligence, Ocalan would be captured by Turkish forces at the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya after spending months on the run. For the majority of the 15 years Ocalan spent leading the PKK’s offensive, he was based in Damascus, Syria with the consent of the Syrian government who seemed to look at Ocalan as the “enemy of my enemy.”\textsuperscript{26} Ocalan’s capture, which initially caused international backlash amongst Kurdish sympathizers, would lead to the announcement of a unilateral ceasefire on behalf of the PKK on September 1, 1999—although it would never be officially recognized by the Turkish government. The remaining 3000-5000 Kurdish militants would leave Turkey for Iraqi Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{27} The ceasefire would last nearly five years until a power struggle within the PKK would lead to hardliners taking power and declaring an end to the ceasefire on June 1, 2004.

While Ocalan’s capture had a deflating effect on the Kurds for a time, 1999 also marked some significant political gains for the Kurds. In that year, a pro-Kurdish party known as the HADEP won control of 37 different municipalities throughout southeastern and eastern Turkey, entering the political arena as legitimate representatives of the Kurds. While state elites either ignored these representatives or would accuse them as being sympathizers to the terrorists (PKK), it was still a major victory politically for the Kurds and would lay the foundation for more ardent political representation in the future. Additionally, in December of 1999, Turkey was recognized as a candidate for full membership to the EU. The Kurds were largely supportive of Turkey’s accession because they knew membership in the EU would mean Turkey would have to reform its laws to make the country more democratic which in turn would be greater inclusion of the Kurds.\textsuperscript{28}

For these reasons, 1999 proved to be a pivotal year for the direction the PKK and its fellow Kurds chose to go forward. It is my argument that 1999 would be the turning point that led to a reassessment of the PKK’s strategy and ultimately a decline in overall violence as well as a stark reduction in attacks on civilians. While Ocalan’s

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\textsuperscript{27} Balta-Parker.
\textsuperscript{28} Balta-Parker.
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capture certainly had a chilling effect on the PKK’s motivation, it was only a part of the reason why this change in tactics took place. The potential for an opening in negotiations between the Kurds and the government coupled with increased access to legitimate participation also played a role in helping the Kurds to see an alternative path to violence. The question now is, does the data support this?

III. Delving into the Data

Methodology

In order to identify any changes in PKK violence, I used two different databases which have compiled their attacks. The first is the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The GTD is “the most comprehensive unclassified database on terrorist events in the world” which uses reports from a variety of credited open media sources. The data I used from the GTD spans from 1992-2014 and includes every cited PKK attack within that time period. The GTD breaks down each attack into several categories including target, number killed, number wounded, date, and location. Additionally, since the statistics used only include data from 1992-2014, this fails to include the PKK’s violent activities from 1984-1992 as well as from 2014-present day. With that being said, I still believe it provides an adequate enough snapshot to determine whether or not the PKK’s claims have been validated.

Using the GTD’s statistics, I first wanted to see if there was an actual correlation between the actual data and the PKK’s claims of a shift in tactics away from targeting. In order to do this, I collected the data from all attacks on what I considered noncombatant targets encompassing 12 different categories. As mentioned earlier, it is my assumption that 1999 would mark a pivot in PKK’s strategy, thus I used 1999 as the dividing line to contrast the data. The results of the first data set, all PKK attacks on noncombatant targets from 1992-1999, are illustrated in Table 1a. I also examined PKK attacks on what I considered combatant targets (Turkish police, Turkish military, or terrorist/nonstate militias) over the same time period to see if the decline in civilians killed may be the result of an overall reduction in violence against all targets. This exploration of the data is presented in Table 1b. To provide a better illustration geographically of these attacks, I used eSpatial’s mapping software to create heat

30 With the exception of one data point from a bombing which took place in 2008 in Istanbul. The PKK denied responsibility and blame was never officially placed on them.
31 The 12 categories included 12 target types as assigned by the GTD which I classified as noncombatant: Private Citizens & Property, Transportation, Business, Telecommunications, Tourists, Journalists & Media, Utilities, Religious Figures/Institutions, Airport/Aircraft, Educational Institution, NGO, and Violent Political Party.
maps of both data sets in order to compare the location and density of the attacks over the designated periods.

