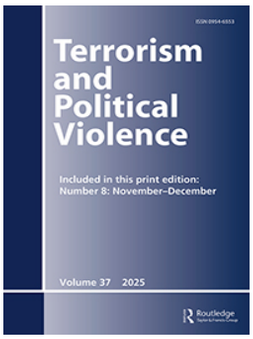

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Innovation and Organisational Survival in Terrorist Groups: Evidence from the PKK

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ABSTRACT

This article examines innovation as a central mechanism of survival in terrorist organisations, using the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a longitudinal case study. Drawing on Lubrano's tripartite typology of tactical, operational, and strategic innovation, it explores how the PKK has continuously adapted to shifting political, military, and geopolitical environments since its emergence in 1978. Rather than attributing the organisation's longevity to conventional factors such as external sponsorship, ethnic mobilisation, or ideological devotion alone, the article argues that its endurance stems from deliberate, multidimensional, and institutionalised innovation. Empirically, it traces the PKK's evolution from rural guerrilla warfare to technologically sophisticated insurgency; its organisational transformation under the decentralised KCK system; and its ideological transition from Marxism–Leninism to democratic confederalism. The analysis culminates in the PKK's self-declared dissolution in May 2025, interpreted not as a rupture but as the latest phase of strategic reinvention designed to reposition the Kurdish movement within civil and political arenas. By integrating theoretical insight with longitudinal analysis, the article demonstrates how innovation functions as both an adaptive and anticipatory mechanism, sustaining organisational relevance under pressure. It concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of innovation for the persistence and transformation of violent non-state actors.

KEYWORDS

PKK; terrorist innovation; tactical adaptation; organisational survival; strategic transformation; Kurdish conflict

Introduction

Terrorist organisations are inherently finite entities, with most unable to sustain operations over extended periods. In her foundational study of 77 terrorist groups active between Second World War and the 1990s, Crenshaw[1] finds that half disband or cease violent activities within a short timeframe, and only a small subset persists beyond a decade. Similarly, Phillips[2] reports that more than 50 percent of terrorist groups survive less than one year. Researchers such as Cronin,[3] and Jones and Libicki,[4] have identified multiple pathways to organisational demise, including leadership decapitation, goal attainment, integration into political processes, loss of popular support, and repression. These outcomes are commonly categorised as transformation into criminal networks, political evolution, strategic success, or operational failure.

A smaller subset of terrorist groups, however, demonstrates notable longevity. Explanations for this persistence vary, including sustained internal and external legitimacy, access to stable support bases, and effective competition for grassroots influence.[5] Piazza[6] underscores the importance of transnational ethnic diasporas in enhancing resilience, while Horowitz and Potter[7] highlight the stabilising effects of inter-group alliances. Moreover, state sponsorship and permissive operating environments—

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particularly within democratic systems or fragile states—are also strongly associated with prolonged survival.[8]

Beyond structural and environmental explanations, an organisational perspective offers valuable insight into the internal dynamics that shape the survival of terrorist groups. As Crenshaw[9] contends, terrorist behaviour is shaped by strategic objectives as well as by organisational imperatives. Violence, therefore, serves not merely as an instrument for achieving political goals but also as a mechanism for maintaining internal cohesion, reinforcing group identity, and legitimising leadership. Empirical research further supports this interpretation, suggesting that groups with diversified attack profiles and a higher proportion of domestic—rather than transnational—attacks are more likely to endure.[10]

Following this organisational logic, Weinberg and Richardson[11] conceptualise terrorist groups as evolving through a life cycle of emergence, expansion, and eventual decline. A crucial yet often overlooked factor in this life cycle is innovation. Innovation enables terrorist groups to modify their tactics, strategies, and organisational structures in response to environmental pressures. While adaptation allows groups to respond to immediate challenges, and learning facilitates knowledge retention and dissemination, innovation introduces new behavioural patterns that enhance organisational resilience over time.[12] From the perspective of organisational process theory, innovation thus constitutes a strategic response to environmental threats that would otherwise lead to stagnation or collapse.[13]

Despite its centrality to survival, the study of innovation in terrorism remains underdeveloped. Most existing works focus narrowly on technological advancements or isolated tactical adaptations, without integrating a broader conceptual framework that captures the interplay between strategic, operational, and tactical innovation.[14] As Weinberg,[15] and Normark and Ranstorp,[16] observe, the field of terrorist innovation research remains nascent and requires systematic theoretical and empirical expansion.

This study addresses this gap by examining how innovation has contributed to the survival of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). Although no prior study has explicitly analysed the PKK's innovation capacity, its longevity has been explored through the lenses of learning and transformational adaptation. Demir argues that the PKK represents a learning terrorist organisation, capable of modifying its activities, discourse, organisational structure, and functions in response to shifting contexts.[17] Güneri similarly contends that the group's military and political architecture enables it to interpret regional political developments in the Middle East and to pre-empt Türkiye's containment strategies through comprehensive projects aligned with changing regional balances.[18] Eccarius-Kelly, meanwhile, underscores that the PKK has undergone organisational reconfiguration to coordinate its criminal and guerrilla activities, developing a symbiotic relationship between the two as a means of sustaining its long-term survival.[19]

Applying Lubrano's tripartiate framework of strategic, operational, and tactical innovation, this article analyses the PKK as a case of organisational resilience spanning more than four decades. A qualitative, longitudinal case study design is employed to trace the PKK's evolution, drawing on a triangulation of secondary sources including academic monographs, peer-reviewed articles, documents, open-source media, and organisational statements. A process-tracing methodology is used to reconstruct key episodes of the PKK's tactical, operational, and strategic transformations, enabling the identification of causal linkages between environmental shifts and organisational adaptations. While these methodological choices inevitably carry limitations in terms of internal access and source verification, the convergence of multiple independent data sources enhances the reliability of the empirical narrative. The qualitative design allows for a nuanced exploration of the PKK's innovation dynamics, while acknowledging the need for future research to complement this analysis with direct fieldwork, interviews, or comparative quantitative approaches.

