

**THE IMPACT OF POPULAR SUPPORT ON TERRORIST GROUP SURVIVAL:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE PKK AND THE SHINING PATH**

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Abstract: Why do some terrorist groups survive for decades while others collapse despite sharing similar contexts? This study argues that variation in popular support plays a crucial but often overlooked role as a causal explanation for the longevity of terrorist group. Drawing on a comparative, process-tracing analysis of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), the article shows that the longevity of terrorist groups depends on the maintenance of popular support which activates the mechanisms of resource mobilization and post-shock adaptation (organizational and ideological). While both groups emerged from marginalized rural bases and faced harsh counterterrorism campaigns, their survival trajectories sharply diverged. The PKK survived intense counterterrorism and leadership decapitation through continued popular support, whereas the Shining Path's violence against civilians rapidly eroded its social base, making it vulnerable to collapse after Guzman's arrest. The findings in this study contribute to terrorism literature by theorizing popular support as a dynamic causal mechanism and offer policy implications for counterterrorism strategies by emphasizing civilian engagement.

Keywords: *PKK, Shining Path, Popular support, Resource mobilization, Organizational-ideological adaptation.*

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TERÖRİST GRUPLARIN HAYATTA KALMASI ÜZERİNDE HALK DESTEĞİNİN ETKİSİ: PKK VE AYDINLIK YOL ARASINDA BİR KARŞILAŞTIRMA

Öz: Bazı terör örgütleri benzer bağlamlarda yer almalarına rağmen neden onlarca yıl hayatta kalırken diğerleri çöküyor? Bu çalışma, halk desteğindeki farklılığın, terör örgütlerinin uzun ömürlülüğünün nedensel bir açıklaması olarak çok önemli ancak genellikle göz ardı edilen bir rol oynadığını savunmaktadır. Kürdistan İşçi Partisi (PKK) ve Sendero Luminoso (Aydınlık Yol) örgütlerinin karşılaştırmalı ve süreç izleme analizine dayanan makale, terör örgütlerinin uzun ömürlülüğünün, kaynak seferberliği ve şok sonrası adaptasyon (örgütsel ve ideolojik) mekanizmalarını harekete geçiren halk desteğinin sürdürülmesine bağlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Her iki grup da kırsal kesimlerden ortaya çıkmış ve sert terörle mücadele kampanyalarıyla karşı karşıya kalmış olsa da hayatta kalma yörüngeleri keskin bir şekilde farklılaşmıştır. PKK, yoğun terörle mücadele ve liderlik devrilmesinden halk desteğini sürdürmesiyle kurtulurken, Parlak Yol'un sivillere yönelik şiddeti sosyal tabanını hızla aşındırarak, Guzman'ın tutuklanmasından sonra çöküşe karşı savunmasız hale getirmiştir. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, halk desteğini dinamik bir nedensel mekanizma olarak kuramsallaştırarak terörizm literatürüne katkıda bulunmakta ve sivil katılımı vurgulayarak terörle mücadele stratejileri için politika çıkarımları sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *PKK, Aydınlik Yol, Halk desteği, Kaynak seferberliği, Örgütsel-ideolojik uyum.*

Introduction

Why do some terrorist groups survive while others break down? What explains the variation in the survival trajectories of terrorist groups that share similar attributes? Quantitative studies show that the lifespan of terrorist groups is short,² and yet some terrorist groups stay resilient, although they face counterterrorism pressure. Studies on group survival argue that the resilience of terrorist groups is dependent on complex socio-political conditions such as popular support, networks for integration, and state responses.³ The existing studies on terrorism lack a comparative angle to pinpoint the impact of popular support through systematic cross-case comparison.⁴ This study aims to fill this gap through a most-similar systems comparison of the PKK and the Shining Path. These groups shared the same base in marginalized rural areas, followed a Maoist strategy of warfare, initially aimed for a revolutionary transformation, and faced strong counterterrorism pressure from the state. However, the Shining Path dissolved into criminal factions starting in the early 1990s,⁵ while the PKK survived to this day.

This study argues that popular support can explain the survival of terrorist groups as a mechanism that enables resource mobilization and adaptation to counterterrorism challenges and external shocks. Activating the sub-mechanisms of resource mobilization and organizational and ideological flexibility, popular support constitutes a mechanism that sustains the link between the terrorist groups and their constituency and hence the group's survival. This study treats popular support as a dynamic, relational process rather than a static, given condition that terrorist groups enjoy. By analyzing the cases of PKK and Shining Path, this

² S. Brock Blomberg, Rozlyn C. Engel & Reid Sawyer (2009), "On the Duration and Sustainability of Transnational Terrorist Organizations", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54(2), pp. 303-330; Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki (2008), "How Terrorist Groups End", in *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, pp. 9-44.

³ Audrey Kurth Cronin (2006), "How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security*, 31(1), pp. 7-48; Virginia Page Fortna, (2015), "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes", *International Organization*, 69(3), pp. 519-556; Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer (2008), "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks", *The Journal of Politics*, 70(2), pp. 437-449; Khusrav Gaibulloev, Dongfang Hou and Todd Sandler (2020), "How do the factors determining terrorist groups' longevity differ from those affecting their success?" *European Journal of Political Economy*, 65(101935), pp. 1-15.

⁴ Srobana Bhattacharya (2017), "Comparing Civilian Support for Terrorism", *Journal of Strategic Security*, 10(2), pp. 1-32; Eylem Kanol (2026), "Who supports jihadi foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq? Assessing the role of religion- and grievance-based explanations", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 18(1), pp. 64-83.

⁵ Carlos Iván Degregori (2012), *How Difficult It Is to Be God: Shining Path's Politics of War in Peru, 1980-1999*, (ed. by Steve J. Stern) Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 154-160; Vanda Felbab-Brown (2010), "Peru: The Coca Path", in *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 33-68.

study finds that sustaining popular support improves the chances of terrorist group survival by resource mobilization, which is related to legitimation of the group and insulation from counterterrorism pressures, embedment with civilian structures and networks. Also, popular support through organizational and ideological adaptation ensures group survival by enabling the recovery after shocks like leadership decapitation and the end of the Cold War. As the first case study to compare the PKK with the Shining Path, this research brings together insights from the literature of terrorist group termination/survival and civilian-terrorist group relations.