The second database utilized was one which I compiled myself and will be referred to as the Independently-Compiled Database (ICD). The reason I chose to use independently collected data in place of the GTD in this instance was for two reasons. First, the GTD only lists attacks perpetrated by the PKK. I wanted to look comparatively at the Turkish government’s response to PKK attacks so I also have included attacks perpetrated by either the Turkish military, Turkish police, or a combination of the two. Basically, I wanted to see if the Turkish government’s response to PKK attacks is proportional. Second, the GTD’s data on the PKK stops in October of 2014 and I wanted to include more recent attacks to compare with data from previous years as well as have a clearer snapshot of the current picture.

In order to collect the relevant data, I scoured news articles dating January 2013 through March of this year that reported on attacks or clashes committed by the PKK or by Turkish police or military forces on the PKK. Each attack would be classified using several different categories: date, location, who committed the attack, who was the target, how many on each side were killed and wounded, how many civilians were killed or wounded, and the type of attack. While the first several categories are relatively undisputable, it should be noted that the final category required a bit of subjectivity and could be considered contentious. As will be shown below, many of the PKK attacks are classified as military. This classification was not done arbitrarily, but rather by examining where the attacks took place (an overwhelming majority take place in Kurdish-dominated regions of Turkey), who the targets of the attacks were (an overwhelming majority target solely Turkish police or military forces), and in some cases whether the attacks were the result of oppressive policies instated by the Turkish government (as in the harsh instatement of 24-hour curfews in Kurdish-dominated regions). Those attacks marked as terror were attacks upon which the target was a noncombatant civilian.

The most common method used for finding the relevant reports used in the database was utilizing the website ConflictMap.org which posts, among other things, continuously updated lists of news articles on which pull from over 250 different sources on current major global conflicts. Using their list of news articles under their “Turkey-PKK” conflict page, I went through day by day to find reports of attacks. While few and far between, there were several gaps in the dates of collected news articles on the ConflictMap site. When this was the case, I would in turn use a customized Google search on news articles from the gaps in time containing keywords such as “PKK,” “attack,” “clash,” “Turkey,” etc. The majority of data comes from accredited news organizations, primarily Reuters. Whenever other, perhaps questionable sources were
used, I searched to find other, more credible sources to back up the same report. Reports that could not be backed up were not included.

Finally, it should be noted that, as in any conflict, it is hard to put an exact number on casualties or civilian deaths and especially so in a conflict as contentious as this one. Reports by the Turkish government seek to increase the perceived damage done by the PKK in order to further demonize the group and reinforce their designation of the group as a terrorist organization. The same can be said of representatives of the PKK when reporting on attacks committed by the Turkish government. A perfect example and a quick anecdote of such reporting is a report a came across of an accident that happened during a Turkish military training exercise. During the exercise, a live grenade accidentally went off, killing 2 Turkish soldiers. The first reports I found on this event were put out by state-owned Turkish media outlets which blamed the deaths on a PKK terror attack. However, upon further investigation, I discovered the reality of the situation. This rationale applies both to the GTD’s information as well as my own data and should be taken into consideration when examining the data.

**Results & Analysis**

**Crunching the Numbers: The Global Terrorism Database (GTD)**

*Figure 1a. “Attacks on Noncombatants”*

![Bar Chart: Attacks on Noncombatants](image)

The first question I sought to answer is whether there was, in fact, a drop in attacks on noncombatant targets after 1999. As *Figure 1a.* shows, there has in fact been a sharp decline in all examine categories from one period to the next. The steepest decline is in the number of civilian casualties since 1999, with the number
dropping all the way from 540 to 81—a decrease of 85%. The number of civilians wounded also declined rather significantly from 487 to 304 for the same time period—a decrease of 38%. Lastly, the number of overall attacks dropped as well from 313 before 1999 to 192 after, a fall of 49%.