The article proceeds by first outlining the theoretical framework for analysing innovation in terrorist organisations. It then applies this framework to the case of the PKK, assessing the group's innovations across the tactical, operational, and strategic domains. The final section discusses the theoretical and policy implications of the findings and proposes directions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Terrorist organisations must continuously adapt to survive and maintain operational effectiveness within the hostile and evolving environments in which they operate. Yet within terrorism studies, the concepts of learning, adaptation, and innovation are often conflated and used interchangeably. One of the earliest contributions to this discourse, Cragin and Daly,[20] examined how terrorist organisations evolve in response to environmental pressures, portraying them as dynamic and ever-adapting rather than static entities.

Building on this approach, Jackson et al.[21] adopt an organisational perspective, providing a more nuanced understanding of how terrorist groups acquire knowledge and refine their strategies. Defining learning as an intentional organisational activity, they outline its key components as acquisition, interpretation, distribution, and retention of information. While they do not explicitly define innovation, they argue that groups capable of both learning and innovating tend to be more competitive against security forces. More recently, Kettle and Mumford[22] define terrorist learning as "the acquisition of knowledge to inform terrorist-related activities in the future," emphasising that although learning often gives rise to innovation and strategic adaptation, these are not its only outcomes.

Terrorist innovation, in contrast, has been broadly defined by Crenshaw[23] as "the adoption of new patterns of behaviour." Dolnik[24] expands this by characterizing innovation in terrorism as "the introduction of a new method or technology or the improvement of an already existing capability." Lubrano[25] offers a more nuanced interpretation, viewing innovation as a gradual process through which a terrorist organisation shatters and reconfigures the foundational norms—written or unwritten—that shape its modus operandi.

Early scholarship largely focused on tactical and technological innovations, such as the deployment of novel attack methods or weapons. Subsequent research, however, expanded the conceptual scope to include organisational, financial, and strategic dimensions. Singh,[26] for example, highlights non-violent innovations, such as advancements in governance, service provision, and fundraising, which significantly enhance a group's legitimacy and operational sustainability. Crenshaw[27] similarly points to strategic innovations involving changes in long-term objectives or modes of political engagement.

The drivers of terrorist innovation can be categorised into three broad groups: endogenous, exogenous, and mixed.[28] Endogenous factors include ideological predispositions, internal group dynamics, resource availability, self-perception, and the relationship with the constituency. Exogenous factors stem from the external environment and include government countermeasures, broader political shifts, and, paradoxically, state sponsorship. Mixed drivers, meanwhile, involve inter-organisational interactions, knowledge transmission practices, and conflict dynamics.

Complementing these categories, Singh[29] introduces a typology of learning and innovation pathways that elucidate how terrorist organisations acquire, disseminate, and institutionalise new capabilities. She identifies four primary mechanisms: intergroup learning within domestic settings, intergroup learning across borders, transnational-domestic group learning, and intragroup or self-learning. These pathways help explain how innovation, shaped by both internal and external conditions, becomes embedded in organisational behaviour. Together with the endogenous, exogenous, and mixed drivers, Singh's typology provides a comprehensive lens to evaluate the conditions under which learning translates into innovation.

These classifications underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of innovation in terrorism and help explain why some organisations exhibit sustained adaptability while others stagnate or collapse. However, innovation does not necessarily equate to success. As Hafez and Rasmussen[30] highlight, some groups engage in "negative innovation"—adopting strategies that fail to achieve their intended outcomes or inadvertently weaken the organisation. Thus, while innovation is essential to group evolution, it is not inherently beneficial.

Although the outcomes of innovation vary, the underlying mechanisms through which terrorist organisations innovate warrant closer examination. The element of surprise constitutes

a fundamental driver of terrorist innovation, often serving as a critical factor in achieving operational success.[31] However, drawing clear distinctions between innovation, adaptation, improvisation, and emulation remains challenging. As Dolnik[32] observes, terrorist organisations rarely develop entirely new technologies; rather, they modify and repurpose existing ones. Lubrano[33] further contends that learning, adaptation, emulation, and improvisation frequently function as pathways to innovation by disrupting established behavioural norms, though their boundaries often blur in practice.

Further complexity arises from the diverse pathways through which innovation emerges. It may originate through top-down processes, driven by strategic leadership, or from bottom-up experimentation and improvisation by mid- or low-level operatives. In his case study of the 9/11 attacks, Moghadam[34] introduces the concept of "integrative innovation," reflecting a fusion of leadership-directed and grassroots-driven innovation. Such innovation may arise internally from organisational members or externally through collaboration with outside actors. Similarly, De Vore et al.[35] classify innovation processes as either discontinuous—radical, top-down transformations—or incremental, involving gradual, field-level adaptations, with the latter being more characteristic of insurgent organisations. Collectively, these studies underscore that innovation is not a singular event but a dynamic continuum that progressively reshapes tactical operations, organisational structures, and strategic frameworks.

While the literature conceptualises innovation both as a process and as an outcome, this study adopts an outcome-oriented perspective, focusing on observable changes in terrorist behaviour, methods, and organisational structure that reflect successful innovation. To systematically assess these developments, the study applies a tripartite model of innovation—tactical, operational, and strategic—which classifies change according to its scope, depth, and functional significance.[36]

Tactical innovation involves modifications to operational behaviour, including weapon selection, targeting methods, timing, and attack techniques.[37] These are typically the most prevalent, given their lower resource requirements and relatively rapid implementation timelines. They illustrate how organisations adjust day-to-day operations in response to immediate tactical challenges or emerging opportunities. Perkoski[38] differentiates between minor and major tactical innovations: the former involving incremental adjustments, and the latter—though rare—introducing novel forms of violence that require higher levels of coordination and resource mobilisation.

Operational innovation, termed organizational innovation by Crenshaw,[39] emphasises structural and institutional transformations. It encompasses a broad range of internal functions essential to organisational sustainability, including recruitment, financing, propaganda, communication, and command hierarchies.[40] Operating at the nexus of tactical and strategic levels, operational innovation integrates day-to-day operational adjustments with longer-term strategic objectives. It strengthens internal cohesion, enhances adaptability, and improves the organisation's capacity to mobilise resources and personnel in response to changing conditions.

Finally, strategic innovation entails profound transformations in a group's overarching campaign logic. These may involve redefining goals or adopting novel approaches that align operations with strategic objectives.[41] Lubrano[42] conceptualises strategic innovation as a shift in the fundamental patterns through which a group challenges political authority, encompassing four stages: evaluation, formulation, adoption, and implementation.[43] Strategic innovation often functions as a "game changer," introducing new behaviours or orientations that alter the balance of conflict. Although relatively rare,[44] strategic innovations frequently integrate operational and tactical changes. For instance, escalations in violence may serve as strategic responses to heightened state repression.[45] Such innovations may also evolve within existing strategic framework, complementing rather than replacing prior doctrines.