This research contributes to both theoretical and policy-oriented research. Understanding the factors contributing to terrorist group survival is important for several reasons. First, the longevity of terrorist groups poses risks for the host countries by reducing the GDP per capita growth due to increases in security spending, challenging state legitimacy, damaging domestic political processes, and crippling state capacity to provide services.⁶ To eliminate these adverse effects, the impact of popular support as a mechanism should be thoroughly understood for models explaining the survival strategies of terrorist groups. While the existing research treats popular support as a monolithic variable, this study provides a framework for understanding how the nature of popular support dictates a group's survival trajectory. Second, the comparison between the PKK and the Shining Path is crucial to highlight the centrality of popular support to explain group survival since these cases present a comparative design to detect the popular support as a varying explanatory factor. A direct comparison of these two cases that share initial similar characteristics is illuminating, because, controlling for the many similarities of the Shining Path and the PKK with a most similar systems design, this research presents the causal link between popular support and group survival through comparative process-tracing analysis. Lastly, the survival strategies of terrorist groups should be understood carefully when counterterrorism policies are formulated, especially in relation to constituency support for these groups vis-a-vis states. The role of popular support for terrorist group survival shows the necessity of non-violent and non-repressive government policies to win constituency support and political legitimacy.

1. Survival and Resilience of Terrorist Groups

⁶ Brian J. Phillips (2014), "Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity", *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(2), pp. 336–47; Todd Sandler (2014), "The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock", *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(2), pp. 257–71; Khusrav Gaibulloev, Dongfang Hou and Todd Sandler (2020), "How Do the Factors Determining Terrorist Groups' Longevity Differ from Those Affecting Their Success?"; Yusuf Abdullahi Manu, Muhammed Abdulkadir and Asmau Isyaku Dutse (2024), "Boko Haram Insurgency and Socio-Economic Impact on Host Communities in Adamawa and Borno States, Nigeria", *Journal of Asian Geography*, 3(1), pp. 36–43.

The literature on how terrorist groups have become so resilient has focused on the importance of factors such as group size, diversified attacks, and more popular attack venues.⁷ Moreover, religious group identity, conducting fewer transnational attacks, and being responsible for a smaller number of non-terrorist casualties⁸ are other attributes that increase the longevity of terrorist groups. While some of these studies identify the nature of the organization (autonomy and capabilities) as a point of importance,⁹ others also have shown that strategic interorganizational relationships (alliances and competition between terrorist groups) matter in group longevity.¹⁰ Other than group-level factors, scholars have analyzed the impact of host state features on group survival, such as regime type, socioeconomic conditions, ethnic fractionalization, location, state repression, and counterterrorism policies.¹¹ Overall, characteristics of the groups and states in which they operate influence their survival.¹² Furthermore, about the role of third-party state support, previous research shows that certain types of external support (e.g., safe haven) may hinder the durability of terrorist groups¹³ while the provision of external resources usually increases their longevity.¹⁴

Earlier research on how terrorism ends shows that negotiations, decapitation, organizational problems, success, transition to other forms of violence, and state repression may cause the end of these groups.¹⁵ Decrease in popular support for terrorist groups is listed as one of the factors

⁷ S. Brock Blomberg, Khusrav Gaibulloev & Todd Sandler (2011), "Terrorist Group Survival: Ideology, Tactics, and Base of Operations", *Public Choice*, 149 (3-4), pp. 441-463; S. Brock Blomberg, Rozlyn C. Engel & Reid Sawyer (2009), "On the Duration and Sustainability of Transnational Terrorist Organizations", pp. 303-330.

⁸ Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki (2008), "How Terrorist Groups End", in *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*, pp. 9-44; S. Brock Blomberg, Khusrav Gaibulloev & Todd Sandler (2011), "Terrorist Group Survival: Ideology, Tactics, and Base of Operations", pp. 441-463.

⁹ Jodi Vittori (2009), "All Struggles Must End: The Longevity of Terrorist Groups," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30(3), pp. 444-466.

¹⁰ Brian J. Phillips (2014), "Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity," pp. 336-47; Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan (2014), "Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8 (2), pp. 12-15; Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B. K. Potter (2014), "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58(2), pp. 199-225.

¹¹ S. Brock Blomberg, Khusrav Gaibulloev & Todd Sandler (2011), "Terrorist Group Survival: Ideology, Tactics, and Base of Operations", pp. 441-463; João Ricardo Faria and Daniel G. Arce (2012), "Counterterrorism and Its Impact On Terror Support and Recruitment: Accounting For Backlash", *Defence and Peace Economics*, 23(5), pp. 431-445.; Ursula E. Daxecker and Michael L. Hess (2013), "Repression Hurts: Coercive Government Responses and the Demise of Terrorist Campaigns", *British Journal of Political Science*, 43(3), pp. 562-67; Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan (2014), "Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure", pp. 12-15.

¹² Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan (2014), "Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure", pp. 12-15.

¹³ David B. Carter (2012), "A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups", *International Organization*, 66(1), pp. 129-151.

¹⁴ Daniel Byman (2005), *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Audrey Kurth Cronin (2006), "How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups".

contributing to the end of terrorism.¹⁶ However, the role of popular support is not adequately assessed in a comparative sense to understand by which mechanisms it could enable the survival of groups. However, there are some recent studies that stress terrorist groups' reputation and civilian ties as strategic assets providing operational security and resource extraction, which is crucial for group survival.¹⁷

2. Theoretical Framework: Mechanisms of Popular Support

This research identifies a causal chain where popular support (the independent variable) activates intermediary mechanisms, which ultimately lead to the survival of terrorist groups (outcome/dependent variable). These intermediary mechanisms are resource mobilization and organizational- ideological adaptation. First, popular support provides *resource mobilization* through logistics and recruitment. High levels of support for the group provide intelligence to monitor adversaries (state or within the constituency) and operational resilience through voluntary recruitment.¹⁸ When the recruitment is acquired voluntarily, the costs of defection are minimized.¹⁹ Moreover, forced recruitment could cause the population to join pro-government militias created by states to counter terrorist groups.²⁰ Furthermore, extant literature argues that predatory recruitment styles alienate the civilians and cut off the intelligence (early warning system) and logistical support for the groups.²¹ As a consequence, terrorist groups that do not have enough popular support use coercion, which is self-defeating since forced recruitment creates a negative feedback loop that eventually diminishes popular support for terrorist groups. Then, when popular support erodes, the longevity of terrorist groups is expected to decrease.

Second, popular support enables terrorist groups to easily embed with civilian structures, and networks and this integration provides groups with cohesion to adapt to external shocks.²² This paper argues that terrorist groups that have popular support can adapt organizationally and ideologically to eliminate the negative effects of external shocks. The extant literature points out that organizational centrality and ideological rigidity could make terrorist groups more

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Seden Akçınaroğlu and Efe Tokdemir (2018), "To instill fear of love: Terrorist groups and the strategy of building reputation", *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 35(4), pp. 355-377.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Carlos Iván Degregori (2012), *How Difficult It Is to Be God: Shining Path's Politics of War in Peru, 1980–1999*, pp. 154–160.