These numbers bear additional significance for a couple of reasons. First, the time period covered before 1999 (1992-1999) is half that of the time covered after 1999 (1999-2014). Taking this into consideration, the stark drop in all of the examined categories is made that much more noteworthy. Second, I originally thought that it may be difficult to discern a change in policy through examining the before and after numbers if the results did not vary, or at least not significantly, no conclusion could be drawn. However, given the substantial drop in all categories—most specifically the number of deaths—I think it is sufficient to say that there a shift in the PKK’s targeting practices is evident.

Figure 1b. “Attacks on Combatants”

Looking at Figure 1b., it seems that the PKK’s reduction in violence was not simply a reduction in attacks on noncombatant targets, but a reduction in violence overall as well. The number of total combatants killed decreased by 69%, from 1371 during the first time period to 426 over the second. Interestingly, the number of combatants wounded saw a significant spike of over 280%, from 276 over the first time period to 779 over the second. But again we see a decline in the number of attacks of 58%, falling from 346 over the first time period to 146 over the second.

While the decreases in the number of combatant casualties is not quite as stark as the decrease among noncombatants, it is nonetheless rather significant. Moreover, the percentage decrease in the number of attacks committed against combatants is higher than that of attacks against noncombatants (58% vs. 49%). The one anomaly is
the increase in the number of combatants wounded over the second time period as compared to the first. While further research would be necessary to determine the reasoning behind this, it could be surmised that the severity of attacks is greater against combatants versus than against noncombatants. Regardless, the data indeed show that there have been declines in overall violence committed by the PKK since 1999, and especially violence committed against noncombatants. 

*Figure 1c. “All PKK Attacks (July 1992-October 2014)”*

In *Figure 1c.*, a timeline is established using all PKK attacks on both combatants and noncombatants for the entire time period covered by the GTD. This depiction of the data allows both for collaboration with the previous graphs to further illustrate the trends that have taken place while also allowing for new conclusions to be drawn. First, the timeline again illustrates the decline in violence over the designated time periods. The peaks in fatalities are not seen any similar fashion after 1999 as they are seen before. Additionally, the peaks in fatalities during the years 1992-1994 reaffirms the previously made statement that this stage (stage one of the PKK’s 3-stage plan) was indeed the most vicious in its history.

As for new conclusions, the three arrows point to the three major ceasefires called by the PKK: the aforementioned ceasefire which lasted from 1999-2004, another ceasefire announced during 2009 after Erdogan announced the “Democratic Opening,” and another ceasefire announced in 2012 after Erdogan announced a potential Kurdish re-opening. I’ve chosen to point out these periods for a couple different reasons. First, I wanted to show that the data correlates with the PKK’s claims to a ceasefire. During the times of each announced ceasefire, there are lulls in the violence committed. Secondly, I wanted to illustrate that the PKK’s use of violence is strategic and is used whenever they feel their needs are not being met. Whenever legitimate negotiations are discussed and a potential opening is on the table, they
have been quick to announce a ceasefire and stop all acts of violence so that a peaceful resolution might come about. As is evident by the spikes in violence after each ceasefire, these negotiations have never fully come to fruition and thus the PKK has returned to its use of violence as a coercive tactic.

My final use of the GTD data was in the creation of figures 2a. and 2b. The two maps pictures above show the concentration of all PKK attacks against both combatants and noncombatants over the two specified time periods, respectively. The areas illuminated in the heat map are done so based on the number of attacks that took place in a given region and not on the severity of the attacks. The color spectrum used designates the bright green areas as those areas with a low density of attacks while the gradation into red signifies a higher density area of attacks. Accordingly, both graphs show that the areas which have the highest density of attacks are the Kurdish-dominated regions in southern and southeastern Turkey. While the maps are relatively indistinguishable, a decline in the number of attacks is once again visible when comparing the densities in the southeastern region of Turkey.

