



CORI Research Analysis

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Country: Turkey

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Issues: **Kurucu system (Village Guards)** a) Is the system still active and efficient, b) how many units is it based upon and how does its recruitment system work? In particular what are the selection criteria, if any; is participation on a voluntary basis or, are people also subject to coercion/duress?; how is it formalised (formal appointment, other) and c) are persons with a pro-kurdish political profile/background trusted by the authorities as to be offered or even forced to adhere to the kurucu system?

This CORI research analysis was commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Status Determination and Protection Information Section, Division of International Protection Services.

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a) Is the system still active and efficient

A May 2009 article published by *OpenDemocracy.Net* by Veysel Essiz, a member of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (Turkey) Refugee Advocacy and Support Program, details the history of village guards in the southeast of Turkey,

“The village guard system, or "provisional (and voluntary) village guards" as it is known officially, dates back to 1924. Village Law No. 442, which introduced the system, identified the village guards as a means for local populations to prevent attacks by "bandits and pillagers". In the ensuing years, the system was not only proven ineffective, but also unnecessary, since criminal laws were already in place to manage threats posed by roving "bandits". Eventually, the system was forgotten. This changed,

however, with the rise of the PKK during the struggle for Kurdish independence in Turkey in the early 1980s.

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In response, the state eventually resurrected the village guard system in 1985, by adding a clause to Village Law No. 442. Now, there were two critical agendas: first, village guards were considered an instrumental tool in assisting the army staff in counter-insurgency operations. Second, and more importantly, the state hoped to root out, or at least hinder, public sympathy for the PKK by employing feudal Kurdish families as village guards. The state relied solely on military means to control the conflict. From the state's perspective, all was a matter of loyalty: families who refused to serve as village guards were deemed subversives and forcibly displaced.

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Moreover, for powerful local clans, volunteering as village guards was a tempting means of securing the state's support and of expanding their already-existing influence in the region. It also was a source of income in an economically blighted area of the country. By offering a system of material benefits, de facto immunity and state arms, Turkey managed to attract both poor and wealthier segments of society into the village guard system. The system was consequently extended to 22 provinces in the Eastern and South-Eastern regions of Turkey and the total number of provisional (and voluntary) village guards reached almost 95,000 at its peak.

[] Turkey was quick to drop a veil of secrecy around the provisions regulating the duties, powers, and appointment/ dismissal procedures of the village guard system. It was only in 2005, in response to a written inquiry of a Member of Parliament, that former Minister of Justice Cemil Cicek finally acknowledged the existence of regulation of village guards, adding, however, that "since the subject matter pertains to national security, it remained unpublished in the Official Gazette."

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Along with this lack of transparency, throughout the conflict, village guards benefited from a culture of impunity imported from the Turkish military. As a consequence, village guards became known for their role in drug and arms trafficking, summary executions, enforced disappearances, sexual assaults and seizure of lands and homes of displaced villagers. A striking tactic employed by village guards was to disguise themselves as PKK militants which would enable them to shift the blame onto the PKK.

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The widespread human rights violations committed by village guards are well documented. A 1995 report of the Parliamentary Commission for the Investigation into Murders by Unknown Assailants cited village guards as decisive actors in extrajudicial killings and other illegal activities. In 2006, again in response to a written inquiry of a Member of Parliament, Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu stated that almost 5,000 village guards had been identified as engaging in illegal activities. Similarly, a recent report of the Human Rights Association of Turkey provided case-by-case listing of 1,591 violations perpetrated by village guards from January 1990 to March 2009."¹

The *Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict* notes in a 1998 report the background to the formation of village guards units,

¹ OpenDemocracy.Net, The Mardin massacre and the village guard system in Turkey, 28 May 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-mardin-massacre-and-the-village-guard-system-in-turkey>, accessed 6 January 2011

“The violence against other Kurds has been particularly gruesome: The PKK’s most hated target are the village guards who, in its view, do the state’s bidding for money. In order to discourage further recruitment, village guards and their families have fallen victim to revolutionary justice, often being attacked and killed en masse.

