CHAPTER TWO

SOLDIERS AND SETTLEMENTS

Turkish Counter-Insurgency and the Strategy of Environment Deprivation

Where there is sea there are pirates. In this province [Hakkari] are 674 villages and hamlets. These settlements form the spider’s web in which the PKK feeds itself. (...) Why don’t we concentrate all [villagers] in two or three main settlements.

General Osman Pamukoğlu

Introduction

The notion that a small group of politically highly motivated but relatively poorly equipped guerrilla fighters could defeat the second largest armed forces in NATO in a prolonged war seems incredible. But various attempts by Turkish politico-military organizations to prosecute a counter-insurgency guerrilla campaign against the separatist PKK during the second half of the 1980s had failed dramatically, resulting in the deaths of their leaders and main cadre, and by 1990 the ‘liberation of Kurdistan’ by the PKK had become not at all unthinkable. The Turkish Armed Forces were rapidly losing control of an undeclared war. They only managed to regain control several years later, after a reorganization of the army and the implementation of a radical (counter-insurgency) war doctrine. The ‘new’ war was characterized by a harsh resettlement practice, with forcible, wholesale evictions accompanied by summary executions, the slaughter of livestock and the burning of villages. In this chapter, we discuss the military logic for this resettlement. The objective, it is argued, was not merely retaliation, and nor was it a negative side-effect of the war or collateral damage. It was not even a temporary clearance of the countryside in order to break the guerrilla. Rather, the resettlement program constituted a concerted attempt

1 Pamukoğlu 2003: 59.
by the Turkish military to bring about a conclusive transformation of
the regional settlement structure. Its rationale was spatial contraction
leading to environment deprivation. The small rural settlements of the
Southeast were regarded as the ‘negative environment’ that fostered the
PKK guerilla, and the immediate aim of the Turkish Armed Forces
was to solve this problem by changing the spatial ground of the war.
The destruction of rural society was simply considered part of the
solution.

A top secret letter written in 1993 by President Turgut Özal reveals
some of the basic characteristics of the counter-insurgency strategy
that began to emerge in Turkey between 1991 and 1993 and was fully
implemented in the years after. A key element in this letter was his urg-
ing of the need to reorganize the space of war, a need that followed
from the spatial strategy of the PKK. Commencing with excerpts and
consideration of Özal’s letter, this chapter goes on to look at the origins
and strategy of the PKK. The discussion focuses on the PKK’s spatial
strategy, which was marked by the decision of the PKK to detach itself
from the urban student environments in western Turkey and develop
an insurgent strategy that attached major importance to the building
up of military forces in rural areas in the Kurdistan region in Turkey.
It is against this background of insurgent strategy that the changing
counter-insurgency tactics of the Turkish Armed Forces are discussed.
We consider how the state military strategy up until 1991 created space
for maneuver for the PKK, enabling the organization to establish itself
firmly in the countryside; and how the radical change in strategy was
developed to combat the PKK guerilla, aimed at environment destruc-
tion and based upon a two-pronged approach of i) the penetration
of ‘PKK spaces’, with the use of special forces and peasants villagers
seconded as paramilitary ‘village guards’, and ii) spatial contraction by
means of resettlement of the rural civilian population—which ultimately
resulted in field domination by the Turkish Armed Forces.

The Özal Proposal

Turgut Özal had been Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey
between 1983 and 1989, the period in which the PKK had developed
into a force capable not just of causing the Turkish state problems, but
of actually winning the struggle for independence from Ankara and
achieving the establishment of a Kurdistan. In 1989 he ascended to