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Justification of violence by terrorist organisations: Comparing ISIS and PKK

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Abstract

The question of whether or not violence is an acceptable form of action to achieve social, political and economic goals is still an important topic of discussion for intellectuals. Analogous to this debate, another issue exists: the question of how groups relying on violence justify their actions. This article discusses the doctrinal and utilitarian justification of violence by terrorist organisations by examining and comparing two internationally recognised terrorist organisations — ISIS and PKK — directly and indirectly threatening the security of many states and destabilising international efforts to counterterrorism in Syria. In normal circumstances, the use of violence results in self-condemnation and self-sanction. However, terrorist organisations try to make their violent acts personally and socially acceptable by using diverse methods. Greater justification is needed in order to achieve “aggressive intentions.” The main division made in the literature is the distinction between normative and utilitarian justifications. Ideology and doctrine play the key roles in normative justification, whereas value-based calculations are at the core of utilitarian justification. Differences and similarities in the doctrines, the process of enemy creation, identity politics and rational calculations of violence are examined for both organisations. This discussion should not be confused either with discussions on the causes of existence or the goals of these terrorist organisations, or with the debate on the status of these groups. However, when trying to justify their acts, these organisations do make use of certain extant but latent discontent and deprivation that form a breeding ground for violent political action.

Let the goal of Jihad be that the word of Allah becomes the highest
—Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir¹

We will also give our lives to the cause you have fallen for
Every time we look at the black barrel [of our gun] we will remember you guerrilla
—PKK propaganda song “Delîla - Ha Gerîla”²

Introduction

The question of whether or not violence is an acceptable form of action to achieve social, political and economic goals is still an important topic of discussion for intellectuals.³ Simultaneously, political discussions take place on the listing of various groups under the category of terrorist organisation. The main deficiency in the fields of terrorism studies and counterterrorism is the lack of an internationally accepted definition of terrorism and the political drive behind many of the

debates on the subject. Therefore, the author chooses to focus on violent acts, which are more concrete and internationally defined, and justification attempts. Building international counter-terrorism strategies on concrete criminal and violent acts instead of endless political discussions on “terrorists” and “freedom fighters” can increase the effectiveness of these strategies.

This article discusses the doctrinal and utilitarian justification of violence by terrorist organisations by examining and comparing two internationally recognised terrorist organisations with a significant support base — ISIS4 and PKK5 — directly and indirectly threatening the security of many states and destabilising international efforts to counterterrorism in Syria. It is important for scholars, counterterrorism specialists and policymakers to understand the rational background of terrorist violence and of attempts to make violent acts acceptable, in order to develop policies to lower support for terrorist attacks. This will in turn lower the possibility of terrorist attacks due to the decrease of monetary, human and logistical support for terrorist organisations.

Many of the readers will remember the footages of people from Middle Eastern countries celebrating 9/11. This trend of support and acceptance of violence is expanding increasingly to the West. Recent incidents, such as the increasing tensions in Parisian “banlieues” after the Charlie Hebdo and November 2015 attacks, public discussions on celebrations and protection of suspects by ISIS sympathisers in Brussels after the Zaventem and Maelbeek attacks (March 2016), and the making of heroes of the suicide terrorists who committed the Mersim Sokak and Güven Park attacks (February and March 2016) by PKK sympathisers, clearly show the importance of this topic and emphasize that this aspect of terrorism studies will need more attention in the near future.6

The focus of this article should not be confused with discussions on the reasons for the existence of or the goals of these organisations. Nor should it be confused with discussions on the status of PKK or ISIS, as there are different references in the literature to both groups (e.g., terrorist organisation, insurgent movement, guerrilla force or rogue state). This article refers to both organisations as terrorist in character, as they are listed as terrorist organisations by many states and are referred to as such in the literature of terrorism studies7, as a result of their extensive involvement in terrorist activities.

The research consists of an analysis of academic literature on terrorism and justification of violence and an analysis of publications, video messages, and existing research on these groups. In addition to abstract academic works, the main sources of information on the terrorist organisations were collected from journals, magazines and newspapers, including Dar Al Islam, Konstantiniyye, Dabiq and ISIS’s Al-Hayat media, Speckhard and Yayla’s study,8 Holbrook’s research (on the use of Quran to justify terrorist violence),9 ISIS propaganda videos, PKK’s official website PKK Online, Abdullah Öcalan’s writings, interviews with PKK executive committee members and PKK publications such as Serxwebûn.