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Beyond the difficulties of everyday life, the insurrection led by the PKK had deepened divisions within Kurdish society. Governmental attempts at recruiting village guards often pit village against village, hamlet against hamlet, and tribal organization against other tribal groupings as the PKK and the state compete for the support of individual villages.”²

The *US Department of State* 2009 country report published in March 2010 states that village guards in Turkey were poorly disciplined and inadequately trained,

“A civil defense force known as the village guards, concentrated in the southeast, was less professional and disciplined than other security forces. The village guards have been accused repeatedly in past years of drug trafficking, corruption, theft, rape, and other abuses. Inadequate oversight and compensation contributed to the problem, and in many cases Jandarma allegedly protected village guards from prosecution. Although security forces were generally considered effective, the village guards, Jandarma, and police special forces were viewed as most responsible for abuses. Corruption and impunity remained serious problems.

During the year, the government made progress in reforming the village guard system as required by a 2007 law which, according to government officials, is intended to gradually phase out the system through retirement while providing social support for village guards. It had reduced the number of village guards to 48, 276, from 63,000 in previous years.

On May 4, a group of village guards attacked a wedding ceremony in Bilge, Mardin, killing 44 persons, including seven children, and injuring 10. While the motivation for the attack was reportedly personal, the attack was conducted with weapons provided to the assailants as village guards. Government officials immediately condemned the attack. Nine gunmen were arrested and two minors were tried separately. In June the nine gunmen were indicted for murder by the Mardin penal court. Each suspect faced life imprisonment for each count of murder. Later, for security reasons, the trial was moved to the Corum penal court. The trial continued at year's end.”³

Several reports document concerns regarding human rights violations resulting from the village guard system in Turkey.⁴ *Human Rights Watch*, *Freedom House* and *USDOS* have all reported that village guards have obstructed returning families in the southeast.⁵

² The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, 1998, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/subsites/ccpdc/pubs/kur/front.pdf>, accessed 6 January 2011

³ USDOS, 2009 Human Rights Report: Turkey, 11 March 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eur/136062.htm>, accessed 10 January 2011

⁴ Jamestown Foundation, *Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism*, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011. OpenDemocracy.Net, *The Mardin massacre and the village guard system in Turkey*, 28 May 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-mardin-massacre-and-the-village-guard-system-in-turkey>, accessed 6 January 2011. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2010*, 2010, p.328,

The *USDOS* 2009 country report further states that village guards occupied the homes of ethnic Syrians in southeastern Turkey,

“Members of the Syriac community reported that Syrians who were forced to leave their southeastern villages during PKK-related violence in the 1980s and 1990s faced fewer problems than in previous years when attempting to return to their villages.

Representatives of one Syriac community claimed that the implementation of zoning laws at times resulted in the loss of 40 to 50 percent of the properties of individual Syrians living in villages in the southeast. Previously, local villagers, particularly village guards, often occupied the homes of Syrians who fled and refused to leave when the Syrians attempted to return.”⁶

In its 2010 report Freedom House states that,

“Property rights are generally respected in Turkey, with the exception of the southeast, where tens of thousands of Kurds were driven from their homes during the 1990s. Increasing numbers have returned under a 2004 program, and some families have received financial compensation, but progress has been slow. Local paramilitary “village guards” have been criticized for obstructing the return of displaced families through intimidation and violence.”⁷

An October 2008 report published by the *Jamestown Foundation* notes the GKK has been blamed for deepening ethnic divisions,

“The negative side of the system is that the GKK has long been criticized by human rights organizations for deepening mistrust and ethnic divisions in an already troubled region. Many village guards have been accused of abusing their authority to seize the property of villagers who have been forcibly evacuated from their villages. The lack of title deeds or other documentation regarding property ownership in the region has exacerbated this situation.

The European Commission, in a recent report on Turkey's progress towards EU accession, has described the village guard system as one of the major outstanding obstacles to villagers being able to return home safely. UN officials such as the UN Special Rapporteur for Internally Displaced Persons have raised concerns: "What I see is that at least Village Guards are perceived as an obstacle, and even perceptions are

http://thereport.amnesty.org/sites/default/files/AIR2010_EN.pdf, accessed 8 January 2011. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Turkey Massacre Raises Questions About Blood Feuds, Arming Civilians, 5 May 2009,

http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Massacre_Raises_Questions_About_Blood_Feuds_Arming_Civilians_/1621967.html, accessed 6 January 2011. Human Rights Watch, Turkey: Letter to Minister Aksu calling for the abolition of the village guards, 2 June 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/06/07/turkey-letter-minister-aksu-calling-abolition-village-guards>, accessed 8 January 2011. Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2010 - Turkey, January 2010,