Somewhat surprisingly, we see a similar concentration of attacks taking place in Europe over the course of both time periods. Given my assumption of a shift in strategy within the PKK leadership, I had expected to see very few, if any, attacks in Europe over the 1999-2013 time period. However, the map shows that this is in fact not the case and that attacks took place in nearly identical places in Europe both before and after 1999.

Crunching the Numbers: Independently-Compiled Database (ICD)

Using the ICD, I first wanted to use the data to see if the trends discovered in GTD’s data would continue. However, since the time period examined is significantly shorter than any of those used in my analysis of the GTD, a side-by-side comparison would be an inaccurate representation of the data. Therefore, the graphs shown in
Figures 3a. and 3b. represent the data in a slightly different manner. Figure 3a. shows the total number of attacks committed by the PKK over the given time period (January 1, 2013-March 4, 2016). From there, the attacks are broken down by the categories assigned to them (terror, kidnapping, protest/clash, or military). As a brief reminder, attacks were classified as terror attacks when the target was a noncombatant and military when the target was a combatant.

![Chart: All PKK Attacks: January 2013-March 2016]

Consequently, the data shows that the trends depicted in the graphs using the GTD continues here. Of the 59 total attacks documented, 53 of them were classified as military attacks (nearly 90%). Additionally, when looking at the details for the other six attacks, there were only 4 total fatalities and 3 injuries combined. These numbers show an even steeper decline in attacks on noncombatants in recent years while the number of attacks on combatants has remained relatively the same (if the numbers from this data set were extrapolated over a similar time period).

Figure 3b. looks at both PKK attacks as well as attacks led by government forces in order to illustrate how Turkish forces have reciprocated. The totals represent the numbers of the targeted group have been killed (T) and the numbers of casualties taken by the aggressor group (G) along with the total number of attacks during the given period. The most glaring discrepancy when comparing the numbers is the death toll of the PKK as compared to Turkish forces. Over the examined time period, almost ten times as many PKK militants have died in combat compared Turkish soldiers or policemen from four less attacks. While the reasons behind this may be obvious (Turkey’s military has clearly better weaponry at its disposal), it still begs the question of whether or not Turkey’s response to PKK attacks has been disproportionate. It also shows that even though the AKP and Erdogan have pledged to address the Kurdish issue through socioeconomic measures, the military option is still the one that seems to win the day.
Finally, similarities can also be identified when looking at the heat map generated for the ICD as compared to the heat maps for the GTD. The same methodology was used in creating the Figure 4a. as with the previous heat maps. Thus, as with Figures 2a. and 2b., the highest density of attacks has continued to be in the Kurdish-dominated southeast. Additionally, with the exception of one attack—the murder of three PKK activists in Paris in 2013—no attacks have taken place inside of Europe.
IV. Why the Change of Heart?

The AKP and PKK: Ceasefires and Broken Promises

Why is it that we see such stark declines in the number of attacks and casualties at the hands of the PKK after 1999? The first, and most obvious answer, would be the ceasefire declared after Ocalan’s capture in 1999 which lasted nearly 5 years. As alluded to earlier, the length of this ceasefire was not simply a demoralized PKK force. Other factors contributed to its length and to the overall decrease in violence that would follow. Increased political participation by parties like the HADEP certainly played a role through giving the Kurds another, non-violent avenue to express their concerns. Additionally, the requirements Turkey would have to meet in order to gain accession to the EU greatly favored the Kurds. Inclusive, democratic reforms would have to be made which would serve to benefit the Kurds position in Turkish society.

