

Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin

May 2017

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Executive Summary

Nusaybin, a political stronghold of the Kurdish movement bordering Syria, is among Turkey's urban south-eastern districts that saw unprecedented levels of violence in 2016. Particularly in the wake of the failed July coup attempt and in the run-up to the 2017 presidential system referendum, emergency rule conditions resulted in the arrest and/or removal from office of elected representatives of the legal Kurdish political movement. While conflict fatigue can be observed in this town where 30,000 lost their homes, so can a distinct sense that a political solution is not in sight. Ankara's effort to meet residents' basic needs and compensate them for material losses is notable, but managing the conflict's socio-political fallout and addressing the grievances of Kurdish movement supporters will be crucial if that marginalised constituency is not to be left more susceptible to mobilisation by the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and drawn toward violence.

Since violence resumed in July 2015, the 33-year conflict with the PKK, which Turkey, the U.S. and European Union (EU) consider a terrorist organisation, has devastated neighbourhoods and livelihoods across urban districts of the majority-Kurdish south-east. In twenty-one months, at least 2,748 people died, around 100,000 lost their homes, and up to 400,000 were temporarily displaced. Turkish security forces conducted hundreds of operations in urban and rural areas of the south-east, while the PKK – after a period of intense clashes in urban centres and attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the western cities of Turkey – returned to fighting in rural areas in June 2016. With the rise to dominance of nationalist cadres and hard-line policies in Ankara, the state's approach is to weaken the PKK as much as possible; marginalise the main legal Kurdish political entity, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP); win over locals via better services and infrastructure; and nurture other Kurdish political actors that might serve as an alternative to the HDP.

Residents in the conflict-torn south-east are fed contradictory narratives as to why the escalation reached such levels. Government affiliates retroactively blame cadres linked to what they call the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ) – also blamed for the 15 July 2016 coup attempt – for the PKK mobilisation in south-eastern urban districts during the peace process (2013-2015). Conversely, hard-line Kurdish movement representatives assert that elements in Ankara favouring nationalist policies, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself, orchestrated the escalation to justify the crackdown on the legal Kurdish political movement. Residents are bitter toward the state but also blame the PKK for being ready to sacrifice its social base in Turkey to pursue the unrealistic ambition of carving out autonomous neighbourhoods with trenches and barricades.

State initiatives to rebuild Nusaybin's neighbourhoods and compensate residents for material losses have taken time to develop, and transparency is lagging. The government is making diligent efforts to compensate residents for the true value of destroyed property, but administrative gaffes and delays exacerbate longstanding mistrust of state authorities. Clearing explosives from neighbourhoods where fighting occurred, the authorities say, required flattening buildings that were still standing. But the demolitions fuelled speculation that they were intended to allow new construction that would facilitate security measures against renewed urban

warfare. Despite genuine progress, the physical reconstruction of houses will not be sufficient to restore trust between the state and the local population or to rejuvenate fully the town's social dynamism any time soon. The government needs to meet expectations regarding revitalising small businesses, which may require allowing controlled border trade, and adequately address the psycho-social needs of people traumatised by the conflict.

More broadly, the central authorities' removal of elected representatives and purge of locally trusted municipality personnel have consolidated a sense among Kurdish movement supporters that their political orientation and culture is not recognised. That, plus the stifling of public debate, the ban on mass protests in some areas and the strong security force presence, have strengthened the perception that there is no outlet for democratic politics. For some, it has left armed struggle as a legitimate response.

In the wake of the 16 April referendum, in which 79 per cent of Nusaybin residents voted "no", the government extended for three months the emergency rule that has been in place since the failed coup. This is hardly the best way to suggest a shift toward the inclusive, pluralistic policies required to win hearts and minds. Instead, state officials should consider engaging with local residents by hiring staff more attuned to the social fabric and proactively trying to address the trust deficit.