²¹ Mohammed Ibrahim Shire (2022), "Protection or Predation? Understanding the Behavior of Community-Created Self-Defense Militias during Civil Wars", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33(3), pp. 467–98.

²² Paul Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 6-10.

vulnerable, especially if their leaders are apprehended.²³ This research further suggests that the adaptation of the terrorist groups either comes as a demand from the population or could be employed as a strategy²⁴ by terrorist groups to maintain their existing popular support. Terrorist groups that cannot show the ideological and organizational flexibility to stay relevant for their constituents may resort to violence to maintain recruitment through punishments for defectors and intimidation for possible betrayals.²⁵ This could further diminish their support since the population could be alienated through coercive strategies.²⁶ To the contrary, groups that can shift their ideology and organizational structure²⁷ upon the irrelevance of their ideologies and capture of leadership could survive dwelling on (and maintaining further) popular support.²⁸

²³ Jenna Jordan (2014), *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Audrey Kurth Cronin (2009), *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁴ Efe Tokdemir et al. (2021), "Rebel Rivalry and the Strategic Nature of Rebel Group Ideology and Demands", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65(4), pp. 735.

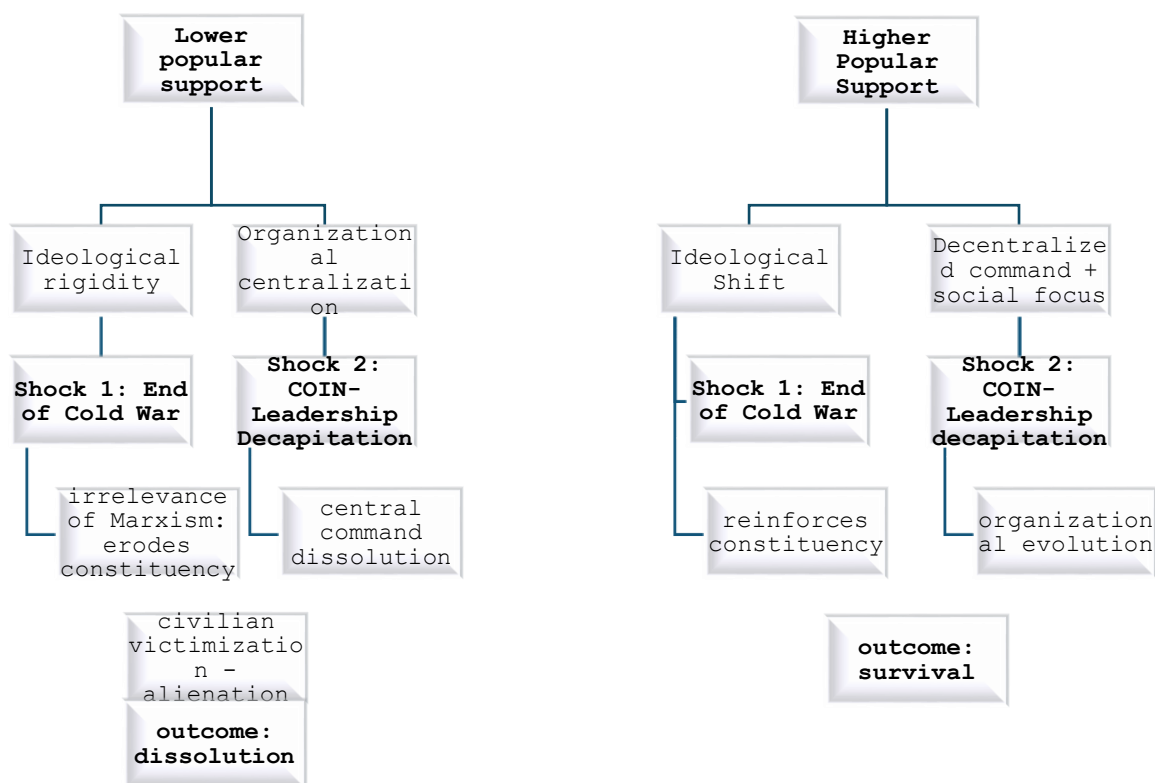
²⁵ Eli Berman (2009), *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 54-58; Stathis N. Kalyvas (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter (2006), "The Strategies of Terrorism", *International Security*, 31(1), pp. 49-80.

²⁶ Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher (2007), "How Free is 'Free Riding' in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem", *World Politics*, 59(2), pp. 177-216.

²⁷ Lindsay Heger, Danielle Jung & Wendy Wong (2012), "Organizing for Resistance: How Group Structure Impacts the Character of Violence", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24(5), p. 518.

²⁸ Paul Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, pp. 6-10.

Figure 1. Popular Support-Organizational & Ideological Adaptation



Overall, this research argues that popular support acts as a buffering mechanism and enables post-shock recovery. In the cases of the PKK and the Shining Path, both groups faced two external shocks: the end of the Cold War (decline of Marxist ideology) and leadership decapitation through state counterterrorism campaigns, as shown in Figure 1 above. Unlocking the intermediary mechanisms of resource mobilization and post-shock adaptation (organizational & ideological), the presence of popular support enables survival for terrorist groups.

3. Methodology

This research uses process tracing to systematically identify the causal link between popular support and terrorist group survival in the contexts of the Shining Path and PKK. Through a temporal process tracing of popular support mechanisms and the differing survival trajectories of the two groups, this study analyzes the impact of popular support via the intermediary mechanisms of resource mobilization and organizational and ideological adaptation. The cases of Shining Path and PKK provide a *most similar systems* comparison to point out the influence of popular support on group survival. Both groups experienced harsh state responses, shared

similar ideological origins (Maoist/Marxist-Leninist), enjoyed initially considerable support from rural bases, and adopted a coercive support strategy with a centralized organizational structure. Moreover, both groups have encountered *rondas campesinos* or *village guards* as pro-government militias. Furthermore, these groups faced the same external shocks, namely the end of the Cold War and leadership capture as part of state counterterrorism campaigns. Although the Shining Path and the PKK shared certain similarities, their paths diverged dramatically. The Shining Path disintegrated into various factions and ultimately collapsed after the arrest of its leader. In stark contrast, the PKK remained resilient to the shocks and survived to this day. This contrast provides an effective comparative case study for examining the relationship between popular support and longevity of terrorist groups, particularly since one of the key differences between them is their ability to sustain popular support, especially following the introduction of external pressures. The similarities of the two groups (**Table 1**) allow controlling for ideology, strategy, and organizational form (in initial phases), which strengthens causal inference.