The Kurdish diaspora’s access to European politics and institutions also had an influence on the new directions Kurdish activists would take. The capture of Ocalan along with the potential for accession led the activists to rethink their approach of achieving the goals they had fought for. They decided to abandon the original goal of creating an independent Kurdistan and instead decided to pursue national minority rights within Turkey. Realizing that Turkey’s accession process could be used to advance this new agenda, those who had sought exile in Europe after the 1980 military coup began bring their plight to the attention of European institutions like the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The hope was that they could create a friction between the EU and Turkey which would further encourage the political and
social reforms they had been seeking for so long.\textsuperscript{32}

Another key factor in the length of the ceasefire, and in the subsequent ceasefires to come, would be the change in both tone and approach taken by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his reigning AKP party. Upon coming to power in 2002, it seemed as if Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) might finally be able to resolve the Kurdish problem once and for all. Initially, the AKP took a softer stance towards the Kurds than any of its predecessors (excluding Ozal). The AKP realized and openly admitted that a solution to the Kurdish problem would include more than simply a military option; economic and cultural development would need to take place as well.\textsuperscript{33} They had 65\% of the seats in parliament making them the first party in over twenty years to be able to govern without coalition partners.\textsuperscript{34} With one of the AKP’s main goal being to ensure Turkey’s accession to the European Union, they were anxious to attempt to meet the necessary human rights benchmarks. Thus, the AKP pushed through reforms which abolished the death penalty (which would end up sparing Ocalan’s life), allowed for greater freedom of expression, and stipulated the release of political prisoners. In addressing the Kurdish problem, the 20-year-long emergency rule which had been in place in the southeast of the country was lifted and Kurdish-language instruction and broadcasting was legalized. Although the new laws were rather unevenly implemented, the Kurdish reform package was a de facto recognition of the Kurds distinct language and culture on behalf of the Turkish government for the first time since Ottoman days.\textsuperscript{35}

However, progress took a step back in 2004 when the PKK declared an end to the unilateral ceasefire. In an official statement, the PKK cited its reasons for resuming the armed struggle: “The ceasefire’s political and military meaning has been lost with the Turkish state’s destructive operations over the last three months.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus, the five year peace had come to an end as both the PKK and the Turkish government once again began military operations. In its return to violence, the PKK had realized that it was highly unlikely that they would ever be able to defeat Turkish forces on the battlefield. It instead came to the realization that violence could be used instead as “an instrument of psychological attrition, which was initially…directed at wearing down the Turkish state’s public refusal to recognize the PKK as a legitimate interlocutor in negotiations

\textsuperscript{32} Eccarius-Kelly, 91.
\textsuperscript{33} Yegen, 5.
\textsuperscript{34} Balta-Parker.
\textsuperscript{35} In Balta-Parker.
to address the concerns of the country’s Kurds.”

This use of violence as more of a negotiating tactic than as a military one has since become a recurring theme. While the PKK has announced numerous ceasefires whenever hopes of negotiations seem legitimate, they are quick to resort back to violence whenever they feel their needs are not being met.

Nevertheless, Erdogan and the AKP would not be deterred and more effort was put towards the resolution of the Kurdish question. In August of 2005, Erdogan made a visit to Diyarbakir—a city in southeast Turkey regarded as the center of the Kurdish opposition—where he delivered a speech publicly addressing the Kurdish issue. He announced that Turkey needed to accept the mistakes it had made in the past: “The Kurdish problem is everyone’s problem. It is my problem too,” he said, adding that the government would “resolve all problems with more democracy, more civil rights and more prosperity.”