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&country=7899&year=2010>, accessed 8 January 2011

⁵ Human Rights Watch, Turkey: Letter to Minister Aksu calling for the abolition of the village guards, 2 June 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/06/07/turkey-letter-minister-aksu-calling-abolition-village-guards>, accessed 8 January 2011. Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2010 - Turkey, January 2010,

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&country=7899&year=2010>, accessed 8 January 2011

⁶ USDOS, 2009 Human Rights Report: Turkey, 11 March 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eur/136062.htm>, accessed 10 January 2011

⁷ Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2010 - Turkey, January 2010,

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&country=7899&year=2010>, accessed 8 January 2011

important when it comes to return. I think it will be important for the government to take these fears seriously and to take the steps necessary to remove the obstacle". Many village guards oppose Turkey's efforts to join the EU, feeling that such efforts might compromise their current status.

The new compensation law, which aims to compensate material losses caused by the intense terror fights in the region, has inspired some displaced Kurdish villagers to slowly begin returning to their villages to re-establish their lives, but many of these returnees are still resentful of those fellow Kurds who choose to work for state security forces."⁸

Amnesty International notes in its 2010 annual report the alleged involvement of village guards in a massacre in May 2009,

"In May, 44 people died after a shooting in the village of Bilge/Zangirt in the south-eastern province of Mardin. According to an official announcement, most of the alleged perpetrators were village guards, a paramilitary force employed by the state to fight the PKK. Guards were also among those killed. The trial of those accused of involvement in the killings began in September."⁹

In May 2009 *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* reported the massacre of 44 individuals and accusations from a Deputy Governor that village guards could have been involved,

"Turkey says there are no signs that the killing of at least 44 people at a wedding ceremony in southeastern Turkey was a terrorist attack. Turkish Interior Minister Besir Atalay says the attack on May 4 appears to be the result of a blood feud between two families and not the work of Kurdish separatists.

Now, authorities have arrested eight suspects in the case. And the arrests seem to confirm that the massacre is the culmination of long-standing animosities between two families in the village where the massacre occurred.

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But if the affair seems purely local, the fact that all the men in the village of Bilge are also members of a paramilitary force gives the matter greater significance than simply a particularly gruesome crime.

Turkey's NTV television quoted Mardin Deputy Governor Ahmet Ferhat Ozen as saying that the motive could have been an old feud between rival groups of the pro-government militia, the Village Guards. The Village Guards are a force of some 60,000 local Kurds armed by Ankara to protect villages in southeastern Turkey against attacks by the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

But if the guards were established in 1985 to be a stabilizing force, some of its members are occasionally in the news for activities that have the opposite effect. The militia's mandate to carry arms, inform on suspected separatist activities, patrol the

⁸ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

⁹ Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2010, 2010, p.328, http://thereport.amnesty.org/sites/default/files/AIR2010_EN.pdf, accessed 8 January 2011

rugged mountainous region, and fight separatists alongside Turkish troops has made them a force in their own right that is able to advance members' own interests.”¹⁰

The *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* report of May 2009 further notes accusations that some members of the Village Guards are involved in smuggling,

“Village Guards members in the past have been accused of using their status to carry out attacks on rival clans, seize land, and engage in smuggling. "I have heard before of incidents where Village Guards have moved with their families into villages that were evacuated in the 1990s and now the original villagers are returning to their villages they find the Village Guards already are living there," Basar says. "And southeast Anatolia is a major smuggling route and it is no surprise that these Village Guards are involved in it because many people in the region are involved in it anyway," he adds.

All this makes the Village Guards controversial even as Ankara continues to depend upon the militia to stabilize the volatile southeast. Yet controversial as the guards are, there are few signs that the force will be disbanded anytime soon. [] In the meantime, southeastern Turkey has to live with an uneasy and volatile mix.