Table 1. Key Similarities Between the Shining Path and the PKK (in initial phases)

Dimension	Shining Path	PKK
<i>Ideology</i>	Maoist	Maoist
<i>Strategy</i>	Protracted people's war	Protracted people's war
<i>Organizational Form</i>	Highly centralized	Highly centralized
<i>Use of Violence</i>	Extensive, coercive	Extensive, coercive
<i>Rural base</i>	Yes	Yes
<i>Revolutionary ambition</i>	Regime overthrow	Regime overthrow
<i>Context</i>	Weak state authority in periphery	Weak state authority in periphery

In this study, popular support is conceptualized as the willingness of the civilian population or the constituency to tolerate, help, or refrain from opposing a terrorist group.²⁹ Popular support includes passive and active forms of support.³⁰ Passive support means to tolerate or acquiesce

²⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, pp. 91-104.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State (2009), *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, p. 2.

to terrorist activities without active support, whereas active support includes providing material resources, intelligence sharing, political support, or recruitment.³¹

The scope conditions in this research allows the application of the findings to ideologically driven terrorist groups in protracted conflicts rather than transnational terrorist groups with limited territorial or societal networks. The findings cannot claim universal generalizability even though the *most similar systems design* strengthens the validity by controlling for key similarities. This research aims to contribute to theory-building by showing how popular support can operate as a mechanism shaping organizational endurance.

4. Analyses & Results

4.1. Shining Path

As a Maoist insurgency, the Shining Path was formed in 1970 with the objective of overthrowing the Peruvian state. It was responsible for 70,000 deaths between the 1980s and 1990s.³² The group's ideology was based on Gonzalo Thought, which was influenced by Karl Marx and Mao Zedong.³³ Its strategy included intense violence, which was also attributed to the personality cult surrounding the group's leader, Abimael Guzman.³⁴ His capture in 1992 is considered a critical point in the Shining Path's eventual demise.³⁵

4.1.1. Initial mobilization, early peasant support and its decline (1980-1985)

Early peasant support for the Shining Path was quite high in rural areas such as Ayacucho. Their grievances provided a justification for public support of the group as well as the lack of government control in the Andean highlands.³⁶ The Shining Path provided education and redistributed land from wealthy owners to marginalized indigenous peasants.³⁷ They established law and order and received a considerable base of support in return.³⁸ The group

³¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, pp. 91-104.

³² Carlos Iván Degregori (2012), *How Difficult It Is to Be God: Shining Path's Politics of War in Peru, 1980–1999*, p. 2.

³³ Darren Colby (2021), "Toward Successful COIN Shining Path's Decline", *Parameters*, 51(2), p. 36.

³⁴ Carlos Iván Degregori (2012), *How Difficult It Is to Be God: Shining Path's Politics of War in Peru, 1980–1999*.

³⁵ Miguel La Serna and Orin Starn (2023), "Beyond the Gonzalo Mystique: Challenges to Abimael Guzmán's Leadership inside Peru's Shining Path, 1982–1992", *Latin American Research Review*, 58(4), pp.743-761.

³⁶ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), *Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency*, LSU Master's Thesis. 1816, p. 75.

³⁷ Darren Colby (2021), "Toward Successful COIN Shining Paths's Decline", p. 42.

³⁸ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), *Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency*, p. 37.

started using violence in 1980, gained territory and used indiscriminate violence and assassinations in its operations.³⁹

Between 1968 and 1980, the Peruvian state was ruled by a military junta which sought to enhance democratization and in 1980, a civilian government was formed. The existing system and the political atmosphere after the transition to civilian rule were tolerant towards leftist groups to join politics, which provided an alternative to Sendero Luminoso for the public.⁴⁰

Around 1983, the government introduced some reforms concerning the socioeconomic conditions in rural areas where previously the Shining Path had a stronghold. However, during the counterterrorism offensive against the Shining Path, the military responded harshly, disregarding civil rights, as the threat and violence of the Shining Path increased.⁴¹ By 1984, the military had controlled many areas in pursuit of the Shining Path with the help of already established security bases and the pro-government militia (*rondas campesinos*) which put the Shining Path in a defensive position.⁴² Then, the Shining Path began to use more violence to prevent further collaboration between the government and the civilian population by punishing the defectors and coercing the peasants.⁴³

4.1.2. Indiscriminate violence & backlash (1985-1992)

The Shining Path alienated its constituency not only with ideological rigidity but also with atrocities against civilians. Rather than using ideology for the grievances of indigenous people against the state, the Gonzalo Thought (Guzman's formulation of Shining Path's ideology) focused on class warfare. Violent tactics employed by the Shining Path caused a decline in support of indigenous populations in Peru.⁴⁴ These violent tactics included forcibly replacing their leaders, banning traditional practices, and enslaving some individuals. Residents faced severe punishments for minor infractions, and while some communities attempted to resist (forming *rondas*), the Shining Path retaliated violently, exemplified by the massacre of approximately 70 peasants in Lucanamarca. The Gonzalo Thought believed that human rights conflicted with the rights of the collective, and hence argued the necessity of violence against civilians. This justification for their brutality included assassinations and public displays of violence which prevented possible support from social bases.⁴⁵ Eventually, the popular support

³⁹ Darren Colby (2021), "Toward Successful COIN Shining Paths's Decline", p. 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Darren Colby (2021), "Toward Successful COIN Shining Paths's Decline", pp. 35-45.

for the group diminished as the group deviated from foundational Maoist principles of collaborating with the people.⁴⁶

In 1985, the Peruvian president, Alan Garcia, promoted human rights and legal reforms to enhance civil-military relations.⁴⁷ The number of civilian deaths decreased upon Garcia's cutback of counterinsurgency units,⁴⁸ but even after military and police forces committed serious human rights violations, the approval rate of Garcia's government was 75% among society around 1986.⁴⁹ This indirectly meant that popular support was in favor of the Peruvian state vis-a-vis the Shining Path. Later, Garcia's development programs aimed at improving the economic conditions of locals further increased societal support for the government, while the decreasing popularity of the Shining Path caused locals to inform about the group's activities. This also led to a significant decrease in the Shining Path's operations by 1987.⁵⁰

In 1989, the Shining Path increased its violence against the people who collaborated with the military, targeting indiscriminately even children.⁵¹ The group committed atrocities increasingly towards people whom they deemed as opponents in addition to pro-government militias.