Whilst the analysed texts did also include messages of utopian peace (to be reached by armed battle), this article focuses exclusively on doctrinal and utilitarian messages concerning legitimisation and endorsement of violent activities.

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4 Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.
5 Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Workers Party.
7 For example, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) and international journals on terrorism studies.
Terrorism and justification

In the past few decades, terrorism has become one of the principal forms of violent political action. Despite the fact that there are not many examples in history whereby terrorism brought solution to a conflict, many groups still see the use of violence as an effective and legitimate tool to achieve their political objectives. The definition of what terrorism is and the discussion on the legitimacy of violence has an important impact on the success of national and international counterterrorism efforts. Attempts to exempt certain types of political violence from the definition of terrorism — mostly under the influence of lobbies acting according to their own interests — or to palliatively relabel terrorists as “challengers of power” and “rebels for change” result in the cliché “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Many academics and counterterrorism experts have claimed that the use of violence for political purposes should be dealt with by ignoring the identity of those resorting to violence and their political, religious or ideological motivations and by only considering the acts and their consequences. There is a risk that attempts to legitimise terrorist organisations can result in passive sponsorship of terrorism.

The main efforts to legitimise terrorist groups are still made by the groups themselves. This is done through the justification of their existence, actions, and goals. Justification is defined as “a positive evaluation of an action for which the subject is responsible” and where “the justification itself consists of giving reasons that are meant to outweigh the violations in question.” This does not incorporate any apologies; however, it is an indirect acceptance of wrong behaviour and an attempt to defeat any reputational damage.

The justification of violent acts by terrorist groups — especially when civilians fall victim — is vital mainly because of their need to convince group members, sympathisers, potential recruits and, sometimes, the broader public of the rightfulness of their acts and to retain their commitment to the cause. Several factors such as politicisation of discontent, the (perceived) legitimacy of the political system, psychocultural aspects of political violence, ideology and doctrine, communication and utilitarian aspects play a role in the justification of political violence.

In normal circumstances, the use of violence will result in self-condemnation and self-sanction. However, by cognitive restructuring of behaviour through propaganda and indoctrination, people are transformed into members or sympathisers who personally and socially accept violence without self-censuring restraints due to the selective activation and disengagement of internal control. In extreme cases, taking human life can be perceived as something right and honourable.

The intensity and the scope of justification have a direct effect on the potential for political violence. Greater justification is needed in order to achieve aggressive intentions. The literature
makes a main distinction between normative and utilitarian justifications. Ideology and doctrine play the key roles in normative justification, whereas value-based calculations are at the core of utilitarian justification.\textsuperscript{19}

The intensity of justification is directly affected by, on the one hand, the number and reach of communication channels and, on the other hand, the content of the message.\textsuperscript{20} Different communication techniques, varying from mass media to face-to-face agitation, are used to facilitate ideological conversion and the implementation of new norms and values. As terrorism propaganda is outlawed, terrorist groups tend to set up their own communication channels. However, access to mainstream media is a priority to reach out to a broader public.\textsuperscript{21} This brings states fighting terrorism into a delicate situation in which a healthy balance between security and the freedoms of expression and information has to be found.

Another delicate issue is the weaponisation of language. Language shapes the apprehensions and beliefs of the people using it and has an impact on their behaviour. Terrorists make extensive use of this. Euphemisms, metaphors, rumours, conspiracy theories, manipulation, deception, relabelling and minimisation of consequences are just a few of these. An interesting occurrence is the self-deception paradox, whereby the deceiver starts believing the messages he knows to be contradicting the factual situation. This can be because accepting the factual situation can challenge the group’s doctrine or damage the utilitarian objectives, self-esteem and organisational discipline.\textsuperscript{22} Subsequently, as a defence mechanism, the biased agent will search for additional biased theories that support the former’s desired objectives. Any other evidence contradicting their beliefs will be ignored or assessed with less care and rejected with a hypercritical prejudiced stance.\textsuperscript{23}

### Doctrinal justification of violence

Doctrines are codifications of principles, rules, norms and values of a certain political or religious entity, which shape interpretations and actions. In terms of violence, doctrines of terrorist organisations serve as moral anaesthesia to help shape the acceptance of violence based on a political prepossession by playing upon social tensions. The ideology and messages from leading cadres are communicated to lower classes in a simplified form of symbols, vague ideas, slogans and rumours.\textsuperscript{24} Receptivity to these messages is higher when intense discontent, relative deprivation and propaganda channels exist. Doctrinal explanations of the sources of relative deprivation are communicated through communication channels in order to transform passive discontent into an active sentiment of hate wherein violence becomes an acceptable option.

