

Policy Memo:

**POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION AND HUMANITARIAN
CONSEQUENCES OF THE VILLAGE GUARD SYSTEM**

Evren Balta, Fall 2004

By 2004 there were probably 80,000 armed village guards. The village guard system raises the most serious humanitarian concerns in the post-conflict process. Further, it creates the most acute problems for the Turkish state to re-establish peace and order in the region.

The village guard system is one of the main reasons for mass migration and village evacuations during the conflict. Approximately 3 million people were displaced from 1985 to 1999 and forced to move to the big cities of western Turkey, or to towns around the southeast, into very difficult living circumstances. According to a study done on Kurdish migration, 70.3% of all migrants have been displaced because of the village guard system.¹

During the conflict, the government armed the village guards and permitted them to acquire considerable de facto power in the region. They had an informal immunity to exercise violence for their own ends and have been accused repeatedly of drug trafficking, oppressing, looting, raping and even killing their neighbors. These crimes have been tolerated and even covered up by state officials.

The conflict in Turkey has eased, but villagers are still extremely wary of heading back into an unstable countryside where their former neighbors, sometimes from rival tribal groups, are still paid and licensed by the government to bear arms. They are reluctant to make a move because they believe that once they return, the cycle of detention and harassment by village guards may start again. In fact, it has been reported that returnees often experience village guard violence upon their return to their villages. Returning villagers have also had considerable difficulties recovering their lands from village guards. During the years that the villagers were away from their land, village guards had taken over the lands vacated by the displaced, stolen timber, or exploited the land by renting it out to others.

It might be assumed that with the apparent end of the guerilla war, the village guard system would be in the process of disbandment. However, no steps have been taken to disband the village militia. The current evidence even indicates that the village guard militia has become a long-term feature of the region. Government fears that if the system is disbanded, it could unleash massive criminal activity backed with firearms. Furthermore, the government created a system that has developed autonomous interests and benefited from the conflict enormously. These forces are now resisting not just the disbandment of the village guard system but also the establishment of full security in the region. It could be argued that the government still distributes spoils to the village guards in order to keep this group of armed people under its control. However, it is in the

¹ Multiple answers were permitted to the questions on the reasons of migration. See M. Barut (2002) *Zorunlu Goce Maruz Kalan Kurt Kokenli T.C. Vatandaslarinin Goc Oncesi ve Sonrasi Sosyoekonomik, Sosyokulturel Durumlari*, Göç-Der Istanbul

interest of the Turkish state to abolish the village guard system if state officials want to reinforce the legitimacy of state power. The crimes that village guards continue to commit with their state-issued guns present the most acute threat to the already damaged legitimacy of the state in the region.

Furthermore, full security in the area is the essential precondition for the mass return of the displaced Kurdish population, which would benefit the Turkish economy by taking some of the unemployed from the already overcrowded cities and placing them back in their villages as productive agricultural workers and/or land owners. For the establishment of full security, the village guard system should be abolished as quickly as possible. However, simply switching off the funds currently being piped into the village guard community is likely to have negative consequences. Therefore, any possible solution should address not just the problems of the displaced but also reintegration of the village guards.

In order to reintegrate village guards and ordinary villagers, the government should first stop the formal and informal practices of distinguishing “loyal” and “disloyal” citizens based on their participation in the village guard system. Regardless of their status during the war, all citizens should be treated equally, compensated for losses related to the conflict, and prosecuted for their crimes, if they committed any. The central government should send strong signals to local officials that no discrimination against villagers who had not participated in the village guard will be tolerated. The same should be done for the village guards. Local state officials should be aware that no preferential treatment of village guards should be tolerated by the central state authorities.

Recommendations

1. The revitalization of agriculture is the main precondition not just for mass returns, but also for the reintegration of village guards. Therefore, the government should prioritize agriculture, develop a sustainable agricultural plan for the region, and provide investment support to the people who want to return without any pre-conditions.
2. Assistance for the reconstruction of destroyed villages should be given high priority. The returnees should receive financial and material assistance from the Turkish authorities.
3. The government should ensure that all village guard violence be prosecuted, and that crimes committed by village guards not be pardoned.
4. A credible program of disarmament should be implemented in the region. All village guards should be disarmed. The government’s commitment to disarmament is a key in this process, and should be accompanied by economic incentives for village guards.
5. Village guards over the age of 40 should be allowed to retire with benefits. Younger ones should either be offered jobs as security guards or helped to find work. However, any provision that is made to ease the transition for the village guard corps should be part of a broader strategy for economic improvement benefiting all the people of the region.
6. An independent investigative commission should be founded by local NGOs and state officials to investigate the various crimes committed by village guards.

7. Another independent commission including state officials and representatives of local NGOs should be established to resolve competing property claims.
8. Government should ensure compensation for property lost by displaced persons as a result of village guard activities.
9. For a continued peace in the region, the cultural and social rights of the Kurdish people should be fully recognized.