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Understanding PKK, Kurdish Hezbollah and ISIS Recruitment in Southeastern Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an explanation for how the PKK, Kurdish Hezbollah, and ISIS, representing distinct ethno-nationalist, Islamist and ideologically motivated political movements, radicalize and recruit supporters in the regions of Eastern and Southeastern Turkey. In doing so, this paper contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about radicalization and recruitment. This study reveals how various regionally specific structural factors encourage radicalization and recruitment into violent politico-ideological movements. In particular, state oppression of ethnic minorities, economic inequalities, geography, and local demographics. While existing literature on radicalization focuses on push factors (structural) combined with pull factors (ideology), this research demonstrates that structural factors in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey are both push and pull factors in processes of radicalization.

Ideologically distinct radical groups, including the Kurdistan Worker's Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), Kurdish Hezbollah, and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), arguably recruit from the same populations in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia. These regions contain the highest rates of participation in the PKK[1] and Kurdish Hezbollah[2] while hosting ISIS cells in Adıyaman, Gaziantep, and Adana.[3] These regions, possessing long and permeable land borders with Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and being extensively affected by large-scale refugee flows, have distinct geopolitical importance for understanding an array of radicalization practices.[4] To comprehend why such diverse radical groups successfully recruit in these particular regions, this study addresses the question: what factors make Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia a fertile recruitment ground for the PKK, Kurdish Hezbollah, and ISIS? Considering how multiple, ideologically diverse groups recruit in this socio-politically and demographically unique context will contribute to furthering theoretical explanations of radicalization and recruitment.

In this explanatory research, we analyze the interplay of various push and pull factors that drive people to join the main radical organizations in these regions. Six in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals with long-standing personal connections or insight into radical organizations in Turkey. These interviews were

contextualized with secondary sources that draw upon interviews with group members from the PKK and Kurdish Hezbollah. The findings of this study highlight state oppression, economic struggle, displacement and migration, and particular geographic aspects as influential factors in radicalization that are specific to the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian regions. We propose a new conceptualization, *structural radicalization*, to draw attention to the locally specific, structural factors that impact individual lived experiences and which are instrumental in radicalization in the two regions. Structural radicalization is distinct from many popular theoretical approaches to radicalization that focus on an individual's radicalization process without an in-depth consideration of the socio-political and systemic context in which a radical group or ideology may appeal to members of an affected population. In this regard, this study challenges and develops commonly held conceptions of radicalization processes.

Besides its theoretical contribution, this research is important for several reasons. First, there are significant restrictions on researching the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Turkey. Apart from the physical dangers in the field, in recent years hundreds of academics have been convicted of "spreading terrorist propaganda" by critiquing military practices in the regions.[5] This has given rise to a lacuna in the literature on radicalization in Turkey. Second, problems of (in)security in Turkey are usually attributed to the PKK and often researched with this bias. As a result, relatively little objective or systematic research is being conducted on radicalization in the Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey. Western academia is also partly responsible for this deficiency in knowledge: while considerable research has been carried out on radicalization in or concerning Western countries, studies of radicalization in Muslim-majority countries are limited. This research directly contributes to filling this gap.

In what follows, we first provide background for the case study. Second, we present the theoretical grounding for the analysis, anchoring the research in debates from the fields of terrorism and civil- and ethnic-conflict studies. Following this, we describe the methodology used in this study, which is qualitative, interpretative, and evaluative. Fourth, we present the findings of the interviews conducted concerning radicalization in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey, under four sub-headings determined by the themes generated from the data: the history of oppression, economics and demographics, internal displacement and migration, and geography. In conclusion, we argue that structural, macro-level factors—such as relative economic deprivation and forced migration stemming from systemic inequalities and military repression, compounded by unique geographic factors—combine to create fertile ground for recruitment to radical organizations at the local level. In these conditions, diverse ideologies compete to recruit from those groups whose loyalty to the state has been eroded.

In line with Mark Sedgwick's recommendations, we do not use the terms "radical" or "radicalization" in any absolute sense.[6] Rather, we specify our continuum and position "radical" in relative opposition to "moderate", wherein "moderate" relates to mainstream, state-sanctioned Turkish norms and values that are underpinned by the rule of Turkish law. As such, our analysis and conceptualization of structural radicalization depict the process of structural and systematic factors unique to the region that compel individuals to think and act in ways that are contradictory to predominant Turkish norms, values, and laws.

Eastern & Southeastern Turkey: An Overview

The Socio-Political Context

Around 64% of Southeastern Anatolia, 79% of Mideastern Anatolia and 32% of Northeastern Anatolia are ethnically Kurdish and Kurdish-Zazas.[7] Apart from the Turks and Arabs, which constitute the largest minority groups in Southeastern Anatolia, there are also a small number of Assyrian and Armenian communities in the region.[8] Additionally, by 2016, Turkey hosted more than 2.7 million Syrian refugees due to the civil war.[9] The Kurdish-majority Eastern and Southeastern regions have the lowest GDP per capita of Turkey, as well as the highest unemployment rates in the country, both in general and among the youth population specifically.[10] Furthermore, studies indicate that Kurds are disproportionately affected by economic crises, are more likely to suffer unemployment, and may face discrimination in the labor market.[11]