The identification of sources of deprivation is the first step of doctrinal justification (Figure 1). The next step is a process of enemy creation, whereby political agents are identified, blamed to be responsible for the deprivation and perceived oppression and then subsequently demonised and targeted (symbolic violence). Thereafter, this enmity is generalised to policies and the actors executing these policies. The desired goal is the rejection of the whole system by the target audiences.

Simultaneously, with enemy creation, identity creation takes places. A new sense of community is created for the discontented group, in which the opponent is used to provide counteraction. Dramatised glorification and references to myths, legends and made-up communal history are

\textsuperscript{19} Gurr, Why Men Rebel.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement in terrorism.”
\textsuperscript{24} Gurr, Why Men Rebel.
commonly used to create a feeling of historical pride, on the one hand, and guilt and responsibility towards past and future generations on the other. With new identity creation, the group focuses on the construction of a different type of communal awareness, new norms and moral standards that are believed to be higher than those of others and have new semantic connotations. The more a discontented group loses connection and grows enmity towards the system and society, the higher would be the likelihood of tolerating violence against this system and society.\textsuperscript{25} The enemy is blamed for all manner of evil, including acts such as occupation of territories, oppression of people, massacres and genocide, whereas the group itself is pictured as having the responsibility to rebel, defend and reclaim what is theirs, as well as fight for the right cause and a peaceful future. Use of violence is portrayed as a \textit{sine qua non}.

**Utilitarian justification of violence**

Utilitarian justification has as its source the value-enhancing potential of violence. The likelihood, frequency and intensity of utilitarian violence depend on the gap between the \textit{costs} and \textit{benefits} and the gap between \textit{desired value position} and \textit{actual value position}.\textsuperscript{26} This facet shows that besides terrorism being fed by emotional incentives, it also has rationality in its own terms to improve value position by altering the psychological coercive balance and asymmetric power balance.

On the strategic level, the logic of utilitarian violence is based on the assumption that violence has a deterrent effect and the exaggerated conviction that the use of violence has been the decisive factor in past events.\textsuperscript{27} At lower tactical levels, violence can be executed to reduce the opponent’s capacity to act and react, weaken the opponent by causing economic damage, seize weapons and other resources, punish, prevent the opponent’s implementation of policies that can damage the organisation, create an atmosphere of polarisation and create or intensify social tension to achieve “propaganda by deed.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.


Unlike messages of doctrinal justification, utilitarian justification is communicated to the broader public to a lesser extent and is mostly limited to members and sympathisers, as it could get undesired reactions. This makes it more difficult for scholars to investigate utilitarian justification, but still not impossible. Interviews with defectors or arrested terrorists give important insights into the internal working and reasoning of these organisations. Moreover, seized organisational documentation can be valuable if accessible.

Comparing ISIS and PKK

When comparing PKK and ISIS, we see that these two groups, although totally different ideologically, use similar rhetoric in terms of doctrinal and utilitarian justification of their violent acts.

PKK is an internationally recognised terrorist organisation based on Marxist–Leninist ideology coupled with a separatist agenda. It has several subgroups and affiliated groups under the names of Hêzên Parastina Gel (People’s Defence Forces), Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People’s Protection Units), Yekineyên Parastina Sivil (Civil Protection Units), Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons), Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi (Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement), and many others loyal to the same leader Abdullah Öcalan. In addition to these armed affiliated groups, PKK has, under its structure, several political constructions, including the political party Halkların Demokratik Partisi (People’s Democratic Party), nongovernmental organisations and activist groups. It has to be noted that a dichotomy exists inside these groups, with both advocates and opponents of violence. Believers of a solution without use of force are referred as “doves,” whereas the devotees of violence are called “hawks.” Despite efforts for peace talk and critique by Kurdish intellectuals that weapons are not an option anymore, PKK did not change its discourse on using armed violence. This division is discussed further in this article.