Blood feuds are not uncommon in the region and often center on questions of land, marriage, and unpaid debts. Paramilitary abuse of power and involvement in smuggling are also allegedly not uncommon. In remote rural areas, all of these questions can easily merge together. And, with arms abundant, those are all the ingredients one needs to get stunning acts of private revenge.”¹¹

Human Rights Watch notes in its 2010 report the recent trial of village guards regarding the murder of individuals in the period 1993-95,

“The most significant attempt at bringing to justice state perpetrators of extrajudicial killings and “disappearances” began in Diyarbakir in September with the trial of a colonel, village guards, and informers for the murder of 20 individuals in the period 1993-95 in Cizre, Sirnak province.”¹²

In July 2010 Turkish daily newspaper *The Hurriyet Daily News* reports the death of village guards in an alleged PKK attack,

“Two Turkish soldiers and three village guards were killed in an attack late Wednesday in Turkey’s southeastern province of Siirt. Alleged members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, attacked the outpost of a commando battalion near Doganköy village, in Siirt’s Pervari district, killing two soldiers and three village guards supporting the military in its fight against the outlawed group. [] The three village guards were

¹⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Turkey Massacre Raises Questions About Blood Feuds, Arming Civilians, 5 May 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Massacre_Raises_Questions_About_Blood_Feuds_Arming_Civilians_/1621967.html, accessed 6 January 2011

¹¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Turkey Massacre Raises Questions About Blood Feuds, Arming Civilians, 5 May 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Massacre_Raises_Questions_About_Blood_Feuds_Arming_Civilians_/1621967.html, accessed 6 January 2011

¹² Human Rights Watch, World Report 2010, 2010, p.458, <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2010>, accessed 10 January 2011

killed in an ambush by suspected PKK terrorists on their way to the clash point.”¹³

A 2009 report by issued by the *Australian Government* detailing the background to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) notes the initial attacks by the group on the village guards in the 1980s,

“In August 1984, the PKK began sporadic attacks on Turkish security force targets, especially in the south-east of the country. The group also targeted Kurds regarded as 'state collaborators' — especially those belonging to the 'village guards', a Kurdish militia that had been established by the Turkish government in the mid-1980s to counteract the PKK's growing influence. On 20 June 1987, PKK militants raided Pincarik, a small Kurdish village in the province of Mardin, and called upon the village guards to surrender. When they refused, the PKK massacred 30 people, including 16 children and six women. After the massacre, Ocalan is reported to have said: "Let's kill, and become the authority”.”¹⁴

Nurcan Kaya, a programme officer with *Minority Rights Group International*, states in a November 2006 article that the establishment of village guards units made civilians more vulnerable to attacks,

“The most prominent reason for large-scale displacement in Turkey has been the armed conflict, which has seen intense fighting between government forces and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Government forces armed villagers and set up 'village guard' units to fight the PKK making people more vulnerable to attacks by the rebels.

Turkish security forces have been responsible for burning entire Kurdish villages that rejected the village guard system. "People were terrified that if they accept the system they would be attacked by the PKK and if they didn't they would have been driven out of their homes or refused security making it impossible to live in the village," says Kaya.”¹⁵

b) How many units is it based upon and how does its recruitment system work? In particular what are the selection criteria, if any; is participation on a voluntary basis or, are people also subject to coercion/duress?; how is it formalised (formal appointment, other)

The *Jamestown Foundation* reported in October 2008 that the Temporary Village Guard system, “Gecici Koy Koruculugu (GKK),“ is regulated by Article 74 of the Village Law.¹⁶ *Jamestown Foundation* further state that the Temporary Village Guard was established in 22

¹³ Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review, 2 Turkish soldiers, 3 village guards killed in Siirt attack, 1 July 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=one-turkish-soldier-three-village-guards-killed-in-pkk-attack-2010-07-01>, accessed 7 January 2011

¹⁴ Australian Parliament, Appendix E - Statement of Reasons – Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), 2009, p.50, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/pjcis/hamas_pkk_let_pji/report/Appendix_E.pdf, accessed 7 January 2011

¹⁵ Minority Rights Group International, International support needed to help Turkey's displaced people, 30 November 2006, <http://www.minorityrights.org/677/press-releases/international-support-needed-to-help-turkeys-displaced-people.html>, accessed 7 January 2011

¹⁶ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

provinces in 1985 and that a Voluntary Village Guard was established in 13 additional provinces in 1993,¹⁷

“In the countryside of the Kurdish region, the temporary village guard system has become the main source of income since 1985. The GKK system was initiated to protect rural villages against terror attacks. Article 74 in the Koy Kanunu (Village Law) regulates the GKK system: “The GKK shall be formed if there is an increasing threat to villagers’ life and properties. If such a threat looms, based on the local governor’s suggestion and Ministry of Interior’s approval, the necessary number of GKK shall be appointed.” Temporary Village Guards work under the supervision of regional Gendarmerie commanders.