In response to Erdogan’s speech, the HADEP called on the PKK to halt armed operations so that negotiations could take place. Since the 1999 elections, the HADEP’s power had grown even further, and this growth had given them a seat at the negotiating table. Building off their success in the 1999 local elections, they gained 6.2% of the vote in the 2002 national election. While they failed to reach the necessary 10% threshold for representation in the Turkish legislature, it was still the largest percentage a pro-Kurdish party had ever won on the national stage. The legitimacy gained through their electoral success afforded them a voice that the PKK would listen to. Therefore, when asked to declare a ceasefire after Erdogan’s Diyarbakir speech, the PKK listened and temporarily halted armed operations. Unfortunately, the HADEP would eventually be dissolved by the Turkish government who portrayed them as the political wing of the terrorist PKK. Ofra Bengio perhaps best stated the relationship between Kurdish political parties and the PKK in saying:

The political activity of Kurdish parties has become an important tool for mobilizing the Kurdish people and for presenting to the outside world a more benign image of the Kurdish movement than the PKK had been able to do. It must be stressed, however, that from the start there formed a kind of Gordian knot or symbiotic relationship between the PKK and the different Kurdish political parties. Hence the constant attempts by the Turkish government to ban them.

Even after his capture, Ocalan has remained a central figure in the fight for Kurdish rights. He is still the leading authority when it comes to the PKK and the Kurdish

37 Jenkins
38 Bengio, 622.
39 Bengio, 624
objective and has even been one of the key negotiators and liaisons between the Kurds and the AKP since his years in exile. As such, realizing the need to address the changing landscape in Turkey, he announced a restructuring of the PKK and its affiliated organizations into an entity called the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). The KCK, as announced by Ocalan, would be “the umbrella organization...composed of economic and ecological communities, democratic compatriots and open cultural identities,” continuing that the KCK “will have a symbiotic relationship with the state as well as a competition.”40 Thus, even Ocalan, long the leader of a push for an independent Kurdistan, acknowledged that the Kurds would exist within the confines of the Turkish state.

As the AKP won its second term in 2007, Erdogan announced a “democratic initiative” to reform the 1982 constitution and address Kurdish demands. Behind the scenes, meetings were taking place between Turkish officials and PKK representatives in Europe. Perhaps as a result of these meetings, several key developments in the Kurdish-Turkish relationship would take place in 2009. First, the AKP continued with reforms aimed at Kurdish identity. At the beginning of 2009, a 24-hour Kurdish language channel (TRT 6) was launched and the Turkish Council of Higher Education agreed to establish Kurdish language and literature departments within universities.41 Also, the Democratic Society Party (DTP)—the successor of the HADEP and predecessor of today’s HDP—would again win big in local elections in the southeast of Turkey. Immediately after the elections took place, PKK would again announce a ceasefire stating that they were ready to begin a dialogue whose final aim was disarmament. These events opened the door for what would come to be known as the “Kurdish” or “Democratic Opening.”42

The Kurdish Opening was launched with high hopes in June 2009 as Turkey’s Minister of the Interior would organize meetings with NGOs, journalists, and intellectuals within the country in order to initiate a public debate on how best to resolve the Kurdish question.43 However, the initiative was met with stern resistance from the two opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The CHP argued that the Kurdish opening would “risk...giving way to the ethnic disintegration of the Turkish society,” while the MHP warned that it would “endanger Turkey’s identity as a unitary nation-state.”44

These fears were exacerbated in October of 2009 when 8 PKK militants who had been residing in Iraq were allowed to enter Turkey without being arrested based on a

40 Gunter in “Unrecognized De Facto States...,” 172.
41 Yegen, 5.
42 Yegen, 6.
43 Yegen, 6.
44 Yegen, 11.
previous arrangement between the AKP and the PKK. Even so, no legal framework had been established to deal with the militants upon their arrival. The militants were treated as heroes by the Kurds upon their return as they were paraded through the streets as a symbol of the beginning of a new process of Kurdish rights. This resulted in a nationalist outrage which led to violent protests throughout the country. Amid fears of additional violence, arrested the eight whom had already arrived. With the fear of losing any more nationalist support, the Constitutional Court outlawed the DTP and the AKP led a campaign stressing its commitment to a unitary Turkish state. While the move placated Turkey’s nationalists, it only furthered the distrust the PKK and Kurdish nationalists had in the AKP’s ability to live up to its promises. Thus, with the fleeting hope of progress, the Kurds not only reinitiated its campaign of violence, it intensified it. Accordingly, the 2009 Kurdish Opening has been widely considered a total failure.