The counterinsurgency (COIN) of the Peruvian state in the late 1980s was more population-centric in the sense that the COIN manual of the Peruvian army stressed the use of civilian patrol units, prohibited indiscriminate violence, and respected the rights of civilians.⁵² By the end of 1982, while the popular support for the military operations increased, the locals started to inform on the Shining Path's activities and its supporters. The civil-military relations had improved by 1990. The military refrained from indiscriminate violence and worked with civilians who joined the anti-sendero militias in 1991.⁵³

4.1.3. Societal disapproval (Post-1992)

⁴⁶ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), *Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Civilian deaths decreased from 1721 in 1984 to 500 in 1985, to 390 in 1987 and to 283 in 1988. See in Cynthia McClintock (2001), "Peru's Sendero Luminoso Rebellion: Origins and Trajectory", in (eds. by Susan Eckstein et.al.) *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 89-90.

⁵⁰ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), *Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency*, p. 53.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵² Darren Colby (2021), "Toward Successful COIN Shining Paths's Decline", pp. 40-41.

⁵³ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), *Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency*.

When Fujimori took office in 1990, there was an increase in censorship, military abuses against peasants, and the use of secret courts to try insurgents. In 1992, Fujimori formed a self-coup regime for almost a year and returned to normal politics with a referendum. During this period, polls indicated that 83% of respondents supported Fujimori's actions.⁵⁴ Despite the regime's anti-democratic nature, popular support leaned toward the government because the government was acting against the Shining Path.⁵⁵ Before initiating a counterterrorism campaign, Fujimori co-opted the military leadership by making new appointments to ensure their compliance. Another noteworthy aspect of Fujimori's campaign was the assistance of the CIA in capturing several key figures of the Shining Path. Additionally, the number and capabilities of pro-government militias were significantly increased. This led to an increase in Shining Path's attacks on foreign targets in 1991. However, intense counterterrorism efforts aided by the CIA and pro-government militias enabled Guzman's capture. His capture further increased the societal support for Fujimori's government.⁵⁶ By 1993, the group was about to collapse due to internal divisions, but still carried out minor attacks after a one-year pause.⁵⁷ In 1994, the government issued an amnesty concerning the insurgents who wanted to abandon the group, and this reduced the violence perpetrated by the Shining Path. Facing a recruitment and leadership problem, the Shining Path's survival was further endangered by the government's offensive against the drug trade, which was crucial to financially support the Shining Path.⁵⁸ The group's decline continued in 1995. Till 1999, the military and the police hunted down the remaining leaders of the group, and the operational capacity of the group was halted.⁵⁹

Table 2. The Trajectory of Popular Support: The Shining Path

Time Period	Evolution of popular support
1980-1985	Early peasant support + indiscriminate civilian violence + alienation of social base

⁵⁴ Darren Colby (2021), "Toward Successful COIN Shining Paths's Decline", pp. 35-45.

⁵⁵ Jana Morgan Kelly (2003), "Counting on the Past or Investing in the Future? Economic and Political Accountability in Fujimori's Peru", *Journal of Politics*, 65(3), pp. 864-880.

⁵⁶ Raymond W. Switzer (2007), *Sendero Luminoso and Peruvian Counterinsurgency*, pp. 65-67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State (n.d.), 2000 (Patterns of Global Terrorism), Date of Accession:10.12.2025 from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2000/>.

1985-1992	Peruvian harsh COIN + diminishing public support reduced the operational space for the group + capture of leader (Guzman)
Post-1992	Fragmentation of the group + strong support for state's COIN

Retrospective opinion polls from the early 1990s showed an overwhelming public support for the government due to its successful campaign against the Shining Path.⁶⁰ **Table 2** shows the process of decline in public support for the Shining Path, going parallel with the increase in civilian victimization. This analysis suggests that Guzman's capture may have weakened the Shining Path; however, the eventual decline of the group seems to be profoundly related to its inability to maintain lasting bonds within Peruvian society. Also, the analysis reinforces the arguments about the importance of decreasing popular support and alienation of potential supporters for the group due to its extreme and brutal tactics, risking civilian lives.⁶¹

4.2. PKK

The PKK was founded in 1978 as an ethno-nationalist, Marxist-Leninist organization with an aim to liberate the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.⁶² The group has engaged in decades of insurgency, adopting Mao's guerrilla warfare strategy which emphasizes the importance of popular support.⁶³ The PKK has declared ceasefires and withdrawn from Turkish territories several times, but its armed wing is still operational.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2014), "From Right Populism in the 1990s to Left Populism in the 2000s- and Back Again?" in (eds. by Juan Pablo Luna & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser) *The Resilience of the Latin American Right*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 155-156.

⁶¹ Anselm Rink (2017), "Do Protestant Missionaries Undermine Political Authority? Evidence from Peru", *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(4), p. 486.

⁶² Ali Kemal Özcan (2006), *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*, London: Routledge; Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York: New York University Press.

⁶³ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*; Joost Jorgenden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya (2011), "Born from the Left: The Making of the PKK", in (eds. by Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden) *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 123-142.

⁶⁴ Gergin, Nadir, Hasan Duru and Hüseyin Çetin (2015), "Profile and Life Span of the PKK Guerillas", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(3), p. 220; Nicole F. Watts (2010), *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.

4.2.1. Emergence and social roots (1970s)

The PKK historically was supported in rural areas where socioeconomic and political grievances provided fertile ground for an insurgent mobilization. The PKK systematically framed the grievances within a Marxist-Leninist/revolutionary and national liberation ideology.⁶⁵ Structural inequalities coupled with the exploitation of local agrarian elites made the young and landless peasant population more receptive to the PKK's mobilization.⁶⁶ Early PKK violence targeted not only state institutions, but also calibrated against rival Kurdish groups and local elites (tribes) to consolidate its power as the sole Kurdish group to defend the Kurds.⁶⁷

This period of armed mobilization, with the adoption of revolutionary ideology, supported a violent class war against the Turkish state and the existing traditional Kurdish tribal order. The PKK used intra-communal violence to systematically target tribal, landowning elites and religious leaders who were accused of supporting the Turkish state.⁶⁸ The use of violence against civilians in this case was strategic for the PKK. First, it enabled the elimination of rival groups and second, it showed the PKK's revolutionary agenda and appealed to the Kurdish population who resented the local elites. Moreover, the PKK used forced recruitment through intimidation which increased fear among the Kurdish population. Also, the Kurdish population in regions where the PKK received support feared state retaliation as well.⁶⁹

4.2.2. Popular support and enhancing legitimacy (1980s-1990s)

The conflict between the Turkish military and the PKK escalated with brutal insurgent tactics of the PKK and an intense counterterrorism campaign by the Turkish military. After the 1980's coup, the Kurdish-populated regions of southeast Turkey were placed under martial law.⁷⁰ A state of emergency was declared in 1987, enhancing the military's power.⁷¹ The village guard system was introduced by the Turkish state as a pro-government militia to combat the PKK and

⁶⁵ Mesut Yeğen (2007), "Turkish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(1), pp. 119-151.