This tripartite model—tactical, operational, and strategic—not only clarifies the conceptual scope of terrorist innovation but also provides a coherent analytical lens for empirical inquiry. Applying this framework to an enduring organisation such as the PKK allows for the systematic tracing of how innovations at multiple levels have underpinned its long-term survival. The

following section turns to the case of the PKK, analysing its tactical agility, organisational adaptability, and strategic recalibrations over time in response to evolving counterterrorism pressures and environmental constraints.

Analysing innovation and organisational survival in the PKK

The PKK was founded in 1978 amid intense ideological polarisation in Türkiye and a global wave of anti-colonial revolutionary movements. Its motivations were twofold: a Marxist–Leninist commitment to proletarian struggle and a fervent Kurdish ethno-nationalism aimed at rectifying what it termed the "systemic exclusion of the Kurds" and "colonial domination" following the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Accordingly, the PKK's initial objective was to establish an independent socialist Kurdish state across parts of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, positioning itself as the vanguard of a combined national and social liberation project.

The PKK has survived in a highly volatile Middle Eastern environment marked by systemic shifts in international politics and persistent regional instability. The end of the Cold War transformed global and regional security dynamics; the region experienced successive conflicts, including the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1991), the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq (2003), and the Syrian civil war following the Arab Spring (2011–). While these conditions created opportunities for organisational continuity, the PKK's endurance also reflects notable adaptive capacity. The following subsections examine this resilience through the lens of tactical, operational, and strategic innovation.

Strategic innovation

Strategic innovation refers to deliberate and durable transformations in a terrorist organisation's ideological orientation, political engagement, and operational doctrine that underpin its long-term adaptability and survival. In the case of the PKK, strategic innovation has been pivotal to its persistence amid sustained state repression, shifting conflict environments, and evolving global counterterrorism norms. Throughout successive phases of the conflict, the PKK has reformulated its ideological narrative, recalibrated its military doctrine, and expanded its political alliances to reinforce organisational resilience.

Emerging in the late 1970s, the PKK was shaped by the global revolutionary zeitgeist of the era. Drawing on a fusion of Marxist-Leninist ideology and Kurdish ethno-nationalism, it initially sought to establish a socialist Kurdish state. Its founding document, Manifesto *(Kürdistan Devriminin Yolu)*[46] conceptualised the group's mission as both a proletarian and anti-colonial struggle. This vision was embedded within what Rapoport[47] as termed the "third wave" of modern terrorism, characterised by leftist, anti-imperialist movements. Through this lens, the PKK interpreted regional dynamics as manifestations of colonial domination, class subjugation, and systemic exclusion of the Kurds.[48]

The end of the Cold War and the global collapse of Marxist-Leninist states presented the PKK with an existential crisis, directly compelling a strategic innovation away from its founding ideology, which had become geopolitically defunct. In the aftermath of the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the organisation's founding leader, in 1999, the PKK undertook a profound ideological reorientation. It formally abandoned its Marxist-Leninist foundations and renounced its original secessionist agenda, replacing it with the doctrine of "democratic confederalism." Developed in Öcalan's defence statements and subsequently elaborated in his prison writings, this new ideological framework drew on Leslie Lipson's theory of democratic civilisation and Murray Bookchin's libertarian socialism.[49] Democratic confederalism advocates decentralised, participatory governance, ecological sustainability, gender equality, and grassroots autonomy. This ideological pivot enabled PKK to align its discourse with dominant liberal-democratic norms while preserving its revolutionary ethos. Reflecting on this transformation, senior PKK figure Duran Kalkan describes the internal reorientation as follows:

> Leader Apo, through his continued concentration within the İmralı system, spoke of the ideological crisis that had arisen. He engaged in extensive reflection to overcome it and identified the solution in a paradigm shift. By abolishing the power- and state-centric party structure, he laid out the requirements for becoming a democratic society-oriented party. At this level, the PKK initiated a process of change, transformation, and reorganisation. Decisions were made accordingly; the PKK was altered, including its name, resulting in a significant period of change and transformation.[50]

This leadership-driven redefinition of ideology not only reshaped PKK's organisational identity but also laid the foundation for subsequent political and strategic adaptations.

Concurrently, the PKK expanded its political engagement to bolster legitimacy at both domestic and international levels. Beginning with its 5th Congress in 1995, the organisation increasingly invested in political mobilisation alongside its armed struggle. It established diaspora institutions across Europe and supported affiliated political parties and civil society platforms within Türkiye. The post-9/11 "War on Terror" and the rise of global securitisation frameworks created immense normative and political pressure on the PKK. This exogenous shock was a primary driver for its strategic innovation toward a discourse of democracy and minority rights, a necessary adaptation to avoid international isolation.[51] This rebranding proved particularly effective in Europe, where Türkiye's EU accession process provided a crucial political opportunity structure. The PKK skilfully exploited the EU's focus on human rights and minority protections to build legitimacy and pressure Ankara. German arms embargoes imposed in 1992, 1994, and 1995[52]—citing concern over Türkiye's treatment of Kurds—illustrate how the PKK's evolving discourse began to intersect with international human rights norms. The organisation further extended its transnational reach by supporting the establishment of institutions such as the Kurdish Parliament in Exile and the Kurdistan National Congress, both designed to promote Kurdish political legitimacy and representative governance.

Institutional consolidation followed PKK's 7th Congress in 2000, convened in the aftermath of Öcalan's imprisonment, which marked a formal endorsement of political inclusivity and democratic participation.[53] Through affiliated bodies such as the Democratic Society Congress (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, DTK), the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), and the Kurdistan National Congress (*Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê*, KNK), the organisation embedded itself in Türkiye's evolving democratic structures while simultaneously projecting influence across the Kurdish diaspora.[54] This phase of strategic repositioning reached a new level during the "peace process" initiated in 2009—also referred to as the "democratic opening." The process involved formal dialogue between the Turkish state and PKK-affiliated actors, aiming to address long-standing political, legal, and cultural grievances. While the PKK publicly embraced the rhetoric of peace and reform, it simultaneously pursued what it termed a "war of self-defence," reinforcing its armed capabilities under the justification of protecting Kurdish communities. This dual strategy enabled the organisation to maintain operational readiness while occupying the moral high ground in negotiations.