Since 2009, the AKP and the PKK have continued to play this dangerous game of back and forth. Several other ceasefires have been declared by the PKK after promises on reforms, although vague, had been made. But due to the level of distrust that exists between the two sides, a return to violence is nearly inevitable. The most recent ceasefire, which had been announced in 2013 and ended in May of last year, once again proved unfruitful as the AKP remains hesitant to fully implement the Kurdish reforms out of fear of both a nationalist backlash and the potential of an autonomous Kurdish region which would border a now relatively independent Iraqi Kurdistan and a potentially autonomous Syrian Kurdish region as well. The PKK, when sensing this hesitancy, returns to the only tool that has proven successful: violence.

**Explaining the Anomaly**

One glaring issue when discussing the the PKK and Kurdish nationalists’ newfound aversion for the use of terrorist tactics is the emergence of a group known as the Kurdish Freedom Falcons (commonly known as TAK). As alluded to earlier when analyzing the GTD data, one particular data point—the July 27, 2008 Istanbul bombing which killed 17 and wounded 154—was excluded. While Turkey blamed the attacks on the PKK, no direct link was made and the PKK openly rejected their role in the attack. It is my belief, based on relevant evidence, that it was instead TAK who was responsible for the attack. While the PKK claimed to only commit acts of violence against enemy

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46 Jenkins.
combatants and no longer target civilians, TAK has claimed responsibility for several bombings which have targeted high-population tourist area. The first TAK attack was a suicide bombing near the Ulus shopping district in Ankara which killed 6 and wounded over 70. In her article discussing the political activism of the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe, Dr. Vera Eccarius-Kelly discusses the potential for the emergence of radical splinter groups like TAK, using the examples of “Real IRA” and Hamas in their attempts undermine, temporarily disrupt, or reverse progress made by their the IRA and the PLO respectively after fundamental shifts in policy.

A similar rationale can be applied when attempting to understand the relationship between the PKK and the TAK. The PKK and the Kurdish movement as a whole start to make an ideological shift after the arrest of Ocalan in 1999 and additionally with the potential for Turkish ascension into the EU. Members of the Kurdish diaspora who had resettled in Europe after Turkey’s repressive 1982 constitution was adopted had begun to explore legitimate avenues to achieve the concessions they had demanded for so long through European institutions such as the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Taking place at the same time was a unilaterally announced ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish government which began in February 2000 and would last until December 2004.

The AKP has sought to use the TAK bombings as political ammunition in the fight for the de-legitimization of Kurdish nationalist groups. Turkey makes no distinction between the actions of TAK and the PKK, and many question the relationship between the two. Most argue that there is no clear-cut answer as to whether TAK is an armed wing of the PKK or whether it is a splinter group led by former PKK commanders who are unsatisfied with the results of the PKK’s change in tactics. When looking through the intellectual lens of Eccarius-Kelly’s argument, one might conclude that the latter is true. Extrapolating on the case of the TAK (with the Real IRA and Hamas in mind as well), whenever a militant or terrorist group seeks to legitimate itself through a fundamental change in tactics, it should be expected that radical splinter groups, who may even go as far as to misrepresent themselves as part of the parent organization, may emerge.

Conclusions

While the PKK certainly earned its terrorist moniker during the first decade and a half of its violent campaign to gain Kurdish rights in Turkey, 1999 marked a turning