In contrast to PKK, ISIS has a radical Islamist ideology based on Wahhabi and Salafi practices that refutes any form of ethnic discrimination. ISIS has affiliated groups in many countries loyal to its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Similar to the PKK case, ISIS’s brutal acts are denounced by Muslims and the Islamic scholarly community (ahl al- ‘ilm). The contrast with PKK is that the dichotomy observed in the PKK (doves and hawks) does not exist within ISIS. Despite the fact that this does not change anything about the cruelty of violent acts by both groups, it creates the image that PKK includes also “good guys.” This is enforced by a selective perception of events. An example where this selective perception is visible is the following: mass executions and exposition of dead bodies by ISIS are rightfully referred to as barbaric; similar executions and the celebration of exposing dead bodies in the middle of cities by PKK are less known and still less denounced.

31 Such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and ISIS-Caucasus Province in the Caucasus.
33 Spencer, “Harvard prof and Kerry adviser.”
Weapons as a doctrinal sine qua non

PKK sees armed combat as the centre of its existence and as the only method to achieve its objectives. PKK sources cite this belief as follows: “the only way to liberation is to organise and enlarge the fire-power of guerrilla corps and orientate them towards almost all targets.” In a recent interview, Cemil Bayik stated that the fight will be taken to all Turkish cities. In another video message, PKK/YPG militants threaten to “attack the institutions of the Turkish state all over the world.” Despite peace talks in the past decade, interviews with PKK leaders and leaked records of the meetings between PKK and Turkish National Intelligence Agency (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MIT) show that PKK continued building weapon stocks and preparing militants for attacks in the main Turkish cities. This situation contradicts the messages by PKK’s leader Abdullah Öcalan during peace negotiations and the “Kurdish opening/democratisation process” started by the Turkish state. In his 2013 Nevruz message, Öcalan gave the clear message that weapons should be abandoned and legal politics should be the preferred modus operandi. This was reintroduced in the Dolmabahçe Meetings and Öcalan’s 2015 Nevruz message in which he proposed PKK to abandon its decades-old armed struggle and continue with political and social activities. Contrary to PKK’s original ideal of an independent Kurdish state, both messages did also include a future for Kurds as part of a more democratic Turkey. Nevertheless, these messages were not echoed in the decisions and behaviour of leading cadres at Qandil, which shows the division inside the PKK structure.

PKK’s conviction regarding the power of weapons is based on Marxist thinking that physical power (military power of the state) cannot be persuaded by words, but needs a counterforce (armed rebellion). ISIS propagates a similar message through the slogan “who needs words when you have deeds.” Besides that, PKK builds its normative justification of violence on the Marxist rhetoric that sets violence as a primary condition for the development of a new society. The head of PKK’s executive committee, Duran Kalkan, supports this in an interview with the following words: “Freedom will be achieved by resisting and fighting.” Use of violence is also explicitly justified in the PKK and Koma Civakên Kurdistan (Group of Communities in Kurdistan, umbrella organisation of PKK) charters under several articles. These are indoctrinated at PKK’s so-called “academies” in the first stage and in training camps in the Qandil mountains afterward. Adapted doctrinal trainings are given according to grade in hierarchy.
Where PKK adopts a Marxist view on violence, ISIS’s primary justification is a distorted version of the concept of jihad. Its doctrine is based on extreme interpretations of selected parts of Quranic verses and hadiths, ignoring Islamic protocols and limits to violence. Despite claiming that its acts are based on Sharia law, the investigation-and-trial procedure is ignored and execution takes place immediately. The current situation is interpreted as *dar el-harb* (state of war) and thus no trial or discussion is believed necessary. The ultimate aim is a self-proclaimed caliphate which will dominate the world. Slogans like “Respond to Allah and His Messenger” are used to try and convince Muslims to respond to ISIS’s call for Jihad. The stages for founding a caliphate applied by ISIS are based on that of al-Zarqawi and include the following steps: *hijrah* (attract migration), *jam’ah* (group formation), *taghut* (rebellion), *tamkin* (consolidate territory) and finally *khilafa* or the caliphate. Fighting is central to this process, wherein during every stage, *shahadath* or martyrdom is possible and desired.