In accordance with these political recalibrations, PKK reconfigured its military doctrine to adapt to changing tactical and strategic realities. Initially guided by Mao Tse-Tung's theory of protracted people's war—centred on rural insurgency progressing through stages of strategic defence, balance, and offence—PKK leveraged mountainous terrain, weak state capacity in peripheral regions, porous borders, and the availability of safe havens to sustain its early campaigns.[55]

However, the group struggled to advance beyond the defensive stage. Its difficulties were rooted in a range of operational and structural constraints, including deficiencies in logistics, command and control, mobilisation, as well as the Turkish Armed Forces' (*Türk Silâhlı Kuvvetleri*, TSK) increasing proficiency in area control and counterinsurgency operations.[56] According to senior PKK figure Murat Karayılan, these tactical failures, particularly after 1994, were the result of the TSK's successful adoption of an area dominance strategy, the fragmentation and lack of coordination among regional militant units, the disruption of attacks on Turkish military outposts due to improved preventive measures, and the reluctance of lower-level cadres to assume responsibility—leading to small-scale, ineffective actions conducted by dispersed groups.[57]

In response, Öcalan outlined three strategic alternatives: the continuation of the classical rural approach, the launch of a Soviet-style urban insurgency, or the adoption of a hybrid rural-urban model.[58] The PKK ultimately embraced the third option, which was formalised in the doctrine of "Revolutionary People's War" and institutionalised through the Kurdistan Communities Union (*Koma Civakên Kurdistanê*, KCK). As a transnational umbrella framework, the KCK integrated the PKK in Türkiye, the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, PJAK) in Iran, and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (*Partî Çareserî Dîmukratî Kurdistan*, PÇDK) in Iraq.[59] The KCK enabled the coordination of political, military, and ideological activities across the region while institutionalising the principles of democratic confederalism within diverse geopolitical contexts.

A critical component of this doctrinal shift was the "rural-based urban guerrilla strategy" articulated by Duran Kalkan, a leading member of the PKK, in 2012.[60] This approach preserved rural areas as strategic fallback zones while elevating urban centres as operational focal points. Distinct operational units were trained for rural and urban engagements, facilitating specialised tactics and decentralised execution. The strategy aimed to create self-governing enclaves in urban environments as practical manifestations of democratic confederalism, supported by community mobilisation and parallel governance structures. It was accompanied by intensified efforts to incite popular uprisings, or *serhildan*, linking urban unrest to the broader revolutionary project.[61]

The Syrian civil war provided an empirical testing ground for these strategic reforms. The PKK's Syrian affiliate, the PYD, and its armed wing, the People's Defence Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG), established autonomous administrations in Afrin, Kobani, and Cizire, which the PKK interpreted as the successful realisation of its ideological vision.[62] These governance experiments allowed the organisation to project its model of decentralised, multi-ethnic, and gender-inclusive administration beyond Türkiye's borders. More significantly, the YPG's integration into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its subsequent alliance with the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS from 2014 onward constituted a major strategic breakthrough. This collaboration conferred material support, battlefield legitimacy, and political protection upon PKK-linked structures. The U.S. partnership shielded the SDF—and by extension, the PKK's Syrian network—from direct Turkish reprisals, while embedding it within the broader architecture of international counterterrorism.[63]

Having consolidated transnational legitimacy through the Syrian theatre, the PKK entered a new phase of strategic rearticulation, manifested most visibly in its declaration of dissolution. In a statement issued on May 12, 2025, following its 12th Congress, the organisation announced the formal dissolution of its structure and the cessation of armed struggle. The declaration followed a public call by Öcalan on 27 February and was prompted in part by Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party and key figure within the ruling Public Alliance. In the statement, the PKK proclaimed that "all activities conducted under the name have therefore been concluded," and called on all actors to join what it termed the "peace and democratic society process." It further denounced the Treaty of Lausanne as the foundational moment of Kurdish marginalisation, characterised past Turkish state policies toward Kurds as "genocidal," and appealed to both domestic and international stakeholders to support a new phase of political resolution.[64]

Despite the significance of the statement, subsequent remarks by affiliated actors have introduced a degree of ambiguity. Cemil Bayık, co-chair of the KCK Executive Council, described the process as a "second manifesto," reiterating long-standing claims that the foundation of the Turkish Republic marked the onset of Kurdish dispossession and systemic repression.[65] Another member of the council, Çiğdem Doğu, asserted that the PKK had not been dissolved as a result of military defeat, referring to the organisation instead as "an unending novel"—a metaphor suggestive of historical continuity and future adaptability.[66] These divergent messages have raised questions regarding the scope, sincerity, and practical implications of the announcement, particularly in relation to disarmament, organisational continuity, and the future of affiliated entities.

In light of these long-term patterns, the PKK's recent declaration of organisational abolishment warrants careful scrutiny. While ostensibly framed as a formal act of dissolution, the announcement

remains analytically ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. Rather than constituting a definitive termination of the group's activities or strategic vision, it may reflect a discursive recalibration aimed at managing international reputational costs, responding to shifting regional alignments, pre-empting increased pressure from counterterrorism actors, or exploiting domestic political opportunities.