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point in its strategy for three key reasons. First, and perhaps most importantly, was the capture of the PKK’s founder and leader Abdullah Ocalan. Naturally, his capture would have a destabilizing effect on the PKK. The second reason is the success of the HADEP, the main pro-Kurdish party, in local elections where they were able to secure control over 37 municipalities. Further building off of their success in the local election, the HADEP would then go on to win 6.2% of the vote in the 2002 national election—the highest total ever received by a pro-Kurdish party. The final reason was Turkey’s recognition as a full candidate for membership into the EU. Given this news, the Kurds were hopeful that pressures on Turkey to reform its social and democratic structures would force the country to finally make the changes the Kurds had longed for. As a result, Kurdish activists now had new, legitimate avenues to achieve their goals without the use of violence. Thus, from 1999 onward we have seen significant drops in PKK violence against noncombatants and combatants alike.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Erdogan has made strides in resolving the Kurdish problem, acknowledging first and foremost that the problem exists and also accepting that it cannot be resolved solely by military means. However, it has seemed for each step forward, he has taken two back. Although some Kurdish reforms have been made which have allowed the use of the Kurdish language in media and in schools, many other reforms—like the redefinition of Turkish citizenship so that it is non-ethnic based—have been left on the table. The Kurdish Opening of 2009 and the re-opening in 2012, which were meant to create a national dialogue on how to best resolve the Kurdish issue, each ended catastrophically and resulted only in increases in violence. The PKK’s lack of trust in the legitimacy of the Turkish government has led them to resort to violence at the drop of a hat the moment they believe their demands are not being met.

While the Kurds have made significant strides in establishing legitimate forms of political participation, the Turkish government has continually stood in the way. The government has been quick to associate any group representing the Kurdish people with the PKK who they constantly remind the world they, as does the EU and US, consider a terrorist organization. This association has allowed Erdogan and his AKP to ban 5 different pro-Kurdish parties as well as dismiss the legitimacy and demands of any Kurdish activists. With this move, though, Turkey is only shooting itself in the foot. The PKK was born of lack of opportunity as well as social, cultural and political repression. Associating these new political parties who have sought lawful, non-violent means to reform with terrorists with the intent of delegitimizing them will only serve to push these activists towards more radical means. Kurdish youth all already beginning to become disillusioned with the prospects of the political process and if Turkey continues to deny them legitimate access, violence will unfortunately be inevitable. The words of Musa, a 20-year-old Kurd living in Istanbul’s Gazi neighborhood sums up this sentiment
best: “We cast our ballots for peace, but the [Turkish] state gave us war. It is clear that democracy means nothing to this government. The only language it understands is the language of force.”

Therefore, if Turkey ever truly wants to solve its Kurdish problem, it will have to fulfill the many promises it has made to the Kurds and make the necessary reforms which would grant the Kurds full cultural rights and recognition, ensure their access to the Turkish political system, and redefine Turkish citizenship so that it is no longer ethnic-based. Then, and only then, can a legitimate end to the violence be negotiated.

Even amidst Turkey’s increased fears of a Kurdish secession given the recent regional developments which have empowered the Kurds, the AKP should still move forward with its Kurdish reforms. With the exception of the more radical Kurdish activist groups, most Kurds simply desired only to be able to freely practice their cultural traditions and use their own language, not independence. It is of note that the neo-Islamist AKP received a lot of support from pious Kurds who were on board both with the new commitment to reform as well as a seeming commitment to move Turkey away from Ataturk’s secularist vision and more towards an Islamist state. Many of these Kurds still wanted Kurdish cultural rights but renounced the violence committed by the PKK and wanted to see an end to the conflict. As Michael Gunter, a Kurdish specialist at Tennessee Tech University, reemphasizes, “…many Kurds have either assimilated into the larger surrounding Arab, Iranian, and Turkish populations or are satisfied with their current status to the extent that they do not actively seek independence or at least would be satisfied with true democracy, some type of local autonomy, or federalism.”

If these reforms are put into place, I believe the data shows that and end to the violence is possible and that the PKK would put down its arms once and for all. While there is sure to be nationalist backlash and even the potential loss of AKP voters, I believe this will be offset by the growth in support the AKP would gain from Kurdish voters. Unfortunately, the situation remains extremely complicated to say the least. It is my hope, however, that a mutual agreement will be reached and that no more people have to die in this struggle.

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