The GKK system was introduced to 22 provinces in 1985. To supplement this program, a “voluntary village guard” system was added in 13 more provinces in 1993. The difference between the two programs is that, while the temporary village guards receive monthly salary and health benefits, the voluntary village guards do not receive a salary but are entitled to health compensation and benefits. As of 2005, it was estimated that a total of 58,511 Temporary Village Guards and 12,279 Voluntary Village Guards were employed by the state.

To undermine the state’s efforts, the PKK gave up its Marxist-based opposition to the tribal system and instead sought ways to cooperate with them. The PKK’s new strategy aimed to obtain the tribes’ support if possible. If they failed in this goal, they sought to convince them not to cooperate with the state. For instance, Zubeyr Aydar and Leyla Zana, two former Kurdish parliamentarians, asked Sedat Bucak, the leader of the Bucak tribe, to allow PKK activities in Siverek and Hilvan, where his tribe resides.

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In this violent armed struggle between the PKK and the central government and its Kurdish supporters, scholar Martin van Bruinessen makes an interesting observation - many leading families had some members in government service while others were active in the PKK; “The apparent split of tribes or their leading families into pro and anti-government factions is not always the reflection of a serious conflict dividing the family, however. In some cases it appears to be the consequence of a deliberate decision not to put all one's eggs into one basket — a time-honored strategy of elite families everywhere.”¹⁸

In April 2010 the Kuwait Times reported an *Agent France Press* article as stating that there were over 60,000 village guards in southeast Turkey.¹⁹ *Radio Free Europe* also reports that

¹⁷ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

¹⁸ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

¹⁹ Kuwait Times, Turkey's 'village guards' tired of conflict with fellow Kurds, 18 April 2010, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/4/turkey2624.htm>, accessed 8 January 2011

there are over 60,000 members of the village guards.²⁰ Turkish news service *Hürriyet Daily News* reports that there are 70,000.²¹

In September 2009 *Hürriyet Daily News* reported on numbers recruited to the village guard forces in southeastern Turkey,

“The total number of village guards in Turkey stands at 70,000, of which 57,174 are temporary and 12,279 are volunteers, according a report titled “A Roadmap for a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Policy Proposals from the Region for the Government,” published in 2008 by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, or TESEV.

The number of village guards fluctuated over time. Although 18,000 village guards were recruited initially, that number rose to 93,000 in 1994, when the government announced that no more village guards would be hired, [].

“The government pledged to both the European Union and the U.N. Secretary General’s special envoy on internally displaced people to abolish the village guard system in the short term,” according to the TESEV report. “Not only has this promise not been carried out, but also the government is further authorized, in a May 2007 amendment to the Village Law, to employ up to 60,000 additional village guards. Recent press reports mention attempts to create new village guard vacancies in the region.” Officially called “temporary and voluntary village guards,” the new recruits worked under the gendarmerie’s command but answered to the village headman for administrative issues.

In the first few years, village guards were well paid, and the system attracted many locals in the Southeast looking for a stable income. [] But they soon had to face the consequences of the deal. The PKK and other locals saw them as collaborators with the Turkish military and the state. Their villages and families became targets.

One village guard was killed and several others were wounded when the PKK attacked the Dalbudak village in 1992, permanently putting fear into the hearts of the villagers. Askeri Ulas, 25, who was just 10 when the attack happened, said he and his family were afraid to go outside at night for years after the ambush.

Like many other children in Dalbudak, Ulas is the son of a village guard. “Whenever I took the cattle to the mountains for grazing, I thought about what I would do if I ran into them [the PKK] on the mountains,” he said. If the PKK asked him whose son he was, he said he would lie and claim to be part of a family that was not part of the village guard system, “so they would let me go.”

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Some village guards say that serving the state has taken a big toll, noting that they face constant discrimination.

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²⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Turkey Massacre Raises Questions About Blood Feuds, Arming Civilians, 5 May 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Massacre_Raises_Questions_About_Blood_Feuds_Arming_Civilians_/1621967.html, accessed 6 January 2011

²¹ Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review, The first village guards, 15 September 2009, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-first-village-guards-2009-09-15>, accessed 8 January 2011

The neighboring Salihli village chose not to join the village guard system, a decision that resulted in decades of animosity between the two villages. That tension is only now beginning to lessen.”²²

The October 2008 *Jamestown Foundation* report notes the requirements for membership of the village guards, and the economic impact of the village guard system in the southeast,

“This competition between the PKK and the state changed the economic structure by shifting the major economic activities in the largely rural southeast from livestock husbandry and farming to the village guard system. Because accurate figures or studies on the economic impact of the GKK system are not available, estimating its economic significance is difficult.