The persistence of this ambiguity is also reflected in statements made by senior PKK figures. Beginning with Öcalan, he described the new process as a strategic transformation and referred to the emerging period as one of reconstitution.[67] Similarly, co-chair Bese Hozat stated:

> When we deeply consider the questions of why we are holding this congress and why we have reached this stage, as the leadership has also expressed, it is not actually an end. We understand very well that it represents a completely new beginning, a process of change, transformation, and reorganisation.[68]

Taken collectively, and particularly when assessed in the context of the organisation's recent declaration, these developments illustrate a systematic and adaptive trajectory of strategic innovation. Consistent with Lubrano's[69] four-stage model, the PKK has recalibrated its approach by reassessing the diminishing utility of its initial separatist agenda, redefining its ideological framework, institutionalising the revised paradigm within its organisational discourse, and operationalising these shifts across political, military, and transnational arenas. Historically, the group has exhibited a durable capacity for organisational reconstitution, ideological repackaging, and network reconfiguration in response to shifting political and security environments. Viewed through this lens, the most recent declaration appears less as an organisational termination and more as a continuation of the PKK's enduring strategy of adaptive rebranding. These dynamics underscore the fluidity between transformation and continuity in the evolution of violent non-state actors, exemplifying PKK's calculated utilisation of ambiguity as a strategic instrument for preserving relevance, negotiating leverage, and sustaining resilience in an increasingly complex conflict environment. While Öcalan's subsequent statements have rhetorically downplayed the pursuit of an independent Kurdish state, the persistence of core objectives—particularly in relation to territorial consolidation, regional influence, and Kurdish self-governance—suggests the continued salience of foundational ambitions.[70] Rather than a rupture, these developments reflect a strategic rearticulation of revolutionary aims under evolving structural constraints. Through the fusion of ideological revision, political incorporation, and military adaptation, the PKK has maintained strategic coherence while maximising organisational longevity within a volatile regional order.

Operational innovation

Operational innovation denotes the systematic adaptation of internal mechanisms, organisational architecture, and implementation frameworks to advance strategic objectives within complex and adversarial environments. For the PKK, such innovation has been instrumental in translating its evolving ideological commitments—particularly the shift toward democratic confederalism—into tangible institutional practices. These include the reconfiguration of military structures, the cultivation of transnational alliances and territorial depth, the formalisation of resource-generation mechanisms, and the establishment of quasi-governance entities. Taken together, these developments have enhanced the organisation's resilience, expanded its operational capacity, and ensured continuity amid sustained counterinsurgency pressures.

A key manifestation of the PKK's operational adaptability lies in the evolution of its military and organisational structure. From its inception, the group adopted a tripartite model typical of Marxist-Leninist insurgencies, comprising a party, a front, and an army.[71] Within this framework, the "party" provided ideological leadership and strategic direction; the "front" focused on political mobilisation and consciousness-raising; and the "army" conducted armed operations. Militarily, the PKK institutionalised its armed wing through the creation of the Kurdistan Liberation Forces (*Hêzên Rizgarîya Kurdistanê*, HRK) following its initial attacks on Turkish military outposts in 1984. The HRK operated

through small, mobile guerrilla units engaged in armed propaganda, consistent with classical insurgent doctrine.

At its 3rd Congress in 1986, however, the PKK replaced the HRK with a more centralised and structured military formation—the Kurdistan People's Liberation Army (*Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan*, ARGK)—marking a significant organisational shift. This transformation was not merely symbolic. It introduced compulsory conscription, significantly expanded recruitment, and institutionalised guerrilla training, including for female combatants.[72] The transition from HRK to ARGK thus signified a transition from symbolic resistance to a disciplined guerrilla force with enhanced command-and-control, coordination, and strategic coherence. As part of this institutionalisation, PKK also established a political-military academy, named after Mahsum Korkmaz—one of its most prominent figures in armed wing—serving as both a training centre and a locus of ideological consolidation.

Organisationally, the PKK implemented major internal reforms to sustain its growing insurgency. These included the institutionalisation of local militia forces at the 5th Congress in 1995, the creation of youth and intelligence cells, and the expansion of conscription. With gender liberation redefined as a revolutionary imperative, women's participation grew markedly. Although women had participated in armed actions since the organisation's early years, their involvement increased substantially between 1987 and the early 1990s, culminating in the formation of the Kurdistan Free Women's Union (*Yekîtiya Azadiya Jinên Kurdistan*, YAJK) after the 1993 Zele Women's Congress. This development reflected the PKK's commitment to the "militarisation of women" as both an ideological and operational principle.[73]

From the mid-1980s onward, the PKK progressively outcompeted—or coerced—rival Kurdish formations by leveraging calibrated violence, strict cadre discipline, and diaspora-enabled resource flows. It constructed parallel social fronts—youth, women's, labour, and cultural—that embedded the organisation in everyday Kurdish life and reinforced its representational authority through symbolic politics, ritualised commemoration, and centralised media control. Selective intra-Kurdish coercion curtailed rivals' organisational space, while the PKK's ability to provide security, services, and patronage—often through cross-border affiliates—consolidated its de facto hegemony within Kurdish contentious politics, even as dissenting voices persisted.

The PKK's Syrian affiliate, YPG/PYD, further institutionalised these operational innovations following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The fight against ISIS from 2014 onward enabled YPG/PYD to gain international legitimacy and secure military support from the United States, facilitating its rapid territorial consolidation and organisational expansion across northern Syria. Notably, the Women's Defence Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ) garnered extensive global media attention, emerging as a potent symbol of both armed resistance and gender emancipation.[74]

A decisive transformation unfolded in the early 2000s following Öcalan's capture and subsequent ideological reorientation. At its 7th Congress in 2000, the PKK introduced the "Democratic Republic and Peace Project," leading to a broad organisational rebranding: the PKK became "Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress" (KADEK), the ARGK was renamed the HPG, and the "National Liberation Front of Kurdistan" (*Eniya Rizgariya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê*, ERNK) was replaced by the "Kurdish Democratic Union" (*Yekitiya Demokratiya Kurd*, YDK), later to "People's Congress" (*Kongra-Gel*).[75] These changes were not merely cosmetic; they reflected a shift toward decentralised decision-making, granting local units more autonomy in both governance and military operations.

The ERNK was formally established in 1985 as the PKK's external political front. It was tasked with recruitment, financial procurement, intelligence gathering, and propaganda dissemination.[76] Operating across Türkiye, Syria, and Western Europe, the ERNK played a pivotal role in constructing transnational support networks and sustaining the PKK's organisational infrastructure abroad. Its creation reflected the adoption of a dual-track strategy that combined armed struggle with mass political mobilisation in both domestic and international arenas. Over time, the ERNK developed

a wide array of subsidiary organisations representing diverse social constituencies, including workers, women, youth, and religious groups.[77]

This decentralisation extended beyond Türkiye's borders, particularly through the establishment of affiliated organisations in neighbouring conflict zones. The PKK expanded its regional presence through entities such as PJAK in Iran, which functioned as a proxy enabling decentralised operations, risk dispersion, and broader regional reach.[78] In weakly governed or contested zones across northern Iraq and Syria, the group developed training camps, logistical corridors, arms depots, and administrative institutions.