Optimists say that President Erdoğan – having now secured an executive presidency – is free to focus on healing social divides, including with respect to the ideological diversity among Turkey's Kurds. With no elections scheduled for two years, he may be less intent on mobilising nationalist constituencies. But he may yet choose the alternative – impeding channels for the legitimate representation of the Kurdish movement and ignoring longstanding political demands and grievances – thus ensuring that adversity festers and segments of the population become radicalised. The government may also continue to broadly apply anti-terror legislation so as to criminalise the mere fact of contradicting official accounts, dashing hope for the resumption of more constructive, peaceful public debate on resolving Turkey's PKK conflict.

With the coming of spring, mutual escalation of that confrontation is likely; the Syrian war, in which Ankara and Kurdish affiliates of the PKK are at odds, further magnifies the danger. Still, many continue to say that the best way to durable peace is new talks between Turkey and the PKK, accompanied – on a separate track – by an effort to satisfy Turkey's Kurdish population on core issues such as mother-tongue education, de-centralisation, a lower electoral threshold, reform of anti-terror laws and an ethnically neutral constitution.

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I. Introduction

During the 2.5-year PKK-Turkish state ceasefire and peace process (March 2013-April 2015), the Kurdish organisation deepened its presence in urban districts of the south-east. Urban warfare followed the ceasefire's collapse in July 2015. From August 2015, a number of regional mayors from the Democratic Regions' Party (DBP), an HDP sister party, announced their autonomy from Ankara. PKK militants set up barricades and dug trenches to keep state security forces out. The government imposed curfews, closing residential neighbourhoods of some 40 south-eastern districts for periods ranging from hours to months.¹

In the most serious cases, residents were asked to evacuate their homes during months of security operations aimed at clearing out the PKK, notably in Diyarbakır's Sur district and Şırnak's centre, Cizre and Silopi districts, as well as Mardin's Nusaybin and Hakkari's Yüksekova districts, where entire neighbourhoods were demolished. International organisations and local human rights NGOs have reported extensively on alleged human rights abuses.² Crisis Group's open-source casualty infographic indicates the conflict's death toll between the breakdown of the ceasefire and 25 April 2017 has been at least 2,721.³

* Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre du pluralisme, de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

¹ See <http://tihv.org.tr/16-agustos-2015-31-ocak-2017-tarihleri-arasinda-sokagacikma-yasaklari>. For a glossary of acronyms and abbreviations used in this report, see Appendix D below.

² A report by a conservative human rights organisation stated that the Cizre curfew "saw mass killings" and turned the town into a "war zone"; a UN report alleged "numerous cases of excessive use of force; killings; enforced disappearances; torture; destruction of housing and cultural heritage; incitement to hatred; prevention of access to emergency medical care, food, water and livelihoods; violence against women; and severe curtailment of the right to freedom of opinion and expression as well as political participation". "Curfew Imposed on Cizre Town of Şırnak Province Investigation and Monitoring Report Covering December 14, 2015-March 2, 2016", Mazlumder Conflict Investigation and Resolution Group, March 2016; "Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), February 2017. A third report concluded: "the right to health in the places under curfew has been completely violated. Hospitals were turned into military headquarters, medical centres were destroyed, health workers were literally held hostage in hospitals. Elderly, pregnant women, children, people with chronic illnesses have frequently faced obstacles in access to treatment and unfortunately some of these cases resulted in death". "Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres 2015", Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TİHV), December 2016.

³ This includes 921 state security force members, at least 1,215 PKK militants, at least 393 civilians and at least 219 youths of unknown affiliation (confirmed urban casualties, aged sixteen to 35, who cannot be positively identified as civilians or members of the PKK or its urban youth wing, the YPS, or Civil Protection Units). See Crisis Group info-

Crisis Group last reported on the conflict in the region in March 2016, when it examined the human cost in Diyarbakır's Sur district. Operations had ended in many districts, but the most intense period was just beginning in the town of Nusaybin, where a 134-day curfew ran from 14 March to 25 July 2016. Since then, operations have taken place only in rural areas of the town, reflecting the general shift of the fighting away from urban centres back to the traditional arena of the 33-year conflict. When Crisis Group visited Nusaybin in February 2017, there was relative calm in the town but also a strong security presence, and security operations were ongoing in rural areas and villages of the district.