⁶⁶ Paul White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*. London: Zed Books; Cengiz Güneş (2012), *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, London: Routledge.

⁶⁷ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*.

⁶⁸ Hamit Bozarslan (2001), "Human Rights and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey: 1984-1999", *Human Rights Review*, 3, pp. 27-38; Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*.

⁶⁹ Joost Jongerden (2007), *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*, Leiden: Brill; Mesut Yeğen (2007), "Turkish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question", pp. 119-151.

⁷⁰ David McDowall (2004), *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd rev. ed. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 418-422.

⁷¹ Nicole F. Watts (2010), *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, p. 67.

depopulate the regions that support the PKK through forced evacuations.⁷² As for the PKK, the group launched its guerrilla campaign in 1984 and attacked military posts. The early strategy of the PKK was to provoke a harsh state response in order to radicalize the Kurdish population.⁷³ Another tactic used by the PKK was to punish the state-appointed Kurdish village heads, teachers, rival Kurdish groups and tribes who were deemed as collaborators of the state.⁷⁴ Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the PKK engaged in rural guerrilla warfare and grew in operational capability while also developing a political front to mobilize mass protests in Kurdish-populated cities, following a “dual-track strategy”.⁷⁵

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK gained popular support in active and passive forms and developed localized legitimacy, especially in rural Kurdish-populated regions.⁷⁶ The PKK could gain guerrilla recruitment and a passive network to sustain logistics and sanctuary through this support. The PKK tried to reinforce its legitimacy in the eyes of its constituency by adjudicating local disputes, collecting taxes, and introducing social rules.⁷⁷ These activities fall within the realm of rebel governance, which could be considered as a long-term investment made by terrorist groups to gain or maintain their social support base and, in return, secure resource mobilization. Some scholars argue that Turkish counterterrorism campaigns, such as forced evacuations and displacements during this era, created resentment against the state among the Kurdish population, which increased the support for the PKK as well.⁷⁸

One of the most important strategy changes employed by the PKK in this period is the abandonment of forced recruitment in practice. PKK wanted to “take into account the demands and criticisms of the people it wanted to represent.”⁷⁹ That’s why, according to Marcus, the PKK abandoned its strategy of forced recruitment. To sustain good relations with the constituency, the PKK calculated the possibility of long-term negative impacts of forced recruitment and opted for its abandonment. This move possibly increased and sustained the existing popular support among Kurds for the PKK. This issue was raised firstly by the PKK at the 1995 Party Congress. During the 1995 Party Congress, the PKK decided to move away

⁷² Ibid., p. 67.

⁷³ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 53.

⁷⁴ Hamit Bozarslan (2001), “Human Rights and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey: 1984-1999”, p. 34.

⁷⁵ Gareth Jenkins (2008), *Political Islam in Turkey: Running West, Heading East?*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 142.

⁷⁶ Paul White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*.

⁷⁷ Hamit Bozarslan (2001), “Human Rights and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey: 1984-1999”, pp. 27-38.

⁷⁸ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*; Joost Jorgenden (2007), *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*.

⁷⁹ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 119, 245-247.

from a rural guerrilla warfare strategy to building political support in urban areas, realizing the counterproductivity of coercive recruitment.⁸⁰ Abandoning guerrilla warfare also meant moving beyond the Marxist-Leninist ideology towards a political mobilization in the face of the post-Cold War environment to stay ideologically relevant.

Moreover, the emergence of the pro-Kurdish parties in the 1990s in the political system played a huge role in gathering support from the public in the sense that it was viewed by the PKK as a strategy to deepen its political legitimacy and mobilize the people politically. Having legal pro-Kurdish parties in the system provided an opportunity for the PKK to reinforce bonds with its constituency.

Meantime, Turkey modernized its army and, increased the deployment of troops in the southeast region to fight terrorism. Between 1996 and 1998, Turkey escalated its military operations against the PKK, which led to the capture of its leader, who had sought asylum from foreign states, while the PKK militias retreated to the sanctuaries in Northern Iraq and Syria.⁸¹ Through a joint Turkish and American intelligence operation, Öcalan was captured in 1999 in Kenya.⁸² Before the capture of Öcalan, Turkey came to the brink of war with Syria due to the latter's provision of a safe haven for the PKK members and Öcalan. The loss of Syria as a sanctuary and internal dissent against Öcalan hinted that the PKK was facing a serious crisis over its tactics and leadership, and its guerrilla forces retreated to Northern Iraq.⁸³

4.2.3. Crisis and adaptation (Post-1999)

The capture of Öcalan constituted a major organizational shock for the PKK. Öcalan was put on trial and given life imprisonment. To decapitate the movement, Öcalan was isolated, and the military initiated a campaign to terminate the remaining PKK units, believing that the war was over.⁸⁴ The PKK survived through tactical retreat (unilateral ceasefire in 1999 and withdrawal from Turkish territory and move to Northern Iraq⁸⁵), a significant ideological and strategic rebranding and conveniently maintaining the armed conflict.⁸⁶ Seen as a paradigmatic shift, Öcalan, in prison, declared that the PKK is now seeking a political struggle (democratic

⁸⁰ Cengiz Güneş (2013), *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, pp. 116-118; Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 245-247.

⁸¹ Nicole F. Watts (2010), *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, pp. 70-73.

⁸² Ali Kemal Özcan (2006), *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*, pp. 202-205.

⁸³ Paul White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, pp. 99.

⁸⁴ Michael M. Gunter (2000), "The continuing Kurdish problem in Turkey after Öcalan's capture", *Third World Quarterly*, 21(5), p. 855.

⁸⁵ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 280.

⁸⁶ Paul White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, p. 112.

confederalism) rather than secessionism and explicitly denounced forced recruitment for the group.⁸⁷ Since Öcalan's capture, the relations between the Turkish state and the PKK have gone through cycles of conflict and peace talks.

Scholars argued that the PKK survived this critical moment of leadership decapitation not primarily through coercion but through organizational adaptation.⁸⁸ Contrary to the earlier literature's expectations about leadership decapitation,⁸⁹ the PKK survived Öcalan's capture by strategic retrenchment and ideological reframing.⁹⁰ This adaptation might have been enabled by the continued societal embeddedness.⁹¹ Strategic moderation of its ideology with discursive reframing of the group's goals (democratic confederalism) ensured the support of its constituency.⁹² During this time, active support for the PKK has decreased while passive forms of support has continued. For instance, survey results conducted in 2011 and 2013 shows that fewer Kurds consider the PKK as a terrorist organization and more of them feel that the PKK represents Kurds (4% and 23% increase respectively from 2011 to 2013).⁹³ **Table 3** below shows the process for PKK's popular support in summary.