In Syria, the PYD constructed proxy structures that enabled the group to extend its influence over governance, economic systems, and social organisation. Over time, the PYD emerged as the most dominant Kurdish political actor in Syria.[79] Through these affiliations, the PKK was able to distribute operational risk, adapt to regional constraints, and embed itself within transnational Kurdish political projects. These structures served not only military purposes but also functioned as platforms for implementing democratic confederalism, thereby aligning practical governance with the PKK's ideological commitments.

While the PKK's decentralised model in Syria materialised during the 2000s, its pursuit of external alliances dates back to the early 1980s. During this earlier period, the organisation forged cooperative relationships with other armed groups to enhance its reach and capabilities. Notably, it signed a formal cooperation agreement with the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) in April 1980. In a joint operation later that year, PKK and ASALA militants bombed the Turkish consulate in Strasbourg, France. The PKK also maintained ties with Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF), which assisted in organising political rallies and whose members reportedly visited PKK bases in Türkiye.[80]

The PKK further capitalised on regional instability to secure operational depth and cross-border sanctuaries. In the early 1980s, it developed relations with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which facilitated its settlement in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the PKK gained valuable combat experience and operated a training camp in *Helweh* until 1992.[81] Throughout this period, it received military training, logistical assistance, ideological instruction, and weapons from various Palestinian factions.[82] The 1991 Gulf War and the establishment of a no-fly zone over northern Iraq provided the PKK with additional strategic opportunities, enabling deeper entrenchment in the region. Collaboration with local Kurdish groups further facilitated the relocation of militants and logistical infrastructure from Syria to Iran and, ultimately, to northern Iraq.[83] The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ensuing collapse of central authority further consolidated the PKK's presence, particularly in the Qandil Mountains. Although nominal sovereignty over these territories passed to the United States, Washington reportedly cautioned Ankara against cross-border operations targeting PKK camps. Consequently, northern Iraq emerged as a durable safe haven for the organisation.[84]

In addition to structural and geographical adaptations, operational innovation also shaped PKK's management of conflict tempo, particularly through the strategic use of ceasefires as instruments for recalibration and organisational consolidation. The PKK declared multiple ceasefires over the course of its insurgency, often leveraging these pauses to regroup, rearm, and adjust tactics in response to intensified Turkish counterinsurgency campaigns. The first unilateral ceasefire in 1993, announced amid internal debate and regional realignments, was quickly overshadowed by one of the most violent episodes in the group's history—the killing of 33 unarmed Turkish soldiers in Bingöl—followed by a series of attacks on rural villages. According to Öcalan, the ceasefire was intended to provide the organisation with "breathing space" for internal development and strategic adjustment. In practice, it created favourable conditions for increased recruitment and the reorganisation of militants across operational zones.[85]

In 1999, following the capture of Öcalan, the PKK declared a formal cessation of hostilities and initiated a phased withdrawal of its forces from Türkiye. The period between 2000 and 2004, described as one of "impasse and reconstruction," conveyed a sense of organisational introversion.[86] Although

sporadic attacks occurred, some attributed to the PKK and others to affiliated groups such as the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan, TAK), overall violence declined. Despite experiencing militant losses and a temporary erosion of operational momentum, the PKK succeeded in preserving the loyalty of a core cadre and sustaining a baseline level of recruitment, which allowed the organisation to maintain its organisational continuity and latent operational capacity.[87] This relative calm ended in June 2004, when the PKK announced the resumption of armed operations, triggering a marked escalation of violence through 2005.

A particularly significant ceasefire followed in 2013, during the peace process initiated by the Turkish government. At this stage, the PKK pledged to withdraw all its militants from Türkiye to northern Iraq. However, the group reportedly used this period to infiltrate urban areas, arm clandestine cells, and prepare for a shift toward urban guerrilla warfare—a strategy that became manifest during the 2015–2016 urban conflict in southeastern Türkiye.

Resource mobilisation has constituted another critical axis of the PKK's operational innovation. Over time, the organisation has built a robust transnational support network, particularly across Western Europe, where Kurdish diaspora communities have played an instrumental role in facilitating recruitment, financial flows, and propaganda dissemination.[88] In Germany, the PKK's principal European hub, the 1993 ban initially triggered confrontational tactics among supporters, but this approach evolved significantly after key turning points such as Öcalan's 1999 capture and the 2014 siege of Kobanî. In response, diaspora organisations pivoted toward rights-based civic mobilisation, including anti-ban campaigns and institutional advocacy, thereby adapting to host-country political contexts and widening their channels of legitimacy.[89] By adjusting to hostland conditions, diaspora networks stabilised funding, outreach, and media ecosystems, feeding back into the PKK's transnational capacity—an instance of adaptive institutionalisation.

This legal and semi-legal support infrastructure has been complemented by extensive illicit financing mechanisms, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and extortion—activities that have sustained the PKK's operational base for decades.[90] According to the British National Service of Criminal Intelligence, the PKK extorted £2.5 million from Kurdish migrants and businessmen in 1993 alone and earned an estimated 56 million Deutsche Marks through drug trafficking.[91] In 1998, the British government claimed that the PKK was responsible for up to 40 percent of the heroin trade in Europe, underscoring the scale of its criminal-economic portfolio.[92] In addition to voluntary donations, the PKK reportedly imposed a "revolutionary tax" on Kurdish businessmen in Türkiye and abroad, established protection rackets targeting Kurdish-owned businesses, and charged "visa fees" to Kurdish expatriates travelling from Europe to PKK-controlled zones.[93] At its peak, the organisation's annual income was estimated at up to $500 million, making it one of the most financially resilient insurgent movements in the region.[94] Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the YPG further enhanced this capacity by gaining control of significant oil fields that had previously accounted for roughly 30 percent of Syrian government revenues, thereby deepening its financial autonomy and operational resilience.[95]

Parallel to these activities, affiliated media outlets and front organisations helped construct a narrative of political legitimacy, framing PKK's struggle in terms of human rights and self-determination. This discursive strategy proved particularly effective in Western political arenas, where it mitigated reputational costs associated with the group's use of violence and its involvement in criminal enterprises. In territories under its control—especially northern Syria—the PKK and its affiliates have developed proto-state governance mechanisms, providing basic services such as security, education, health care, and legal adjudication.[96] These structures function not only as instruments of service delivery but also as vehicles of ideological dissemination, consolidating local legitimacy and institutionalising its political vision on the ground.