The Eastern and Southeastern regions have been dominated by two mass political orientations—Kurdish nationalism and Sunni Islamism—witnessing large swings in electoral support between the pro-Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) and the secular Kurdish-nationalist People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP). These two parties present different understandings of the "Kurdish Issue". AKP leader President Erdoğan, unlike his predecessors, accepts the existence of Kurdish identity, but positions ethnic identities as subordinate to the uniting supra-identity of Islam, presenting the Kurdish movement as anti-Islamic.[12] The HDP represented ethnic Kurdish nationalism up to 2015; since then, they have shifted the narrative away from ethnicity to focus on citizenship rights for all marginalized and oppressed groups.[13] The end of the Peace Process between the state and the PKK in 2015 and the AKP's lack of support for Kurds fighting ISIS in Syria caused a surge in support for the HDP among Kurds in the first of the 2015 general elections.[14] This prompted the AKP to suppress the HDP and left-wing and Kurdish NGOs, politically and militarily, to appeal to Turkish-nationalist and Islamist voters, resulting in hundreds being imprisoned and thousands being killed in the years since.[15]

A History of Political Violence in Anatolia

The PKK has formed the primary threat to Turkish military security in the Eastern and Southeastern regions since its founding in the 1970s. New conflicts began in the 1980s with the rise of Kurdish Hezbollah. More recently, ISIS emerged and used the Southeast as a passage to Syria, forming cells, and recruiting from the local population.[16] These three organizations are ideologically disparate and each one faces unique challenges in recruiting from the population. Since his imprisonment in 1999, PKK leader Öcalan has shifted the ideological narrative away from that of a vanguard-driven independence movement to democratic confederalism and autonomy; however, in practice, this clashes with the group's long-standing Leninist-Stalinist tendencies.[17] The secular PKK has traditionally struggled to appeal to the predominantly Sunni Muslim Kurds of Anatolia.[18] As such, for pragmatic purposes, the organization has taken a less hostile stance toward Islam in recent years.[19] Turkey's conflict with the PKK is

estimated to have cost 40,000 lives and displaced perhaps one million people.[20] Nearly 5,000 deaths have been recorded since the peace process broke down in July 2015, including members of Turkish security forces, PKK militants, and civilians.[21]

Kurdish Hezbollah, founded in Batman, Southeastern Anatolia, cemented itself as the predominant violent Islamist movement in Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s.[22] Inspired by the Iranian Revolution—although Kurdish Hezbollah is a Sunni Islamist group and unrelated to the Lebanese Hezbollah—they sought to initiate an Islamic revolution. They recruited from mosques, primarily focusing on Diyarbakır, where they had an influence over almost all the mosques by the mid-1990s.[23] Hezbollah used violence to predominate other movements and recruited young, often poorly educated people from other Islamist groups.[24] In the late 1980s, along with the establishment of the village guard system, the state supported Hezbollah as a way of mobilizing Kurds against the PKK.[25] Violent clashes followed, dividing Kurdish communities and even families between the opposing organizations.[26] The period between 1991 and 1995 saw the peak of violence between the PKK and Hezbollah, before the latter transitioned away from violence in the 2000s and founded a legal political party, Hüda-Par.[27]

ISIS is a more recent and extreme Jihadi-Salafi organization, with the aim of establishing a caliphate harking back to a seventh-century ideal.[28] Research into ISIS has revealed that the organization managed to build extensive networks in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey.[29] The Southeastern cities of Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Bingöl, and Muş became recruitment grounds for ISIS, and Adana and Gaziantep were chosen by the organization as assembly grounds.[30] Moreover, the Suruç, Diyarbakır, and Ankara bombings perpetrated by ISIS in Turkey, which resulted in 149 deaths and thousands wounded, were organized in Adıyaman.[31] Additionally, 2015-2016 saw four bombing attacks in Gaziantep in which 66 people lost their lives and hundreds were wounded; all were perpetrated by local branches of ISIS.[32]

Conflicts in Syria and Iraq have had a significant impact on Southeastern Turkey. As of June 2017, more than 53,000 names were on a Turkish list of individuals suspected of attempting to join the conflicts across the border.[33] Opposing ISIS in Syria, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) is an offshoot of the PKK, sharing resources, intelligence, manpower, and ideology.[34] It is estimated that more than 8,500 people joined the YPG from Turkey.[35] Moreover, the Ankara and Bursa attacks carried out by the PKK in 2016 against Turkish civilians have shown an operational connection to Kurdish-majority cantons in northern Syria, where the perpetrators reportedly received military training in YPG camps.[36]

Structural Radicalization in Turkey

This paper proposes a new conceptual focus in the debates on radicalization and non-state political violence, for which we have coined the term *structural radicalization*. Our theoretical approach considers locally specific factors as instrumental in radicalization processes. It emphasizes the importance of aspects of an individual's or community's lived experience that predispose them to join to radical movements. The findings highlight issues that are structural and specific to the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions of Turkey, which contribute to recruitment for the PKK, ISIS, and

Kurdish Hezbollah. These are factors, such as state oppression, that in turn produce economic hardships, forced displacement and migration, and cultural suppression, compounded by regional geographic particularities. This research is grounded in, and further develops, theoretical debates from the fields of terrorism and radicalization studies, as well as ethnic conflict and civil war studies.

There is a long-standing debate on how political violence is connected to exclusionary policies and state repression. Piazza's quantitative research found that economic discrimination against minorities significantly increases the likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks,[37] although no significant association was found with religious or linguistic discrimination.[38] Furthermore, Piazza found that state repression, in general, is a stimulating factor for domestic terrorism; however, he also analyzed the impact of various types of repression and found that repression of participation—particularly electoral participation and expression of labor rights—increases domestic terrorism, as do minority discrimination and physical and religious repression.[39] Correspondingly, Matesan's study found that restrictive and exclusionary policies lead Middle Eastern Islamist groups to adopt more violent rhetoric, with the likelihood of violent action increasing when a group feels its physical integrity is imperiled due to state violence or repression.[40]