The south-east's atmosphere has been deeply impacted by larger domestic political developments. Over the last year, Turkey has experienced an unprecedented consolidation of presidential power, particularly in the aftermath of the 15 July 2016 coup attempt attributed to the network Ankara has labelled FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation).⁴ The emergency rule that the government declared in the coup's aftermath paved the way for sweeping purges and arrests of those suspected of links to either FETÖ and/or the PKK, both alleged to be used by foreign powers that want to destabilise Turkey. The post-coup climate and emergency rule enabled a massive purge of state institutions, along with intense pressure and restrictions on media, academia and civil society, while impunity for security forces increased with legislative changes.⁵

In an effort to convert the government system from parliamentary to presidential, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), in conjunction with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), proposed eighteen constitutional changes that were approved by 51.4 per cent of those who participated in the 16 April 2017 referendum. The referendum campaign both fed off and played into marginalisation of the Kurdish movement. The political leadership framed a "no" vote as support for terrorists, while high-ranking PKK figures expressed opposition to the constitutional changes.⁶ Thirteen HDP parliamentarians and 84 DBP mayors spent the

graphic on casualties of Turkey's PKK conflict: <http://www.crisisgroup.be/interactives/turkey>. The government claims to have killed 11,000 PKK militants since the resumption of violence in July 2015. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan A News'e konuştu: AGİT'e nasıl inanayım" ["President Erdoğan talked to A News: How should I believe in OSCE"], A Haber, 21 April 2017.

⁴ The Gülen movement – labelled FETÖ by the state in 2016 – was formed in Turkey in the 1970s by Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim scholar in self-exile since 1999 and based in the U.S. state of Pennsylvania. The government accuses Gülenists, among other things, of illicitly infiltrating the Turkish bureaucracy, persecuting political enemies (among them high-ranking military officials) and orchestrating the 15 July 2016 coup attempt.

⁵ Law no. 2722, adopted on 23 June 2016, "requiring the authorisation of political authorities for the investigation of soldiers or public officials suspected of having committed crimes in the context of counter-terrorism operations", was referred to in the "Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey", UN OHCHR, op. cit., p. 19. Shortly after the coup attempt, a decree was enacted stipulating that "persons who have adopted decisions and fulfilled their duties within the scope of this decree bear no legal, administrative, financial and criminal liabilities". The UN OHCHR report expressed concern this could reinforce impunity among law enforcement officials.

⁶ A 15 December 2016 declaration by Cemil Bayık, a leading PKK figure, opposing the constitutional changes was followed by a 23 January 2017 declaration by Rıza Altun, PKK "head of foreign relations", and a 27 February declaration by Mustafa Karasu, also a high-ranking member. "Qada Parastina Medya Cemil Bayık AKP MHP ittifakı ve son siyasal gelişmeler" ["Medya Defence Area Cemil Bayık AKP MHP alliance and the latest political developments"], Fırat News, 15 December 2016; "Qada Parastina Medya Rıza Altun" ["Medya Defence Area Rıza Altun"], Fırat News, 23

campaign and voted in prison. Local Kurdish movement representatives not arrested were under immense pressure. Nevertheless, 61 per cent of voters in the twelve provinces that in November 2015 supported the HDP voted against the changes. The “no” vote in the main urban conflict districts of Cizre, Sur, Nusaybin, Yüksekova and Silopi was 75.3 per cent, among the highest in the country.⁷