Indoctrination starts before joining ISIS, mostly online and through mosques, schools, conversation groups and even penitentiary institutions. After joining ISIS, obligatory courses on radical Islamic thought, Shariah Law, and military training are provided depending on the recruit’s background. The emphasis is on the “hear and obey” rule, which is formulated as follows: “the caliphate of ISIS is not only a legitimate claim of political governance that all Muslims must obey, but that it is a confirmation of the ‘glad things’ predicted by the Prophet of a system of rule that will be based upon the ‘methodology of prophet hood (khilafa ’ala minhaj al-nubuwwa) towards the end of times’.” These lines show that ISIS tries to push a political agenda by backing it with religious arguments. Former Central Intelligence Agency operations officer and academic Marc Sageman supports this finding with the following words: “Religion has a role but it is a role of justification. To give themselves a bit more legitimacy, they use Islam as their justification. It’s not about religion, it’s about identity.”

**Enemy creation**

Whereas PKK uses distrust towards the Turkish government caused by human rights abuses during the 1980s and 1990s and the lack of certain social rights, ISIS plays on the disgruntlement of young discontent Muslims from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, including Europe.

One of PKK’s main arguments for defending its reliance on arms is that there is a so-called genocide going on against Kurds. However, it is the Turkish counterterrorism operations tar-

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43 By radical clerics such as Sheikh Hussein bin Mahmoud.
45 Speckhard and Yayla, “Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State.”
46 ISIS, “There is no Life Without Jihad” (Film), published 12 June 2014, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=6a5_1403639105 [accessed 10 February 2016].
49 Ibid. 9.
getting PKK structures, training camps, weapon depots and safe houses that are seen as genocide against Kurds, as PKK sees itself as the embodiment of Kurds. Education is branded as “white genocide,” where the attacks against schools and libraries are propagated as protection against cultural rape and social genocide. These attacks against educational institutions will be mentioned further under utilitarian violence. The Turkish state is seen as colonial, and the legality of the system is rejected.

Where the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party) government is blamed for being responsible for all evil, the security forces are pictured as “the palace’s fighters” and counterterrorism operations as “Erdogan’s dirty war.” The use of “imperialist fascist TC” instead of referring to it as the Turkish state or security forces is an example of how language is used to change perception, create enmity and facilitate the rejection of the political system.

Besides genocide accusations, PKK also believes that there is an international conspiracy going on against them. Members and sympathisers are indoctrinated to believe that this conspiracy is organised by the “Turkish deep state” and the “imperialist powers” of the UK, Germany, the USA and “NATO’s secret army Gladio.” Özcan cites the following from a Serxwebun article from December 1999 related to the perceived international conspiracy: “America, England, Turkey, Germany sat down, investigated, explored: ‘these humans [PKK activists] are like this...a person [Öcalan] does everything, let’s catch him, then they grapple with one another. No sense of executing party, politics, struggle, anything amongst them’ they said. Namely, they diagnosed all these features of us, and dared to launch such an offensive against us, and by the strength, self-confidence acquired from this [our state] they effected this fearless aggression against the Leadership.” Öcalan, referring to the Vietnamese revolutionaries, states that the Kurdish revolution and PKK will play the leading role in the fight against capitalist imperialist Western powers and the liberation of the Middle East.

ISIS uses a similar semantic as PKK by portraying the operations against ISIS as a crusade against Islam. It claims to use defensive jihad because the current conditions are seen as a threat for the existence of Islam. Moreover, the bloody and barbaric actions are defended as a necessary evil for the foundation of the new caliphate. Countries such as the USA, the UK, France, Israel and Turkey are blamed for the collapse of the previous caliphate and as being the cause of all problems in Muslim countries. Turkey is specifically seen as a Trojan horse and is blamed for the deformation of Islam and of Muslim identity. This enmity against these states is extrapolated to their citizens, who are seen as guilty by association. In targeting these states, ISIS explicitly refers to the Sykes-Picot Agreement that has shaped the region and, thus, the consequent problems. In a video message, an ISIS militant states the following: “This is the so-called border of Sykes-Picot. Alhamdulillah, we don’t recognise it and will never recognise it. Insha-Allah, this is not the first border we will break; Insha-Allah, we will break all the borders also. As Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi used to say, He is the breaker of barriers. Insha-Allah, we’ll break the barrier of Iraq, Jordan,