Karreth et al. found that when civilians are systematically targeted during counter-insurgency campaigns, human rights conditions post-conflict are substantially worse than pre-conflict levels. The systematic targeting of civilians and ensuing poor human rights *leads to* (or *precipitates*) the "dynamic of radicalization and revenge" on behalf of (former) opposition groups: government brutality against civilians produces a more extreme opposition movement, increasing recruitment motivated by revenge and support for armed groups and rebel leaders.[41] Their study supports previous research that highlights how repression drives radicalization and recruitment to terrorist groups by alienating and victimizing members of marginalized groups.[42]

Buhaug et al. measured the association between ethno-nationalist civil war and characteristics of large ethnic groups excluded from power. They not only confirmed that the probability of conflict increases with the exclusion of powerful minority groups, but also found that groups that are located far from the capital and settled in rough terrain are more likely to be involved in ethnic conflict.[43] A large-scale quantitative study by Cederman et al. found that when ethnic groups are excluded from state power, the probability of armed conflict increases.[44] Another study by Cederman et al. analyzed the relationship between transborder ethnic kin (TEK) groups and civil war and concluded that the relative size of a TEK group impacts the likelihood of violence in a curvilinear way—i.e. intermediate-sized ethnic groups, relative to the size of the group holding state power, are most likely to engage in violence. While state control may have a conflict dampening effect for large TEK groups, excluded transborder stateless communities, such as the Kurds, contain greater potential for conflict.[45]

The cross-border nature of Kurdish communities and their geographic context affects operational possibilities for radical groups in the border regions, influencing both recruitment and group sustainability. Eccarius-Kelly highlights that smuggling across the borders with Turkey's neighbors is commonplace and is considered a profession for segments of the population. Turkey's geographic position provides an ideal

opportunity for the PKK to significantly bolster its finances through involvement in the illicit drug trade too, although this may damage their image and legitimacy among Kurdish communities.[46] Smuggling activities are dangerous, however, as the Roboski incident in 2011 highlighted; the attack on a group of Kurdish smugglers by the Turkish air force worsened Turkish-Kurdish relations during a peace process that had been gaining momentum at the time.[47]

The discussion thus far has considered the relationships between exclusion from political and economic power, state repression, and political violence. However, radicalization stemming from the macro-structural level must also relate to the individual and their motivations for participation in a violent struggle. State repression can produce (re)constructions of identity narratives that challenge the authority and legitimacy of the state. Such identity constructions, often comprising victimhood narratives that reinforce a process of othering, may suggest a vulnerability to recruitment by radical organizations. Kruglanski et al. explore these themes in their "significance quest" model of radicalization, acknowledging the potential for a "socially based significance loss," observing that "often, experience of significance loss relates to one's social identity that is disrespected by others."[48] This may cause an individual to pursue significance gain through participation in a violent organization.[49] This study builds upon the literature discussed above, furthering our knowledge of the interplay between systemic and structural factors and individual lived experiences in radicalization processes.

Research Design and Methodology

The primary aim of this paper is to explain the fundamental reasons for Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia being a fertile recruitment ground for radical and violent movements by examining various structural factors that can lead to radicalization, thereby advancing theoretical explanations of radicalization and recruitment. By taking a macro-level, region-specific perspective, grounded in the literature discussed above, we expected socio-political, spatial, geographic, economic, and, more broadly, systemic factors to be root causes of radicalization, increasing the likelihood of ideological influences pulling individuals toward specific movements. We predict the demographic and economic factors that are unique to the region to be important elements in this picture of structural radicalization. To test this hypothesis, the research focuses on three major terrorist organizations in the region: the PKK, Kurdish Hezbollah, and ISIS. Other organizations will be excluded from the process due to their limited size and influence, various organizational fragmentations, and difficulties in comparison.

The ideological diversity between these three groups that are all able to recruit from the same population is suggestive of a macro-structural primary cause of radicalization. While quantitative approaches highlight a relationship between political violence and factors relating to economic deprivation, demographics, repression, and distinct geographic features, qualitative analysis is needed to provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics in our localized case study. Therefore, this qualitative research is primarily built on six in-depth semi-structured expert interviews conducted in November and December 2019. The interviewees were selected based on their long-standing

personal or professional experience relating to political violence in the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Turkey. The individuals were also specifically chosen to provide a balanced sample, representing different sides of the political divide and a mixture of prior involvement with the Turkish state (e.g. military) or non-state armed actors (e.g. PKK). A balanced sample improves the validity of the findings, especially considering the sensitive and politicized nature of the subject matter. The interviewees were initially contacted either via intermediate contacts in Turkey or via direct contact through social media, plus one which snowballed from another interview. All of these interviews were face-to-face interviews conducted in Istanbul during late 2019 besides one, which was conducted through Skype due to the interviewee's location at the time. All but one were willing to be recorded and translations from Turkish to English were undertaken by one of the authors. Pseudonyms are used throughout: the focus of this paper is sensitive for Turkish national security discourse and the exposure of the real names of our interviewees may pose a threat to their lives and freedom. Thus, even though the interviewees were willing and prepared to use their real names, we use pseudonyms due to ethical and security reasons.

The first interviewee was Cevdet, who previously directed a commando regiment and Special Forces team in the Eastern and the Southeastern Anatolia regions. After his military service, he became a security studies scholar and adviser, producing several books and other publications. The second interview was conducted with Ali, a journalist with expertise on Kurdish Hezbollah, having researched the group since the 1990s and publishing several books on the "Kurdish issue" and Islamic organizations in Turkey. The third interviewee was Tarık, a professor at one of Turkey's top universities, who researched the "Kurdish issue" between the years 2013 and 2015 but could not reveal the results of his research due to political pressures after the end of the Peace Process between the PKK and Turkish State. He shared the results of his research during the interview. The fourth interview was with Sarp, a journalist and author who has conducted extensive research on ISIS networks in Turkey and has spoken with dozens of ISIS militants and their families. The fifth interview was conducted with Zehra, a former leftist guerrilla fighter from the 1968 generation in Turkey. She is now a writer and a documentary film director in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions. The final interview was with Baran, an ex-PKK member who was imprisoned for 10 years and later became a writer, exposing the PKK's use of child soldiers and intra-organizational killings.