The Turkey/PKK conflict also has considerably aggravated Turkey’s relations with the U.S. and European Union (EU) in the past year. Ankara blames Washington for providing support to the PKK’s Syrian affiliate, the People’s Protection Units (YPG)/Democratic Union Party (PYD). It accuses the EU and its member states – with which relations are also strained over what Ankara considers unfair obstacles in the accession process and failure to keep its end of the refugee deal, while Brussels objects to what it sees as Ankara’s dangerous disregard for liberal principles and EU values – of leniency toward the PKK and aiding PKK-linked individuals in their countries and pushing for changes in Turkish anti-terror laws that could embolden terrorists. The EU visa liberalisation process, about which EU member states are highly sensitive given the refugee/migration crisis, has stalled primarily due to Ankara’s reluctance to reform those anti-terror laws, the broad interpretation of which potentially qualifies more Turkish citizens for asylum in the EU.⁸

While Ankara’s public line is that a military solution to the PKK conflict is within reach, officials privately acknowledge that the insurgency’s eradication is unrealistic.⁹ Rather, the strategy appears to be to weaken the PKK as much as operationally possible, curb its affiliate’s aspirations in Syria, paralyse and discredit the HDP, and dilute its influence by nurturing alternative Kurdish actors.

A year after examining the human cost of the conflict in Sur, Crisis Group looks in this report at Nusaybin, on the Syrian border, an area deeply impacted by the recent cycle of violent escalation between the PKK and the Turkish state. The report assesses the extent to which Turkey’s strategy is yielding desired results as opposed to unintended consequences, and considers some ideas about how the conflict’s human cost and its social and political fallout might be better managed.

January 2017; “Qada Parastina Medya Mustafa Karasu Referandum Üzerine” [“Medya Defence Area Mustafa Karasu on the referendum”], *Firat News*, 27 February 2017.

⁷ For detailed referendum results, see www.yenisafak.com/en/secim-referandum-2017/diyarbakir-secim-sonuclari-referandum.

⁸ 80 per cent of some 5,000 Turkish citizens applying for asylum in Germany in 2016 were reportedly Kurdish. “What chances for Turks seeking asylum in Germany”, *Deutsche Welle*, 27 December 2016.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, February 2017 and Istanbul, September 2016.

II. Nusaybin: Conflict Dynamics and Narratives

A. *The Surge of Violence*

Nusaybin, in Mardin province at the border with Syria and with a population of around 120,000, predominantly Kurdish, many of whom have relatives in the Syrian town of Qamishli, is a political stronghold of the Kurdish movement. The town is strategically important for Ankara due to its close proximity to Qamishli, which is predominantly PYD-controlled.¹⁰ The HDP won 90.4 and 89.4 per cent of the vote in Nusaybin in the June and November 2015 parliamentary elections, respectively. Political consolidation paralleled a surge in Kurdish nationalism in the town, where the PKK had begun during the peace process (2013-2015) to mobilise youths. After the June vote, members of the PKK's youth wing, YDG-H (Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement), became more active in the town and the main actors in the ensuing fighting.¹¹

Nusaybin saw unprecedented violence in 2016, with a death toll of at least 184, of whom 24 were civilians.¹² Six of the town centre's fifteen neighbourhoods were fully destroyed; some 6,000 buildings were demolished or heavily damaged; around 30,000 people lost their homes.¹³ While officially the town lost 10 per cent of its residents in 2016, a local source estimated the decrease at around 35 per cent.¹⁴

With the help of PKK militants, some of the town's youths dug trenches and set up barricades in the Firat, Abdulkadir Paşa, Yenişehir and Dicle neighbourhoods (see map in Appendix B below). Because state security forces first focused on operations in Sur and Cizre, PKK militants temporarily were able to control parts of Nusaybin, which they and some civilians perceived as "liberated".¹⁵ When small, intermittent security operations began in October 2015, the number of trenches and barricades was estimated by local sources at around 150. By March 2016, just before large military operations began, that figure had increased to 450-

¹⁰ The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne separated majority-Kurdish villages in the area, with some going to Syria, others to Turkey. The population of Nusaybin dropped to around 100,000 after the urban combat.