Table 3. The Trajectory of Popular Support: The PKK

Time Period	Evolution of popular support
1970s	Kurdish grievances + strategic use of violence and forced recruitment
1980s-1990s	Resilience of the PKK despite harsh COIN + abandonment of forced recruitment +

⁸⁷ Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jorgenden (2012), "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy", *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, pp. 1-19; Paul White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*. London: Zed Books, pp. 86-88.

⁸⁸ Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jorgenden (2012), "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy", pp. 1-19.

⁸⁹ Jenna Jordan (2009), "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation", *Security Studies*, 18(4), p. 745; Martha Crenshaw (2011), *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences*, London: Routledge, p. 162.

⁹⁰ Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden (2013), "Confederalism and autonomy in Turkey: The Kurdistan Workers' Party and the reinvention of democracy", in (eds. by Cengiz Güneş and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu) *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*, London: Routledge, p. 192.

⁹¹ Nicole F. Watts (2010), *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*.

⁹² Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden (2013), "Confederalism and autonomy in Turkey: The Kurdistan Workers' Party and the reinvention of democracy", p. 192.

⁹³ Ekrem Karakoç and Zeki Sarıgil (2020), "Why Religious People Support Ethnic Insurgency? Kurds, Religion, and Support for the PKK", *Politics and Religion*, 13, p. 260.

	dual-track strategy (guerilla warfare & urban political front)
1999- present	Öcalan's capture + strategic retrenchment + ideological reframing + transformation to a social movement + political support despite societal disapproval of terrorist activities

5. Popular Support as a Causal Mechanism

5.1. Resource mobilization

In the case of Shining Path, ethnographic research such as Degregori's shows that forced conscription of peasants led to the formation of pro-government militias (*rondas*),⁹⁴ a negative feedback loop, illustrated in **Table 4**, below in comparison to the PKK's case. When Shining Path used coercion to extract resources or soldiers, civilians felt threatened and were alienated, and to protect themselves, they provided intelligence to the Peruvian army or joined pro-government militia (*rondas*). As a result, the counterterrorism campaign of the Peruvian state became successful because the resource mobilization mechanism was hindered when popular support for the Shining Path decreased.

Table 4. The Comparison of the Shining Path and PKK: Resource Mobilization

Resource Mobilization Mechanism	Shining Path (negative feedback)	PKK (positive feedback)
Initial Action	Forced recruitment, civilian victimization	Strategic use and later abandonment of forced recruitment
Civilian Response	Resistance, defection, and collaboration with the state	Loyalty, voluntary recruits, and silence toward the state
Outcome	Attrition, collapse	Resilience, survival

⁹⁴ Carlos Iván Degregori (2012), *How Difficult It Is to Be God: Shining Path's Politics of War in Peru, 1980–1999*.

On the other hand, the PKK initially used violence against Kurdish civilians to radicalize them against the Kurdish state. This tactic aimed to recruit the resentful Kurds who were experiencing heightened state repression, a situation that emerged because of PKK violence in the first place, creating a vicious cycle. Later, the PKK abandoned its strategy of forced recruitment around mid-1990s,⁹⁵ to maintain and increase its support base while also being responsive to its constituency. The case of the PKK supports Weinstein's arguments that the strategies of terrorist groups are shaped through the interaction between the groups and their social bases.⁹⁶ This case also supports Staniland's insights that the survival of terrorist groups depends on their ability to negotiate their social contract with the constituency they claim to represent, which necessitates balancing their coercive capacity with perceived legitimacy.⁹⁷

As a consequence, the stark contrast between the levels of popular support enjoyed by the Shining Path and the PKK can explain the divergence in their survival trajectories (**Table 4**). Popular support enabled a steady source of resource mobilization for the PKK while the resource mobilization mechanism was interrupted when popular support for the Shining Path diminished due to civilian victimization.

5.2. Organizational & ideological adaptability:

The rigidity of the Shining Path, both in terms of its ideology and organizational centralization, prevented the possibility of mobilization of their constituency, after the end of the Cold War and Guzman's capture, which was already adversely affected because of indiscriminate violence. Given that both PKK and Shining Path were challenged by the counterterrorism campaigns of the state and the end of the Cold War, the PKK's ability to adapt vis-a-vis Shining Path's rigidity highlights the importance of an adaptation mechanism that ensured the maintenance of popular support for the case of PKK. Guzman's capture was considered a significant blow to the Shining Path since the group centered entirely on a singular leader (strong cult of personality)⁹⁸ and the rigid Gonzalo thought. The Shining Path failed to transition to a broader political movement as opposed to the PKK and that's why leadership decapitation led to the terminal fragmentation of the Shining Path.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*.

⁹⁶ Jeremy M. Weinstein (2007), *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁹⁷ Paul Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*.

⁹⁸ Audrey Kurth Cronin (2009), *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Table 5. The Comparison of the Shining Path and the PKK: Organizational & Ideological Adaptation

Organizational & Ideological Adaptation Mechanism	Shining Path	PKK
Mobilization Base	Ideological Maoism, grievances of Andean peasants	Marxist-Leninist ideology coupled with ethno-political grievances
Exogenous Shocks	Systemic: end of the Cold War, global decline of Maoist insurgency	Systemic: end of the Cold War, global decline of Maoist insurgency
	Tactical: Capture of Guzman (1992)	Tactical: Capture of Öcalan (1999)
Ideology (institutional flexibility and social integration)	Adherence to Gonzalo thought and rejection of reform	Ideological adaptation: shift from Marxist-Leninist ideology to democratic confederalism
Organizational centralization	Highly centralized system, vulnerable to leadership decapitation and splintering	Decentralizing the command structure through the KCK umbrella system ¹⁰⁰ after decapitation
Outcome	Attrition and fragmentation (due to alienation of the social base, decline of popular support)	Resilience and survival (via adaptation to exogenous shocks, maintaining popular support)

The process tracing analysis indicates that when popular support for terrorist groups is maintained, they become resilient to counterterrorism efforts of host states. Leadership

¹⁰⁰ Marlies Casier and Joost Jorgenden (2012), "Understanding Today's Kurdish Movement: Understanding today's Kurdish movement: Leftist heritage, martyrdom, democracy and gender", *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, pp. 1-12.

decapitation may work in cases where popular support has weakened, while decapitation may not work to bring an end to the terrorist groups if popular support (through organizational and ideological adaptation) is maintained. This analysis also supports some of the existing literature on decapitation strikes on terrorist group leaders.¹⁰¹ Additionally, the analysis about the responsiveness of the PKK towards its constituency stemming from the external pressures supports the earlier accounts that terrorist groups are more likely to endure when they have popular support by being attentive to the demands of constituency.¹⁰² In the case of PKK, strategic retrenchment and ideological reframing activated organizational and ideological adaptation mechanism to maintain and broaden the popular support (**Table 5**).