This study also includes references to a meeting organized to share the results of a research project aimed at finding the reasons for "the radicalization among the Kurdish youth" by the Rawest Research Company based in Diyarbakır, and its top-level employee, Ferhat. Books that contain interviews with (former) group members and local people with direct experience are utilized as valuable secondary sources, such as *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey: Islamism, violence and the state* by Mehmet Kurt,[50] *ISIS Networks* by Doğu Eroğlu,[51] *ISIS in Turkey* by İsmail Saymaz,[52] *Looking Behind the Mountain* by Bejan Matur,[53] *It is Not as You Know* by Canan Rojin Akın and Funda Danışman,[54] and *Mehmed's Book* by Nadire Mater.[55] These sources provide valuable contextualization for the findings from our interviews.

One limitation of this research is the relative lack of available primary data relating to ISIS in Turkey and Kurdish Hezbollah. The interviews conducted with Ali and Sarp,

and the books written by Saymaz, Eroğlu, and Kurt, highlighted above, constitute the primary building blocks of research on ISIS in Turkey and Kurdish Hezbollah, but there is a relative lack of empirical data about these organizations in academic literature with which to contextualize our findings. Despite gathering data from a balanced sample of interviewees to address validity concerns relating to political bias, as researchers from Turkey and the U.K., we acknowledge the potential risk of unintended bias when interpreting and analyzing the data. Moreover, the region-specific focus limits the generalizability of these findings; in fact, it is the structural, demographic, economic, and geographic uniqueness of the locality that, we argue, make it such a fertile recruitment ground for extremist organizations. However, with many shared structural and systemic dynamics felt across the borders in Iraq and Syria, it will hopefully open a path for further studies, especially on radicalization among ideologically disparate organizations operating in a shared locality and population. More generally, this macro-level, yet qualitative and region-specific, case study approach contributes to the body of knowledge upon which radicalization theory can be tested and refined. In the section that follows, we analyze our findings in light of existing theoretical literature and shed light on the interplay between context-specific push and pull factors.

Findings and Analysis

A range of themes relating to radicalization in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia emerged from the interviews conducted for this research. These themes can each be understood as elements of a relationship between the push and pull factors of radicalization: pushing an individual away from state-sanctioned Turkish identity, political expression, and rule of law toward radical groups that sanction the use of violence for political and ideological ends. The discussion of our findings, contextualized with references to secondary sources, is structured around the following themes, each describing a dimension of radicalization. First, a history of oppression by the Turkish state encourages marginalization and alienation of Kurds in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia from Turkish society, reinforcing distinctive identification narratives that can be manipulated by radical groups to recruit. Second, relative economic deprivation pushes individuals toward groups that offer solutions to these inequalities, whether in the form of material gain or a sense of self-worth. Third, displacement and internal migration, often outcomes of state oppression, create a rupture in people's lives, dislocating them from social and familial ties; alienated in a new habitat, the desire for new social networks and purpose make individuals vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization. Fourth, the mountainous terrain and geographic remoteness create factors that affect the likelihood of radicalization: in particular, the proximity to Iraq, Syria, and Iran enables the trans-national movement of people and physical resources, but also nonmaterial elements such as identifications, politics, and ideologies.

History of Oppression

Military Abuses

The following quotation from Professor Tarık encapsulates much of the discussion that follows. Touching on themes of violence, torture, resistance, and the mountainous

habitat in which rebel groups operate, it underlines the importance of understanding the context in which radicalization occurs:

> It doesn't matter if it is Islamist or Communist… If a culture of protest was formed… I mean going to the mountains, using force, resisting… And if some people have been killed, tortured or jailed for that… The new generation find themselves inside this culture and socialize themselves within this culture. I mean none of the Turks grow up in an environment where the main plan for people is taking a weapon and going to the mountains! You can never find this socialization in İzmir or Aydın, but you can find it in Diyarbakır. The important thing is the environment that you are born in, what you see when you first open your eyes, in which street you socialize, what your family tells you as their memories… As I understand it, since Sheikh Said, the problem of the Kurds is the environment they socialize in.

Radicalization does not happen in a vacuum. The argument that many Kurds in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia are born and socialized into a cultural environment of resistance against the state is implicitly assumed by our interviewees and the findings explored throughout the rest of this section.

Since the 1980 coup and the Turkish operations against the PKK that followed, executions, torture, forced displacements, arbitrary arrests, and murders of Kurdish journalists, activists and politicians became common in the Eastern and the Southeastern Anatolia regions.[56] Although, according to former leftist guerilla fighter Zehra, military abuses predated the 1980 coup: "Even when I was in the Kurdish villages back in the 1970s, the Turkish army was a monster for these people." Military abuses marginalized Kurdish communities. For instance, a PKK member cited by Matur highlights military atrocities as a factor that pushed her toward the PKK:

> I was 13 when my village was burned down by the army. The soldiers came at 5:00 am and took all of us out of the village. They stripped all the men naked and started to torture them. My uncle's son had a Qur'an in his hand. The soldiers even took that and threw it onto the fire.[57]

Our interviewee's observation about the impact of the social and cultural environment in which people experience early socialization resonates with the ethnographic research of Neyzi and Darıcı. Their findings underline how childhood experiences of abuses by the military, particularly those affecting the child's parents, continue to have an influence in adulthood.[58] Neyzi and Darıcı refer to the notion of *bedel*: a sense of obligation to repay a historical debt to the sacrifices of the Kurdish community of the 1980s and 1990s. This narrative provides the basis for how the individuals build their morality and produces expectations of reciprocation through political actions.[59] Accounts of abuses by the Turkish military are common, and are consistent with evidence that when civilians are targeted in counter-insurgency campaigns, human rights worsen post-conflict.[60] Such abuses may foment "a dynamic of radicalization and revenge,"[61] particularly when use of torture is overt.[62] Kurdish resentment toward the Turkish state and the AKP has worsened since the end of the Peace Process and the crackdown on the HDP in 2015. As Ferhat of the Rawest Research Company informed one of the authors: "the Kurds are losing their belief in democratic representation", warning that "this might further increase the radicalization in the region."