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53 “Duran Kalkan: Öz savunma kazanacak, hem de çok büyük kazanacak.”
54 Suh, “PKK İdeoloji, Şiddet ve Meşruyet.”
55 TC is used as an abbreviation for Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, Republic of Turkey.
57 Abdullah Öcalan, Kürdistan Devriminin Yolu (Manifestosu) (Cologne: Weşanen Serxwebun, 1993); Özcan, A theoretical analysis of the PKK.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid. 192.
60 Beşikçi, PKK Üzerine Düşiçeliler.
63 Ibid.
Lebanon, all the countries, Insha-Allah. Until we reach Quds [Jeruzalem], Insha-Allah.” “We’re going to come to Quds, and pray in the Masjid [Al-Aqsa Mosque] Insha-Allah, the first Qibla of the Muslims.”

Likewise, PKK declares that it does not recognise the current borders in the following message: “Our people are the same, we do not recognise any borders or boundaries. Amude is Nusaybin, Cizre, Diyarbakir. We will abolish the rotten borders.”

Besides enmity against non-Muslims, ISIS is also engaged in takfiri practices, which includes “the right to label other Muslims, to whom they object, ‘unbelievers’ and exterminate all those who do not adhere to their own extremist ideology.” Muslims opposing ISIS are labelled as infidels and apostates, whereas non-Muslims are branded as khafirs. This classification is based on the concept of “al-wala wal bara” (loyalty and disavowal), which is interpreted by ISIS as “all Muslims are required to exclusively ally themselves only with other Muslims and thereby disassociate from others (with failure to do so constituting disbelief), a strong rejection of nationalism and the idea of territorial boundaries; failure to rule in accordance with God’s law constitutes disbelief (kufr).”

Similar to ISIS’s position against oppositional Muslims, PKK sees Kurds who do not support PKK as a threat. Kurdish and leftist groups not supporting PKK are marked as agent provocateurs, collaborators, traitors, and thus as legitimate targets. PKK blocks all forms of opposition and critique by stating that “The Leadership [Öcalan] is a proven and real fact that cannot be questioned.” Violence against opponents is enforced by sloganised sentences such as “Punishing traitors is a responsibility towards martyrs” and “They died because of their betrayal.”

A critical remark concerning the Syrian conflict where both groups are involved is that both PKK and ISIS build upon each other through a protagonist-antagonist relation. Both organisations benefit from depicting each other as an enemy. Where PKK gains support in the international arena for its fight against ISIS, ISIS gains support in local circles and Muslim communities for its fight against the Marxist–Leninist PKK depicted as atheist. This complicates the situation where supporting and/or fighting one of these organisations always enforces the other side.

Identity politics

Where PKK tries to create an identity primarily based on revolutionary resistance, ISIS spotlights the Muslim collective identity and the honour of fighting for Islam and to fall martyr on the path of Allah.

Identity and identification with a mysterious and powerful imagined political community plays a major role for ISIS recruits. Religion and the individual obligation to help fellow Muslims has a marking role that defines their identity. Lost individuals become one community bound with religious ties fighting for a higher cause, reaching the highest religious level possible if they fall during battle. Recruits vary from local discontented civilians and military to foreign converts to
Islam or radicalised young people with a criminal background. ISIS promises them a new life with the slogan “Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best future.”

Similar to Sageman, former MI6 officer Richard Barrett says that the primary motive for joining ISIS has “mostly to do with the search for identity coupled with a search for belonging and purpose. The Islamic State offers all that and empowers the individual within a collective. It does not judge and accepts all with no concern about their past. This can be very appealing for people who think they washed up on the wrong shore.”