The economic attractiveness of this job, however, was reflected during a recent recruitment drive - 9,000 people, including high-school graduate women, applied for 350 vacancies in voluntary village guard positions in Hakkari province.

In order to be employed as a village guard, there are few requirements other than age restrictions and the usual background checks. Tribal affiliation is one of the most important elements during the background checks for two reasons. First, because tribes exert political influence on the local branches of the ruling parties and maintain good relations with the state bureaucracy, they can throw their weight behind their members during the recruitment process. Second, because background checks are the key determinant in hiring decisions, by nature, those without connection to the PKK terror organization are potential candidates for the job.

At this point, once again, tribal connections play a crucial role in that they are generally divided into two categories: those who support the PKK, and those who support the state. Because of this division, the tribes that allied with the state have been the major beneficiaries of the village guard system.”²³

c) Are persons with a pro-kurdish political profile/background trusted by the authorities as to be offered or even forced to adhere to the kurucu system?

A *BBC News* report of August 2006 notes the divisions caused by the village guards in Kurdish communities in southeastern Turkey,

“With the mountain rain dripping inside the collar of his ill-fitting camouflage jacket, Sefik Tiryaki is in an uncomfortable position. He is a Village Guard, part of a controversial militia force which patrols the rocky, treeless hillsides of south-eastern Turkey.

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Like Sefik, most Village Guards are themselves Kurds, armed by the state to police other Kurds. Set up originally as a temporary militia group 22 years ago, the Village Guards are still operating, with more than 58,000 members. It is a system which has

²² Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review, The first village guards, 15 September 2009, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-first-village-guards-2009-09-15>, accessed 8 January 2011

²³ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

long been criticised by human rights organisations for exacerbating mistrust and ethnic divisions in an already troubled region.

Despised as traitors by many other Kurds, the Village Guards' relationship with the state is also ambiguous, with a lower standard of equipment, pay and benefits than the Turkish military or police. [] Mahsum Batu sits at a polished desk festooned with Turkish flags. On the wall beside him is a large marble tablet engraved with the words "Our Martyrs". Glazed onto it are the passport size photos of some of the 41 comrades killed in battle local Village Guards killed in service, many in clashes with the PKK.

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Among the tribal Kurdish communities of the south-east, there are families, even entire villages which, like Mr Batu, are fiercely loyal to the Turkish state and firmly oppose any kind of Kurdish autonomy.

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But not all Village Guards share this kind of patriotism. Away from the watchful gaze of anyone in uniform, a former Village Guard, who does not want to be named, told me what happened 13 years ago, when fighting broke out between the military and the PKK in the hills around his village. "It happens because people are pressured into it," said the former Village Guard, who now collects paper from city-dwellers' rubbish bins to make a living.

"The military came and said that if we did not join the Village Guards, then we would have to evacuate the whole village. They would not allow our village to remain without a Village Guard."²⁴

The *BBC News* report of August 2006 further states,

"Over the last 20 years there have been numerous allegations of Village Guards abusing their position, seizing for themselves the choice properties in evacuated villages and threatening, even killing, Kurdish villagers who try to return.

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"What I see is that at least Village Guards are perceived as an obstacle, and even perceptions are important when it comes to return" said Walter Kalin, UN Special Rapporteur for Internally Displaced Persons, on a trip to Turkey earlier this year. "I think it will be important for the government to take these fears seriously and to take the steps necessary to remove the obstacle."

Just what the Turkish government intends to do about the Village Guards is unclear. No new guards have been recruited for the last six years. There have recently been proposals for improved pay and conditions.