Secular Reforms

Communities in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey were impacted by Kemalist reforms to religion. One interviewee, Ali, emphasizes how secular reforms failed to penetrate these regions, creating social antagonisms that contributed to Kurdish Hezbollah's increased influence:

> Due to several factors, one of them being geography, Turkish modernization could not enter this region. At least, it couldn't succeed. Despite the bans applied by the state, madrassas, lodges, and even the most religious sects have somehow been preserved and continued their existence. Diyanet [the Directorate of Religious Affairs] has become incapable of even in controlling the mosques. Kurdish Hezbollah, since the 1980s, has grown in these mosques.

Over time, these religious distinctions between the Southeastern regions and the rest of Turkey reinforced differences in identity and enabled narratives of religious oppression to act as push factors away from the Turkish state. Islamist groups—such as Hezbollah and, later, ISIS—utilized these narratives to recruit from the regions. For instance, the statement below is from the "39. Koğuş," one of Kurdish Hezbollah's propaganda books:

> Since the beginning of this system, it is a structure constructed against Islam. They killed our scholars, mullahs, and sheikhs. This system banned the Qur'an, turned our mosques into military posts and horse shelters. They are the ones who slaughtered Sheikh Said and his friends. Again, they are the ones who banned everything related to Islam. Today, we are here to show that they couldn't succeed. Today, we are here to defend Islam![63]

Kemalist reforms impacted Southeastern regions differently from the more secular West of the country, reinforcing secular-religious identity distinctions. The limited reach of state authority also allowed radical groups to develop in these circumstances. Identity distinctions fomented by repression sow the seeds of radicalization by creating perceptions of alienation and victimization that push people away from state-sanctioned norms. Issues stemming from systematic oppression set the context for the discussion that follows, and marginalization of communities in these regions is often interconnected with other factors emphasized by our interviewees.

Economics and Demographics

The Eastern and Southeastern regions of Anatolia have the lowest GDP per capita and the highest unemployment rate in Turkey, both in the general population and among young people.[64] Several of our interviewees emphasized economic factors that are specific to these regions as causes of radicalization. These primarily relate to the relative economic deprivation compared to other areas of the country, partly stemming from the failure of the state to develop the regions since the Republic's foundation, but socioeconomic class and demographics were also highlighted as relevant factors that exacerbate economic issues and provide opportunities for radical groups to recruit.

Relative Economic Inequality

Cevdet, security studies scholar and ex-Special Forces commander, highlights state failure to provide modernization and economic opportunity, largely due to geography, as a push factor for radicalization:

> Neither the Republic nor the Ottoman Empire could have brought modernization to these lands. In urban centers, education and culture have been shaped by local Islamic sects. In the villages, we cannot even mention education. They have never seen a proper service from the state, but have been abandoned by the state. The only means of existence for these people was cross-border smuggling to Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and this has also been prohibited by the Turkish state. There is no place in Hakkari or Şırnak where you can earn money from agriculture; it's all mountains. These people literally have nothing left. In a place such as this, of course a person can radicalize.

Cevdet's argument stresses not only how mountainous terrain impacted socioeconomic development in Turkey but also that the proximity to neighboring states with porous borders offers opportunities too. Biner highlights that when faced with high unemployment and poverty, cross-border activities become a key aspect of the informal economy in the area.[65] Cevdet's point suggests that the crossover of economic and geographic factors provides both push and pull factors for engagement with illicit behaviors. Fundamentally, economic deprivation compels individuals to seek alternative sources of income. Ali explains how the financial pull of ISIS recruitment appeals in such circumstances:

> For some people, it wasn't "terror" that they were participating in. They believed that they would have a new life under the Islamic State, and some of them had it. There are many people from Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia who migrated to Syria or Iraq during the reign of the Islamic State but never participated in clashes. Instead, they became officers at border control, worked as editors in ISIS news agencies, or opened a bakery that cooked food for the fighters. This opportunity that ISIS created, and the money it provided, of course, pulled people. And when you think how close everything was, participation wasn't an issue for the people living in that region.

Ali's point is similarly made by a source cited by Eroğlu (2018), a documentary photographer and researcher from Gaziantep, Southeastern Anatolia:

> If money can be made, a person from Gaziantep gets into that business without hesitation, including becoming an Islamist. If you go to villages between Jarabulus and Elbeyli you can find many people voting for HDP but carrying goods for ISIS. This is a commercial relationship; it is not important what you carry, you just do your job and get your money. It might be cigarettes, it might be tea, it might be weapons or drugs… it doesn't matter. Border trade is always like that.[66]

Again, economic opportunity is stressed as a pull factor for joining ISIS, particularly due to convenience for those in the border regions. Another interviewee, Sarp, argues that economic causes are at the root of radicalization:

> If you asked an ISIS fighter about his reasons for going to Syria, he would talk about the general cleavage among the society between the religious and the secular. After that, he would probably continue with anti-Western sentiments and, in the end, he would explain everything with the struggle of the Ummah. However, if you get to the deeper thoughts

of that person, he would then start to tell you rational things, mainly economic reasons that he may not have understood while joining the organization.