In contrast to ISIS, PKK bases its identity creation primarily on Marxist rhetoric and secondarily as a reaction to the oppression of the Kurdish identity. This process starts with PKK defining itself. Reber Apo (leader Apo) is given a messianic role where “PKK — in the personification of the Leader [Öcalan] — is a spirit, a consciousness, an identity, perseverance to fight, to unveil its own values and live up freely to all sorts of genocide and assimilation” and “a new way of life and the representation of morality,” according to which “All weaknesses and obscurantisms can only be overcome by internalising PKK’s identity and the Apocu morality.” Öcalan claims that “the first bullet shot by a militant is symbol for the rebirth as a heroic warrior” and that “it ends the enslavement, meek character and loss of identity” of that person.

Another aspect that plays a role in identity politics used by both organisations is the responsibility argument towards past and future generations. In his earlier writings, Öcalan wrote that rebellion is one of the inheritances of Kurds since history. Support for PKK’s acts is seen as a responsibility for the legacy of martyrs and a debt to future generations formulated as “the martyrs have showed and taught us how we must fight” and as “a debt to the Kemal Pir’s, Beritan’s, Agit’s and Zilan’s, Andrea Wolf’s and other heroes who are the pride of Kurdish people.” The suicide terrorists of the Ankara attacks, Seher Cagla Demir and Abdulkadir Somer, who killed 67 and injured 186 people, were commemorated in PKK’s so-called cultural centres in European states and autonomous regions in Syria. ISIS makes similar references to numerous Mujahidin killed in action or attacks, from Afghanistan and Iraq to the suicide terrorists who died in the Paris and Brussels attacks. Imagery of martyrs with added slogans such as “We haven’t forgotten” are published regularly on ISIS magazines and social media. The terrorists of the Paris and Brussels attacks were glorified in many videos and ISIS magazines. Special editions were printed to propagandise these last attacks.

Rational use

Examination of PKK and ISIS shows that the use of violence has also a utilitarian facet. Members are convinced by rational argumentation that violence is necessary to satisfy organisational needs, achieve tactical and strategic objectives or block the adversary from implementing certain policies. This section briefly discusses the needs, objectives and methods used related to utilitarian justification.

First, there is the aspect of satisfying certain feelings such as revenge and anger. For ISIS, this is specifically the case for the execution of hostages and ISIS militants accused of espionage. Additionally, former ISIS members state that brutal violence is believed to be necessary in order to

75 Ibid.
76 Alkan, “PKK, Insanlığın Kurtuluş Umutlarını Buyuttüyor”; Özean, A theoretical analysis of the PKK.
78 Beşikçi, PKK Üzerine Düşüşceler.
79 Alkan, “PKK, Insanlığın Kurtuluş Umutlarını Buyuttıyor.”
minimise casualties later.82 Besides that, the show-off of violence and power has a deterrent effect and thus makes it easier to control local populations and encourages them to join ISIS for protection and to keep life bearable.83 Furthermore, it makes it easier to quickly gain control of political, economic and social infrastructures.84 They sloganise this as “When deeds speak, words are nothing” and “As soon as we picked up the gun, they started to listen.”85 Economic needs are partly satisfied by robbing victims, seizing materials and ransoming money for hostages, where using violence is a normal way of working.86 Video messages show ISIS militants showing off with seized weapons, vehicles and other materials, whilst stating that they are “waiting to take more ganimeh [captured materials from the enemy]. We have helicopters, we have planes, we have cameras.”87 Besides direct plundering, violence is also used as deterrence to get ransom money for hostages. ISIS magazines such as Dabiq and Konstantiniyye are used to offer hostages “for sale.”88 The brutal killings of previous hostages are used as a trump card during possible negotiations. The same magazines also include references to the necessity of armed control of regions for food security and availability of commodities.

Similar to ISIS’s robberies, PKK’s attack preparation reports and articles concerning PKK actions show that attacks also have the aim of plundering and stealing weapons, equipment and valuable possessions such as jewellery, money, medications, and vehicles. A tragic example is the carjacking attempt by PKK on 20 September 2011, in Siirt, where four Kurdish young women were executed because they refused to stop. Weapons are also used for the extortion of civilians to provide money and support. The so-called “revolutionary taxes” are not limited to Turkey only but are collected in Europe. Many examples of court proceedings in European countries and a Stratfor (Strategic Forecasting, Inc., USA) report leaked on Wikileaks89 show that, furthermore, PKK is also involved in narcotics, blackmailing and arms smuggling where the possession of weapons and use of violence plays to their advantage.