But plans for a commission to oversee the disarming and disbanding of the militia seem to have come to nothing. Thanks to a new compensation law, some of the displaced Kurdish villagers are slowly starting to return to the mountains to try to rebuild their homes and their communities. But many of these returnees are still resentful of those fellow Kurds who chose to work for the state security forces."²⁵

²⁴ BBC News, Local guards divide Turkish Kurds, 4 August 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5246068.stm>, accessed 8 January 2011

²⁵ BBC News, Local guards divide Turkish Kurds, 4 August 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5246068.stm>, accessed 8 January 2011

A June 2006 report by *Human Rights Watch* noted that there is no legal requirement to join the village guards, however they also reported that returning Kurds may be pressured into joining by security forces which also puts them at risk of attacks from the PKK,

“Continuing violations are severely hindering resolution of the problem of widespread internal displacement in the southeast: the threatening presence of village guards is deterring displaced people from returning to their former homes; village guards occupy displaced persons’ houses or land; and displaced villagers fear that on return they will again be put under pressure to join the village guards.

There is no legal requirement to join the village guard corps, but security forces often make village guard service an informal requirement for return. Returning villagers who join expose themselves to attack by the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK). Any returning villager faces the ever present threat of violence from village guards who may carry out reprisals for attacks by forces of the PKK, pursue blood feuds and tribal conflicts, or engage in any of the other forms of prevalent criminal behavior ranging from rape to theft. It is no coincidence that rates of return are particularly low in areas such as Pynak province, where the village guard system is particularly entrenched.”²⁶

The *Jamestown Foundation* notes in an October 2008 report that the village guard system is one of the key aspects of Turkish security policies in the southeast,

“The Village Guard system is one of the key aspects of Turkish security policies in the nation’s ethnic-Kurdish southeast. In response to the growing power of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - PKK), the state has resorted to increasingly complex and aggressive counterterrorism strategies. In order to attract local people to its side in 1985, the state launched a new initiative to buy off the local Kurdish tribes. The carrot that the state offered was the Gecici Koy Koruculugu (GKK) system, i.e., the temporary village guard system.

This policy was meant to discourage the tribes from lending their support to the PKK by employing them as a local security force. Members of tribes were put on the state’s payroll as village guards and received salaries and health insurance benefits from the state, though these, like their equipment, met a lower standard than that implemented for the military or state police. As a frontline unit exposed to regular contact with PKK militants, a number of village guards have lost their lives in fighting with the Kurdish separatist movement in the last two months.”²⁷

The *Jamestown Foundation* report of October 2008 further notes that village guards may have divided loyalties, which is a concern for the Turkish state,

“Through this policy, the state was able to win over the cooperation of the tribes. The state, thus, has managed to undermine the PKK’s recruitment basis as well as establishing local alliances against the PKK. The support of the state, on the other

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, Turkey: Letter to Minister Aksu calling for the abolition of the village guards, 2 June 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/06/07/turkey-letter-minister-aksu-calling-abolition-village-guards>, accessed 8 January 2011

²⁷ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey’s War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

hand, strengthened the role of tribes in the Kurdish society throughout the 1990s. Most village guards are fiercely loyal to the Turkish state and firmly oppose any kind of Kurdish autonomy. Others, however, have complained of coercion in their recruitment.

Given their often precarious position as stalwarts of state authority in a region known for militant separatism, there are often fears in the military about the long-term loyalty of the village guards, which may account for their substandard government-issued weapons.

General Osman Pamukoglu, who directed military operations in Hakkari province in 1993-95, described problems in the use of village guards he regarded as undisciplined and poorly educated: "They were scared that PKK militants were going to take revenge on them one day. As the authority of the PKK strengthened in the region, they went further away from the authority of the state. Either because of fear or belief, some of them were covertly supporting the PKK with their state-issued guns and salary. That was not enough; they were participating in the operations of the PKK against the state."²⁸

In November 2007 the *Brunei Times* also reported that loyalties can be uncertain, particularly as villagers were "largely" forced to join the guards.²⁹ According to the *Brunei Times* some guard members fear attack from both the PKK and intelligence services, further six guards had been arrested on suspicion of passing information to the PKK,

"One village guard walking his donkey on a border road said there is little love for him and his fellow guards. "If they ever take my gun away the first thing that will happen is I'll get hung in the village square," said the man who gave only his first name as Cinsi. In the southeast, Turkey's military — the second largest in Nato — has always said the decision to join the guards is voluntary, but villagers say their decision to sign up has been accompanied by force.

Even Babat acknowledges the contradiction of working with the army that destroyed his own village of Hilal, and says he joined purely out of pragmatism. "When they destroyed our village, some people joined the PKK, others fled to northern Iraq. If you wanted to stay you had to become a village guard," said Babat, looking over the river that once ran through Hilal. Village guards say the 500 lira (\$610) monthly salary also draws enlistments in the country's poorest region.