Sarp here argues that religious and ideological narratives may be superficial and, instead, structural economic factors are a root cause of ISIS recruitment. These findings relate to previous studies that emphasize the economic struggles of those in the Eastern and Southeastern regions, highlighting that Kurdish communities are disproportionately hit by economic crises, labor market discrimination, and worsening unemployment and under-employment.[67] Furthermore, our findings underline the relationship between those economic factors and recruitment to radical groups in those regions.

Socioeconomic Status

Some of our interviewees stressed that socioeconomic class is an influential factor in terrorist recruitment. For instance, Tarık highlights the relevance of this factor to PKK recruitment:

> Of course, there are examples of people that joined the PKK from college or top universities, but these boys and girls are a small minority among thousands of militants. These people are not the mass target of the PKK. This problem, in the end, is a class issue. If you were a Kurd mixed with the middle or upper class in Turkey, you would not join PKK. At the most you may become a Kurdish nationalist, but that's it, you would not become a terrorist.

Another interviewee, Zehra, also emphasizes this class dimension. She argues that the PKK and HDP, both potential routes for pro-Kurdish political activism, are distinguished by economic class and perceptions of opportunity:

> Why would the family of Ahmet Türk [a wealthy senior HDP politician] join the PKK? Is this the same with a child from the suburbs of Şırnak or Cizre? Can Ahmet Türk be the same as these people? This is also a matter of class. Many important people among the tribes became politicians. In other words, these are not the striking power of the PKK. The PKK mainly consists of children from the suburbs because these people have nothing to lose. So, they see their liberation inside the organization.

The arguments about socioeconomic class raised by Tarık and Zehra stress an important point: ideology, in this case Kurdish nationalism, may encourage political activism, but the individual's economic class and social status influence whether that finds expression via the political system or militancy. These findings support Özeren et al.'s study that analyzed records of 2,312 PKK members and found that 78% were unemployed before joining, and 71% had no employed family member.[68]

These findings highlight a relationship between socioeconomic factors and radicalization, supporting Piazza's research on the relationship between socioeconomic discrimination against minorities and terrorism.[69] People left with limited employment opportunities and insufficient state support in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey tend to become key recruitment targets. Economic circumstance, class, and the possibilities of the transborder black market economy are both push and pull factors in determining associations with radical groups in these regions.

Sociodemographics

The Southeastern Anatolia region has a fertility rate, population growth rate, average household size, and infant mortality rate all above the national average.[70] Five cities in the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Anatolia have the highest infant mortality rates, and they have the highest average number of children per household.[71] In addition, these regions contain the ten highest fertility rate cities in Turkey.[72] Our interviewees emphasized these demographic factors as worsening the economic struggles of those in the region. In particular, the large family size was claimed to impact youth poverty and lack of opportunity, making many vulnerable to recruitment by groups that offer socioeconomic support and status. Baran, an ex-PKK member who has recently published a book on PKK child soldiers, highlights how these issues influence PKK recruitment:

> A lot of militants inside the PKK are children. I am talking about at least 20,000 children since the 1980s. Their parents were responsible for them. As a family, you cannot blame this solely on the convincing power of the organization. Especially during the 1990s, the PKK requested one child from every Kurdish family to join the PKK under what they call "compulsory military service," and some of the families even gave their children voluntarily because they were having trouble looking after them. But you should also understand the families: they have eight, maybe nine children and an armed militant comes and wants your child, who cares? I mean, in this context, it would also not matter if it was the PKK or another organization.

Ali likewise suggests family size as a causal factor for the recruitment of children by Hezbollah in the region:

> Although Hezbollah may be considered more of an urban organization than the PKK, the overall demographics of the group members are not different. This is because most of the children who have joined Hezbollah were from migrant families who came from the countryside. They had more children than the urbanized people. Most of these children that I talked to told me that they were in search of shelter before participating in the activities of Hezbollah. Probably, the organization gave them the family bliss that they were searching for.

Baran and Ali's observations emphasize how economic and demographic problems combine and can lead to children being cast out, unable to be supported by their families, vulnerable to the lure of a new familial support network provided by a group that offers subsistence and shelter. Ali's statement also resonates with Kurt's argument that Hezbollah has been successful in cultivating a sense of group belonging while "instilling the notion of *the pursuit of a high ideal* among the less well-educated, socioeconomically disadvantaged and dispossessed youth."[73]

Cevdet also emphasizes the effects of family size, but instead considera the child's perspective and perceptions of status:

> One of the main reasons why people join the PKK is because of their families. They have seven to eight children and then they can't look after them. They don't care if they go to school, they don't care what they eat, and they don't even care if they are alive. But the PKK does. For these children, the PKK becomes a "new home," a "new shelter." The organization gives them the chance of being a "national hero," a chance to be a micro-celebrity for a child who can never be an important person otherwise, even for

his family. And most importantly, the PKK gives them a weapon. Think of a child who can never play with toys and a child who has never been spoiled in his life… For that child, the feeling of carrying that gun is the same as becoming the king of the world!

This supports Kruglanski et al.'s "significance quest" model of radicalization.[74] An undervalued child in a large but poor family, with little possibility of prosperity, may feel insignificant and lack foreseeable opportunities to improve their status. If an organization offers the chance to become a "national hero" or "micro-celebrity," in addition to financial support, shelter, and a social network, then this is a significant pull factor. Thus, economic and demographic factors combine to both push and pull toward radicalization. When combined with a perceived significance loss at the communal level—identified with the individual's religious or ethnic group—joining an organization such as the PKK, Hezbollah or ISIS provides not only a path for significance for the individual but also a group identity. The pull of this significance quest is therefore twofold and relates individualistic motivations to group victimization narratives.