Finally, the PKK has asserted influence in the socio-cultural domain as part of its broader identity-building agenda. It has instrumentalised symbolic and cultural practices to foster Kurdish national consciousness.[97] Notably, the group played a central role in transforming *Newroz* celebrations—previously marginal in Türkiye—into mass political rituals. Drawing on historical narratives such as

Mem û Zîn and invoking ties to ancient peoples like the Medes,[98] the organisation has sought to construct a distinct Kurdish historical identity. The PKK frequently presents itself as the sole defender of Kurdish identity, devoting significant attention to history in its congresses and publications. Commemorative practices, including naming training camps after militants killed in combat, have reinforced organisational loyalty and collective memory, strengthening internal cohesion.[99]

Taken together, these developments reflect a process of adaptive institutionalisation—the embedding of operational innovations into durable organisational routines that are ideologically coherent, structurally integrated, and reproducible across contexts. Distinct from tactical improvisation or broad strategic shifts, this process captures how insurgent organisations consolidate adaptive practices over time. In the case of the PKK, such institutionalisation has underpinned long-term resilience by transforming reactive innovations into stable mechanisms. This logic is further observable in the domain of tactical innovation, where battlefield experimentation has directly contributed to the group's operational effectiveness.

Tactical innovation

Tactical innovation constitutes a crucial pillar of the PKK's long-term survival strategy, enabling the organisation to adapt to shifting political, technological, and military landscapes. As Dolnik[100] argues, tactical innovation within terrorist organisations is not only a mechanism for overcoming immediate operational challenges but also a means of sustaining momentum in protracted conflicts. The PKK has consistently recalibrated its tactical repertoire in response to the evolution of Türkiye's counter-terrorism policies, combining physical violence, mass mobilisation, and digital warfare within an increasingly hybrid operational framework.

Originally grounded in Maoist guerrilla doctrine, the PKK's early military strategy centred on rural insurgency, ambushes, and hit-and-run attacks across the mountainous regions of southeastern Türkiye during the 1980s and early 1990s. These tactics exploited the rugged terrain to offset the Turkish military's conventional superiority. As state counterinsurgency efforts intensified in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the PKK gradually redirected its operational focus toward urban environments. Through *serhildan* committees, the organisation orchestrated urban protests in the early 1990s, culminating in mass demonstrations during the 1992 *Newroz* celebrations in Cizre, Silopi, and Şırnak.[101] This tactical adaptation reached its peak after 2015, when the PKK transformed its *serhildan* strategy into protracted urban warfare. In towns such as Nusaybin, Cizre, and Sur (Diyarbakır), militants erected barricades and trenches, engaged security forces in sustained clashes, and sought to establish de facto autonomous zones through the so-called "self-rule" initiative.[102] This shift underscored the group's capacity to hybridise tactics, merging rural guerrilla methods with urban insurgency to exploit the asymmetries inherent in contemporary conflict.

The PKK's tactical profile reveals a calculated blend of high-frequency attacks and diversified target selection, designed to generate both immediate operational effects and broader psychological and political impact. According to data from the Global Terrorism Database,[103] armed assaults and bombings dominate its repertoire, consistent with asymmetric warfare strategies aimed at attrition and disruption. These are supplemented by facility attacks, kidnappings, and assassinations, reflecting a coercive logic intended to undermine state authority, intimidate local actors, and assert territorial control. The group's target selection underscores this hybrid orientation. While security forces—particularly military and law enforcement units—remain the primary focus, a significant proportion of attacks have also targeted civilians, economic infrastructure, and symbolic state institutions. Periodic assaults on schools, transportation networks, non-governmental organisations, and media outlets indicate a deliberate effort to extend the conflict into the social and psychological spheres. This tactical diversification exemplifies the PKK's capacity for innovation—an adaptive synthesis of direct violence, intimidation, and symbolic messaging calibrated to the evolving dynamics of the conflict.

The PKK's urban warfare capabilities were further enhanced through operational learning derived from allied theatres in Syria and Iraq. The organisation adapted and incorporated tactics

refined by its affiliates, particularly the YPG, including tunnel-based warfare, decentralised combat formations, and extensive employment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These cross-border learning processes demonstrate how regional entanglements broadened the PKK's tactical repertoire and facilitated the diffusion of innovations across interconnected insurgent environments.

Technological adaptation has been equally pivotal in this trajectory of tactical evolution. The deployment of IEDs became a defining feature of its asymmetric campaign during the 2000s, enabling the group to inflict significant damage on military patrols while avoiding direct confrontation. Since 2016, the group has incorporated unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into its operational repertoire, employing both rotary-wing and fixed-wing drones for reconnaissance and offensive strikes. Reports further suggest that the PKK has experimented with GPS-guided navigation systems to mitigate vulnerability to signal jamming.[104] In April 2025, for instance, the organisation claimed responsibility for drone attacks against Peshmerga forces in Duhok, northern Iraq—describing the strikes as "warning operations" intended to project presence rather than inflict mass casualties.[105] Collectively, these developments signify a substantial enhancement of the group's capacity for remote surveillance, low-cost force projection, and calibrated deterrence.

The PKK has also extended its tactical operations into the cyber domain, recognising the strategic utility of information systems in contemporary insurgency. Affiliated hacking groups, including the Cold Attack Team, TAK Hack Team, and Mezopotamia Hackers, have targeted Türkiye's public and private sectors, causing service disruptions and probing cybersecurity vulnerabilities.[106] Beyond acts of sabotage, the organisation has cultivated a sophisticated information warfare infrastructure that deploys disinformation, digital propaganda, and online manipulation to obscure operational losses, erode state legitimacy, and incite social unrest.[107]

The PKK's digital media strategy complements and amplifies its armed activities. Traditional media outlets have been restructured into decentralised online platforms such as Firatnews.com, Radyowelat.com, and Gerilla TV, while social media channels—including X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram—are utilised to disseminate narratives, coordinate activities, and mobilise diaspora constituencies. During military operations such as Olive Branch and Peace Spring, PKK-affiliated media networks intensified the circulation of fabricated and misleading content aimed at eroding the Turkish military's domestic and international legitimacy.