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With participation largely dictated by economics or force, loyalties can be uncertain and telling friend from foe can be difficult and dangerous. Babat, like other guards, carries his rifle everywhere he goes — slung over his shoulder at the grocer's or walking along the mountain roads — to defend against both members of the PKK and intelligence services who may think he is a double agent. In October six guards working in the area were arrested for informing the PKK about army operations, security sources said."³⁰

²⁸ Jamestown Foundation, Village Guards on the Frontline of Turkey's War on Terrorism, 1 October 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5193&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=246&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5193&tx_ttnews[backPid]=246&no_cache=1), accessed 8 January 2011

²⁹ The Brunei Times, Turkey village guards face danger from all sides, 17 November 2007, <http://www.bt.com.bn/focus/2007/11/17/>, accessed 8 January 2011

³⁰ The Brunei Times, Turkey village guards face danger from all sides, 17 November 2007, <http://www.bt.com.bn/focus/2007/11/17/>, accessed 8 January 2011

The *Brunei Times* states in a November 2007 article that the village guards have been labelled traitors by other Kurds,

"Babat, a Turkish Kurd, is an unlikely figure to be working as one of 57,000 state-sponsored village guards throughout Turkey's southeast, acting as a guide and fighting the Kurdish rebels alongside the same army that destroyed his home. But with recent legislation aimed at boosting their numbers by the thousands and a possible cross-border operation into Iraq looming, these villagers, labelled traitors by many of their kin, may become more important than ever to Turkey's military.

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The army says the village guards' knowledge of this remote mountainous terrain is key to operations in guerrilla warfare. "I've probably participated in more than 500 operations over the last 21 years. At the end of some I've been the last one standing, and there have been times when I've shot and killed, too," Babat said loading his rifle in a single, fluid motion.

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Officially the guards are part of a controversial policy established in 1985 to set up a paramilitary force to protect villages against PKK attacks, patrol the rugged mountains and help fight the separatists. But their right to carry arms, to inform on suspected separatist activities and to kill in the name of the state has made them a force within the region, while critics say they use their status to settle family scores and take over land."³¹

An *Associated France Press* article appearing in the *Kuwait Times* in April 2010 notes divisions amongst Kurds regarding the activities of village guards,

"The conflict has sharply divided Kurds in the region, where tribal tradition persists and whole communities respect the decision of clan leaders. Several hamlets have enrolled collectively in the so-called "village guard" supporting the Turkish armed forces -- while others have seen their men join the PKK.

So-called "village guards" or Pro-Turkish government Kurdish militia units established in 1985, armed by the Turkish government to provide support to the Turkish army against the Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels seeking more rights for the Kurds and for an independent Kurdish homeland in southeast Turkey. Kurds call these guards "traitors" (Jash or Qorucu Kuruyucu).

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There are over 60,000 village guards throughout Turkey's southeast, part of a policy established in 1985 to set up a paramilitary force to protect villages against attacks from Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) guerrillas [].

The army may be grateful for their services. But the militia has come under harsh criticism for acting outside the law, and human rights groups have mounted calls for its abolition. Many Kurds, who either fled their villages or were forced out by the military at the peak of the PKK insurgency in the 1990s, found their homes occupied by the militiamen when they returned. "The village guards are helping the army.

³¹ The *Brunei Times*, Turkey village guards face danger from all sides, 17 November 2007, <http://www.bt.com.bn/focus/2007/11/17/>, accessed 8 January 2011

For us, they are traitors," said Garip Yilmaz, 39, who abandoned his farm in 1994 to settle in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city in southeastern Turkey. Dozens of village guards have been implicated in serious crimes, abusing their right to carry arms by using them to settle blood feuds or engage in drug-trafficking and abductions.

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For many Kurds, joining the militia was not a voluntary choice, but a fiat imposed by the realities of war. "We had no other choice. We were caught between the PKK and the army. One night it was the PKK who harrassed us, the other night it was the army," said Ishan Kuzu, 40, as he stood on watch with nine other village guards on a road near Silvan town.³²

³² Kuwait Times, Turkey's 'village guards' tired of conflict with fellow Kurds, 18 April 2010, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/4/turkey2624.htm>, accessed 8 January 2011