Internal Displacement and Migration

The conflict with the PKK in the 1990s led to the Turkish military displacing approximately 3,500,000 people, predominantly Kurds, by forcibly evacuating almost 3,500 villages and hamlets, although these figures vary considerably depending on the source.[75] This led to an influx of migration to the cities of Southeastern Anatolia. Diyarbakır, for instance, saw its population increase from 381,000 to over 800,000.[76] The displacements removed communal and kinship networks, exacerbating unemployment and poverty.[77] Displacement and migration emerged as common themes from our interviewees, underlining how these dynamics were exploited by radical organizations.

Tarık highlights how those who were "reterritorialized" from the villages to the cities of the regions may become reliant on a radical group as a replacement for their lost socioeconomic networks:

> If you want to talk about the radicalization in the Eastern and the Southeastern Anatolia regions of Turkey you should talk about the story of people who were reterritorialized. The terrorist organizations appear to be a path for the people who couldn't join the "main formula of happiness" in Turkey. You can call this the "Turkish Dream." Only the mainstream Kurds join this formula: the ones living in centers, or the ones who are integrated after immigration. But the others… I mean the ones who are taken from their lands and put into a city without anything, these people lose all of their socioeconomic networks. For those people, the only thing they can lean on is an organization. It doesn't matter if it is the PKK or ISIS. The organization and the things it gives, only that matters… If a person's inclination to become a radical is at level three when he is in his village, then it is at level fifteen when he migrates to a city.

The reference to the "Turkish Dream" and how, for many Kurds, this is an unobtainable ambition, relates again to Kruglanski et al.'s "significance quest" model of radicalization.[78] If the "main formula of happiness" is not possible due to "reterritorialization" and being uprooted from their socioeconomic networks, individuals may gain a sense of self-worth by joining a radical organization.

Ali highlighted the same point, emphasizing that the internally displaced are a recruitment target for radical groups in the region, regardless of ideology:

> How do you think that ISIS and the PKK, or the PKK and Hezbollah, recruit people from the same families? You know, there are many families whose two sons went to different organizations that are fighting against each other. This is not a coincidence. This is because they recruit from the same mass: from the ghettos, among the poor people who have just arrived in cities and who are searching for an identity or searching for a place to get rid of their loneliness. This is the same in Diyarbakır, in Adıyaman, in Muş, in Gaziantep, and Şırnak. Not only in Istanbul or in Ankara. Many people have migrated to the big cities in the region due to village evacuations and due to economic conditions in the countryside. These are the main targets of organizations.

Like Tarık, Ali's reference to people searching for identity and seeking to alleviate their loneliness stresses how displacement and migration can create a rupture in people's lives that radical organizations exploit. Recruiters take advantage of those struggling with social dislocation, furthermore identifying that an individual may be more easily recruited if they already have a social tie to the organization, which leads them to target these kinship ties. Sarp expands on this point concerning ISIS:

> I can tell you that ISIS recruiters were targeting families as such because they knew if they can indoctrinate one of the siblings, the others may also join. As you know, the kinship ties among Kurds are really strong and ISIS built its primary recruitment method on these kinship ties.

Cevdet suggests that this process of displacement and migration leads to a clash in the cities between urban and rural cultures. He describes how the Kurds that have been displaced from their villages struggle to recreate the village's collective values and bonds, that is, the "traditional superstructure." He states that "[…] when they come to the city, they cannot find these values and this superstructure collapses. And, although they try to become a part of the city, they cannot. They stay in between being urban and rural." Cevdet argues that this creates distinct segments among the population in the cities that the displaced move to. He says he witnessed this dynamic during his military service in Cizre and Şırnak, arguing that it directly relates to radicalization and recruitment among these populations:

> There are two kinds of people living there: the core population of the city in the center called "Öz Cizreliler" who had been living in the city for centuries, and the peasants who came to the periphery of the city after village evacuations. The ones in the center humiliate these newcomers. Imagine that you are a peasant who had lost everything and came to the city in search of a new start, and you feel that you have nothing in common with the people around you. And, you have no one. After this point, your process would be accidental terrorism. Because not only would you have a sense of Kurdish ethnonationalism but you would also be a conservative coming from the countryside… It would be just be a toss-up which organization radicalize you first.

Cevdet's observations stress the impact of social dislocation and the resulting culture clashes and alienation between different parts of the city's population. Cevdet also states that such individuals may hold multiple beliefs (ethno-nationalism and religious conservatism) that while not inherently contradictory, render them susceptible to the pull of groups with a range of different ideologies.

To summarize, the preceding discussion highlights how systemic issues cause locally-experienced tensions, creating a context in which elements of the population are vulnerable to radicalization. Displacement and migration—often stemming from military aggression in the countryside—fracture collective bonds and challenge one's culture and identity, creating insecurities for radical organizations to exploit.

The Impact of Geography

The geography of the Eastern and Southeastern regions was stressed by several interviewees as an issue that affects radicalization and organizational recruitment. The mountainous environment made it more difficult for the state to economically develop and culturally influence the region. In addition, the proximity to neighboring states provides an opportunity for the trans-national movement of people and materials, plus the exchange of ideas, self-identifications, and ideologies across state boundaries. Some of these factors have been touched upon already, but given how prominent the geographic point was among our interviewees, it deserves further elaboration.

Ali describes the influence of geographic isolation and the physical and cultural vicinity to neighboring states:

> The mountainous terrain of the region has caused several difficulties for the central authority. I mean, think about an imam sent to a village that has been isolated from the rest of the society for centuries. How can he tell them that the religion they have believed for years is not true? But also, don't forget the importance of the location […] for a Kurd living in that region, Syria, Iraq, and Iran mean a lot. It is not only because they are close to these countries but because there are relatives of the Kurds living in those countries. They feel close to them in heart and mind, and can easily be affected by events across the border. For instance, the appearance of Kurdish Hezbollah in the region in the 1980s is primarily based on the Iranian Revolution. Kurds have been exposed to its effects much more than the other people. For the ones who had problems with Turkish modernization and Western values, the Iranian Revolution showed an alternative way.