In tandem with these technological advances, the PKK has consistently employed symbolic and psychological tactics to reinforce internal cohesion and external visibility. Hunger strikes, first employed in Diyarbakır prison in 1981, have remained a fixture of the group's protest repertoire, symbolising discipline, endurance, and martyrdom. At the opposite end of the spectrum, between 1995 and 1999 the organisation conducted fifteen suicide attacks—many carried out by female operatives—to project moral resolve and undermine public confidence in state security.[108]

The PKK's evolving approach to target selection reflects a pattern of pragmatic adaptation. While security forces remain the primary focus, civilians, local elites, teachers, and health workers have periodically been targeted to assert control over contested territories and suppress dissent. In the late 1980s, the group deliberately attacked educational institutions and assassinated teachers to disrupt the state's administrative reach in rural areas. Economic targets, particularly within the tourism sector, were also attacked to inflict financial damage and diminish perceptions of state competence.

Overall, these patterns reveal a deliberate and multifaceted trajectory of tactical innovation. The PKK's capacity to integrate kinetic violence, urban warfare, cyber operations, and psychological tactics has enabled it to sustain operational relevance despite persistent counterinsurgency pressure. As Lubrano[109] and DeVore et al.[110] argue, tactical innovation among insurgent groups is not merely reactive but often anticipatory—intended to outpace state countermeasures and recalibrate the parameters of conflict. In the PKK's case, such innovation has been central to its organisational resilience and its enduring capacity to shape the dynamics of political violence across the region.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of innovation as a fundamental mechanism of survival in terrorist organisations, using the PKK as a longitudinal case study. Applying Lubrano's tripartite framework—tactical, operational, and strategic innovation—we have shown that the PKK's endurance over more than four decades is not merely the by-product of resilience or external sponsorship, but rather the outcome of deliberate, adaptive, and often sophisticated forms of organisational innovation.

At the tactical level, the PKK has continuously recalibrated its methods of violence and resistance, evolving from early guerrilla warfare and ambush tactics to the deployment of IEDs, anti-aircraft systems, and more recently, drone technologies. These adaptations demonstrate the group's capacity to respond dynamically to Türkiye's evolving counterinsurgency apparatus, technological advances, and changing operational environment. Tactically, the PKK has leveraged asymmetric methods to exploit vulnerabilities in state forces while mitigating its own operational exposure, thereby enhancing its survivability.

Operationally, the organisation's structural metamorphosis—particularly after Öcalan's capture and the subsequent adoption of the KCK system—has enabled decentralised decision-making and the diffusion of its administrative, ideological, and military functions across a transnational network. In this context, we introduced the concept of adaptive institutionalisation to capture the PKK's capacity to redistribute risk and authority across affiliated entities such as the YPG, PJAK, and SDF. This operational innovation has not only bolstered organisational resilience against leadership decapitation but also allowed the PKK to expand its regional footprint and entrench itself within local governance structures.

Strategically, the PKK has engaged in repeated cycles of ideological reorientation, transnational alliance formation, and normative reframing. Its shift from a Marxist-Leninist doctrine to democratic confederalism, its cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, and its dual pursuit of insurgency and legal political engagement within Türkiye through proxies exemplify its capacity for long-term strategic recalibration. These innovations have enabled the organisation to contest legitimacy not only through armed struggle, but also via political discourse, diplomatic engagement, and local governance—broadening the repertoire of insurgency into multiple domains of contestation.

These findings offer essential context for interpreting the PKK's May 2025 declaration to dissolve itself and transfer the Kurdish struggle to political and civil institutions. Although this announcement may appear to signify a rupture with its insurgent past, it is more accurately understood as the culmination of a long trajectory of strategic innovation. Much like earlier transitions, this latest shift reflects not termination, but a reconfiguration aimed at repositioning the movement within a changing political landscape shaped by normative contestation, international fatigue with armed conflict, and evolving intra-Kurdish dynamics.

The declaration also appears to be a calculated effort to re-legitimise the Kurdish cause internationally while increasing pressure on Ankara to engage politically. The complexity of this manoeuvre is underscored by the Turkish government's insistence that dissolution encompass all affiliated entities and by the SDF's refusal to align with Öcalan's call. In this sense, the PKK's self-declared "abolishment" should not be seen as a historical epilogue but as an inflection point in its evolutionary trajectory—a transformation from a centrally directed insurgency into a diffuse network of political, social, and paramilitary actors embedded within a rebranded ideological framework. The evidence presented here supports the broader claim that such organisations can exhibit extraordinary institutional learning and adaptive transformation, blurring boundaries between insurgency, political activism, and governance. Innovation, as demonstrated throughout this study, is not peripheral to survival; it is constitutive of it.

Looking ahead, three trajectories seem plausible. First, a managed demobilisation scenario would involve a verifiable reduction of armed capacity and the consolidation of leadership into lawful politics through allied political platforms, contingent on third-party guarantees and credible amnesties. Second, political rebranding with latent coercive capacity would see dissolution rhetoric mask the

persistence of organisational networks seeking to preserve and expand gains achieved via the PYD, with coercive assets relocated transnationally while public discourse centres on civil struggle. Third, fragmentation would result in partial compliance and splintering between hardline spoilers and pragmatic factions, heightening short-term risks of renewed violence. Based on subsequent developments, the second trajectory appears most consistent with observable patterns—namely, strategic rearticulation rather than organisational termination. This assessment, however, remains contingent upon forthcoming behavioural indicators, including verifiable disarmament, deconstruction of command hierarchies, alterations in financial flows, and the extent of (in)direct political or institutional engagement by international actors.

Nonetheless, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. This study relies primarily on secondary sources, archival materials, and open-source reporting; direct access to internal PKK documents or interviews with former cadres would provide deeper insight into the organisation's decision-making processes. While the single-case design affords analytical depth, it also constrains the generalisability of findings. Future research should therefore adopt comparative designs to examine whether similar innovation dynamics operate across other terrorist organisations. The long-term implications of the PKK's 2025 dissolution also remain speculative. Continued empirical observation will be essential to determine whether this shift yields genuine demobilisation, political integration, or merely a reconfiguration of existing networks under new guises. Understanding these evolving trajectories will remain central to explaining how innovation mediates both the survival and transformation of violent non-state actors in post-conflict political orders.

Disclosure statement

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