6. Discussion: Alternative Explanation

Another possible explanation for terrorist group survival is the presence of external support, such as sanctuaries for the PKK. The extant literature shows the vulnerabilities of having safe havens and sanctuaries for terrorist groups.¹⁰³ However, the frequent use of military operations inside Northern Iraq and Syria has not led to the demise of the PKK. However, one must consider that, without the PKK's embeddedness within existing local networks and continuing political support (passive support), the group's ability to endure over time, relying only on external support is highly questionable. Further research is needed to analyze the impact of external support on the survival of terrorist groups. Existing research shows that external support provision for rebel groups can, in the long run, harm the terrorist group in terms of decoupling the groups from their local population.¹⁰⁴ This argument suggests that when terrorist groups receive alternative funding and resources externally, they will no longer need the support of local constituencies for material survival. Therefore, they may shift to forced recruitment and civilian victimization.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Mampilly argues that terrorist groups without external patrons are more likely to invest in governance activities for the population to ensure intelligence and logistical support to endure against states' counterterrorism

¹⁰¹ Jenna Jordan (2014), *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*.

¹⁰² Francis O'Connor (2021), *Understanding Insurgency: Popular Support for the PKK in Turkey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰³ David B. Carter "A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups", *International Organization*, pp. 129-151.

¹⁰⁴ Eli Berman (2009), *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*; Idean Salehyan (2009), *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ Eli Berman (2009), *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*; Idean Salehyan (2009), *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*, p. 115.

campaigns.¹⁰⁶ Contrarily, the trajectories of the PKK and Shining Path do not fit with these arguments. The PKK did not lose its support base, especially in the form of passive/political support, while receiving many forms of external support, such as safe havens, training camps, and fundraising.¹⁰⁷ The Shining Path did not pursue a civilian-friendly strategy to compensate for its lack of external support and instead relied on indiscriminate civilian targeting and punishing the local constituents with violent acts.¹⁰⁸ Overall, this research cannot eliminate the role of external support while explaining the pivotal impact of popular support on terrorist group survival. Nevertheless, the scholarly consensus holds that the PKK's external support and its popular support are complementary to each other, while the former provided organizational and coercive capacity, the latter enabled political legitimacy, operational security and social embeddedness.¹⁰⁹ The maintenance of passive support during counterterrorism campaigns of the Turkish state and after the capture of Öcalan indicated that popular support should be viewed as a primary strategic asset, whereas external support could serve as a force multiplier rather than a substitute.

Conclusion

This study has investigated a central puzzle in the study of terrorist group survival: why some groups facing state counterterrorism campaigns, leadership decapitation and significant geopolitical changes survive while others do not. By employing a comparative process-tracing analysis of the Shining Path in Peru and the PKK in Turkey, this research has shown the crucial impact of popular support on these groups' longevity. The PKK's survival across five decades, despite exogenous pressures, could be attributed to its popular support, which activated the mechanisms of resource mobilization and organizational-ideological adaptation. Popular support through a resource mobilization mechanism enabled social embeddedness and political legitimacy. These resources enabled the maintenance of popular support in the long run despite state counterterrorism. Also, popular support through the adaptation mechanism allowed the

¹⁰⁶ Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (2011), *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹⁰⁷ Paul J. White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, pp. 67-70, 145-148.

¹⁰⁸ Carlos Iván Degregori (2012), *How Difficult It Is to Be God: Shining Path's Politics of War in Peru, 1980–1999*; Jeremy M. Weinstein (2007), *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*; Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR) (2003), “La masacre de Lucanamarca (1983)”, *Informe Final*, Tomo VII, Lima: CVR, pp. 43-64.

¹⁰⁹ Paul J. White (2015), *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, pp. 67-70, 145-148; Aliza Marcus (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, pp. 182-185, 234-237; Cengiz Güneş (2012), *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, pp. 98-102, 133-137.

PKK to rebrand itself both by decentralizing the organization and ideologically focusing on a political agenda while maintaining its armed wing. These two mechanisms of popular support enabled the PKK to endure the external pressures in comparison to the case of Shining Path.

The Shining Path's trajectory shows the dysfunction of the mechanisms of resource mobilization and organizational-ideological adaptability. The Shining Path alienated its constituency by civilian victimization and forced recruitment (which were also employed by the PKK but later abandoned). The collapse of resource mobilization diminished the group's legitimacy in the eyes of the peasants, who shifted their allegiance to the Peruvian state. The inability of the group's adaptation with its rejection of ideological compromise and high centralization made the Shining Path more vulnerable to the shocks of the end of the Cold War and Guzman's apprehension.

This study provides an empirical explanation for divergent survival trajectories of terrorist groups by offering a master mechanism (popular support), activating the sub-mechanisms of resource mobilization and organizational-ideological adaptation. This research also contributes to the literature by analytically examining two cases that are usually studied in isolation. The comparative process-tracing analysis through a most-similar systems design points out how similar initial conditions produced divergent outcomes through the critical variable of popular support.

Several future research suggestions emerge from this study. First, an extended comparative case selection could include other terrorist groups with variations in their popular support levels. Such a comparison could test the generalizability of popular support mechanisms across diverse cases. Another research avenue could search for the specific micro-level mechanisms through which terrorist groups receive feedback from their constituents before they decide to adapt and evolve their organizations or ideologies. Moreover, quantitative research could operationalize popular support dynamics across time and space to provide more precise correlations between support divergence and group survival.

Findings of this comparative analysis carry significant policy implications. The divergent survival outcomes of the PKK and the Shining Path demonstrate that counterterrorism strategies should take passive popular support into account, which enables political legitimacy for terrorist groups. The Peruvian state's victory over the Shining Path did not depend solely on the military effectiveness but was most probably enabled by the existing social rejection of the Shining Path by the peasants within which the group had its social base in the initial stages.

This supports that the most effective counterterrorism strategies should invest in gaining political legitimacy. This way, passive support would not turn into active support with radicalization, and passive support could be eliminated in the long run, too. Therefore, for a successful counterterrorism, states should focus on making the terrorist groups politically irrelevant rather than focusing exclusively on military measures.

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