This quote draws attention to how remoteness from Ankara and Istanbul influences Kurds within the region, as the mountainous border region connects them to alternative political and ideological influences. Similarly, Cevdet emphasizes the impact of geographic isolation and argued that geographic conditions created a distinct "mountain culture" that acts as a source of radicalization:

> The reason why people are more inclined to radicalize in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions is that they are not civic people. They have a mountain culture. Think about the geographic conditions and the climate. I lived there for years. Snow falls in November, becomes three meters in December, and stays until April. These people live for months in isolation without any physical connection to any part of the country. They cannot send their children to school, and if they get sick, they cannot reach a doctor.

While he describes a "mountain culture" as a cause of radicalization, he highlights extrinsic factors, such as isolation from public services, as fundamental issues. Our interviewees present support for Buhaug et al., who have highlighted the increased likelihood of ethnic conflict when large ethnic groups are excluded from power and located far from the capital and in a location with rough terrain.[79] Studies on the impact and advantages of proximity to state borders,[80] and those concerning the

relationship between transnationalism of excluded ethnic kin groups and violence,[81] also find some support in our findings.

Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to deliver a comprehensive picture of the causes of radicalization in the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Turkey. It has demonstrated how regionally specific factors enable ideologically disparate terrorist groups to recruit and radicalize from the same population. Highlighting structural and systemic dynamics as influential in radicalization among the PKK, Kurdish Hezbollah, and ISIS, representing both ethno-nationalist and Islamist ideologies, it emphasizes these contextual factors as significant determinants of radicalization. The findings highlight structural issues stemming from state oppression and inequalities, compounded by geographic, economic, and demographic factors, as driving forces for radicalization in Turkey. The factors highlighted in this study compose our proposed typology of push and pull factors in structural radicalization, distilled in the table below. Unlike previous literature on radicalization, which describes structural factors as pushing toward radicalization while ideology pulls, this paper demonstrates how structural factors in the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Turkey both push and pull (Table 1).

Long-term oppression sets the context of early socialization for Kurds in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey has a causal link with many other factors that can pull an individual down the path of radicalization. Suppression marginalizes communities and reinforces divergent identity narratives, whether they be Islamist or ethno-nationalist. Decades of suppression of Kurdish identity, political exclusion, human rights violations, forced migrations, and economic abandonment by the state fueled widespread grievances, pushing people toward the PKK, Kurdish Hezbollah, or ISIS. These findings support prior research identifying the relationship between state repression and political violence.[82] At the micro and meso levels of analysis, studies that underline the role of personal and group grievances in radicalization practices also find support;[83] as do those that highlight overt abuses by state forces as a cause of backlash from among the population.[84]

The lack of economic development in these regions has caused relative deprivation and lack of economic opportunities, fomenting grievances against the state but also creating perceptions of discrimination and lack of status. Economic inequality has been compounded by restrictions to Kurdish political representation, especially since the failed peace process. These economic factors increase the attraction of radical organizations that may provide both financial opportunity and a response to inequalities. Our findings, therefore, support studies highlighting the relevance of socioeconomic and political exclusion of particular groups to political violence.[85]

Table 1. Combined effects of push and pull factors in structural radicalization.

	Push	*Pull*
History of oppression	Racism, exclusion, disadvantage	Pluralism, acceptance, opportunity
Economics and demographics	High unemployment, underemployment, low human capital	Employment, income, (self-) education
Internal displacement	Village burnings, groups forced to move to cities	Autonomous settlements, embeddedness
Geography	Alienation, isolation, anomie	Social capital, inclusion, synnomie

Demographics, particularly large family size, was highlighted as an important factor that worsens economic issues and generates opportunities for recruitment to radical organizations. Displacement and forced internal migration create ruptures in people's lives and can make them susceptible to radicalization and recruitment, partly for financial reasons but also due to dislocation from previously held familial and kinship ties. Recruiters prey on immigrants to the cities, whose loneliness and insecurity are compensated by the organization, which offers them self-worth and purpose. This pull factor relates to Kruglanski et al's. "significance quest" model of radicalization.[86] The impact of domestic migration is interconnected with repression and economic factors and deserves further study and recognition in theories of radicalization processes.

Our findings highlighting geographic remoteness and mountainous terrain as factors influencing radicalization complement Buhaug et al.'s analysis of the likelihood of ethnic conflict relating to distance and roughness of the terrain.[87] The geographic features of Eastern and Southeastern Turkey limit state access, economic development, and provision of services, pushing people in the area to seek opportunities with non-state organizations. Meanwhile, the proximity to state borders also produces opportunities for local communities. Alternative means of economic opportunity via the cross-border black market, aided by kinship ties that transcend state lines, present pull factors toward cooperation or association with terrorist groups that operate there, regardless of ideology.

Our conceptualization of structural radicalization emphasizes the overlapping impact of various systematic, demographic, geographic, and economic factors that are unique to the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Turkey as the basis for radicalization. Although generalizability is a limitation of this study, the research develops a theoretical understanding of radicalization by highlighting how an interplay of structural factors can create both push and pull factors that influence radicalization and recruitment to ideologically diverse groups operating in the same locality. Further research into the relationship between these groups, and how specific structural factors influence radicalization, is needed to improve our understanding of these dynamics. In particular, we suggest that the impact of displacement on radicalization is a theme that deserves greater attention.

Disclosure statement

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