Besides using violence for their own economic benefits, these groups see the use of violence as a legitimate tool to create economic damage.90 This damage is not limited to the victim countries but affects the whole region.91 The Paris and Brussels attacks have cost millions of euros in losses for the local and regional economies, as well as in investments in new security measures.92 Corresponding damage to communal psychology has more dramatic consequences.

Additionally, analysis of ISIS and PKK attacks shows that these groups aim to provoke overreaction of security forces, create polarisation in the community and intensify tensions. Whether they are successful or not in achieving these objectives is a matter that needs further

83 Engel, “How ISIS fighters justify their brutal tactics”; Speckhard and Yayla, “Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State.”
84 Speckhard and Yayla, “Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State.”
85 Speckhard, “The Hypnotic Power.”
86 Speckhard and Yayla, “Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State.”
87 Al-Hayat, “End of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.”
exploration. However, certain trends of polarisation and overreaction are observable in European states and Turkey.

It is generally known that one of the main objectives of terrorists is propaganda. PKK attack evaluation reports show that attacks are organised in such a way so that propaganda can be made at the maximum level. In line with that, both ISIS and PKK members tell in their own publications that the application and participation of new recruits is at its highest when violent attacks take place. The capability and the actual use of violence is also seen as a way of showing force and humiliating the opponent. Exhibition of dead bodies and destructed enemy assets serves this goal partially.

Besides these, PKK has a more particular utilitarian tactic of damaging infrastructure with specific objectives. There are thousands of examples in which PKK tries to disrupt daily life and the implementation of government policies by damaging infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, roads, energy infrastructure, factories and work sites. PKK members believe that by targeting these infrastructures, they can convince the public that the state has no control over certain areas and create the impression that the government is not providing basic needs. Another reason why hospitals are targeted is to provide injured PKK militants with medical care. Disrupting education by attacking schools makes it easier for PKK to recruit new members and prevent the government from implementing antiradicalisation policies.

Conclusion

This brief analysis shows how even ideologically different organisations can have quite similar features in their justification of their use of violence. Most terrorist organisations accept violence as the only reliable option to push their political agenda. This can be because of the lack of democratic representation or the lack of public support for the cause and, in extreme situations, even the rejection of the democratic governance system. The two organisations analysed reject the Western model of the nation-state and democratic governance and opt for an independent state under their total control, namely, the Islamic State under the control of the caliphate and an independent Marxist–Leninist state, Kurdistan, under the total control of PKK.

The need for justification arises from the fact that most people have to be persuaded to accept the use of violence as an acceptable method. In these days especially when Muslim scholars and Kurdish intellectuals reject violence, both organisations feel the need for a stronger justification of their acts.

Doctrinal justification plays a crucial role in shaping the opinions of members, sympathisers and the broader public, and makes the righteousness of violence unquestionable. Remarkably, where the internal and external communication of doctrinal justifications by ISIS is the same, PKK — depending on the situation — prefers to make a distinction. Certain aspects are concealed from the broader public where others, such as the “victim/self-defence” arguments are highlighted.

Fundamental to doctrinal justification for both organisations is the enemy creation aspect, according to which an external enemy is blamed for everything, put forward in the form of conspiracy theories. Simultaneously, a process of identity creation takes place, enabling a new
group identity to be created by the organisation, in order to hold people together and to make them more susceptible to justify violence. During both processes, existing social, economic, and political disgruntlement is utilised.

Additionally, in-group justification for utilitarian purposes takes place, mainly in the form of economic damage and disruption of daily life in order to damage and block the implementation of government policies.

The danger of accepting the justification of violence for a certain purpose is that it increases the susceptibility to enlarge the scope of justification. This brings us to the current situation wherein ISIS justifies sexual violence and slavery and PKK sees drug trafficking and providing illegal weapons to other terrorist groups as acceptable. Keeping this in mind, lobbying attempts to tolerate certain types of violence or exempt certain organisations from the definition of terrorism should be dealt cautiously, as it will have a much larger effect than intended on the likelihood of terrorist attacks and international counterterrorism efforts. Furthermore, it could give the wrong message that some political objectives can justify the killing of innocents, whereas others do not.

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**Conflict of Interests**

Emin Daskin declares that he has no conflict of interest.