¹¹ The YDG-H subsequently renamed itself the YPS (Civil Protection Units).

¹² A total of 82 security force members were killed in clashes in the town between August 2015 and June 2016; 73 were recorded by Crisis Group during the curfew imposed from 14 March 2016 to 25 July 2016. In that period, Crisis Group confirmed 85 militant casualties in Nusaybin (66 male); nineteen were HPG (People's Defence Forces), the main armed wing; and 66 YPS, the PKK's urban youth wing. Crisis Group categorised six deaths as "youths of unknown affiliation" and confirmed 24 civilian deaths in clashes. See www.crisisgroup.be/interactives/turkey.

¹³ "Nusaybin'de 6 bin 182 adet ağır hasarlı ve yıkık bina var" ["There are 6,182 heavily damaged and destroyed buildings in Nusaybin"], İlke News Agency, 6 December 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_5oVHOC8ks.

¹⁴ According to TÜİK figures, Nusaybin's population of 113,594 at the end of 2015 dropped to 102,000 by the end of 2016. However, a local reporter estimated the town population was actually around 125,000 before the clashes, including persons not registered there. He estimates the population now at around 80,000 and says official numbers are misleading because many who left did not deregister. Crisis Group interviews, Nusaybin, February 2017.

¹⁵ The biggest operation was carried out after Sur and Cizre operations, which ended on 10 March 2016 and 11 February 2016, respectively. "Behind the barricades of Turkey's hidden war", *The New York Times*, 24 May 2016.

500, a majority of which were barricades erected with cobblestones removed from roads.¹⁶

PKK propaganda in the town stimulated “self-defence” sentiment by playing up allegations that security forces had burned civilians in basements in Cizre.¹⁷ Between 1 October 2015 and 25 July 2016, security forces imposed seven curfews, the last of which was declared on 14 March and lasted 134 days.¹⁸ During this intensive phase of clashes, the curfew was only lifted at brief intervals to allow civilians to escape. A middle-aged man who lost his home explained:

Some armed militants came to our house and asked me to arm myself and resist with them. I didn’t want to join and left my home together with my wife and kids. When we returned after the curfew was lifted in our neighbourhood for a short while, our house had been burnt down completely.¹⁹

This sense of being squeezed between the state and the PKK was particularly felt by women. Some mothers said they had begged their sons to leave the region, do seasonal work or join relatives in other provinces so they would not be taken by PKK militants. Women said they were tormented by guilt for having left fighting sons and daughters behind in Nusaybin. “I should have died with my three sons”, a mother said, in tears. Others related stories of grandmothers who during the curfews and clashes continued to knit socks “to send to their boys in the mountains”. Some fretted their teenagers had been indoctrinated or forcibly recruited by the PKK and said they had nowhere to turn for help.²⁰

While many Nusaybin residents felt caught between powerful forces, some were motivated and emboldened to support the PKK youths. Others were pressured to take part in active fighting and give logistical help. Yet others left town once a curfew was announced, because they knew the security forces would interpret their presence as support for the PKK, so they might become targets. Curfews continued to be imposed in rural areas of Nusaybin throughout late winter/early spring.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Nusaybin, February 2017. After the end of operations in Nusaybin, the Mardin governorate said 515 barricades and 53 trenches were removed from neighbourhoods. www.mardin.gov.tr/14072016-basin-duyurusu.

¹⁷ A local reporter living in one of the most affected neighbourhoods explained: “There were all these stories about civilians being burnt in basements in Cizre. All these stories were making people in Nusaybin anxious. When the military did not intervene in the town for 45-50 days, they thought the strategy of not letting them [state security forces] in could be successful”. Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

¹⁸ Curfews are imposed by appointed provincial governors for the conduct of security operations. The state says the aim is to protect civilians from the clashes. On the first day of the 14 March 2016 curfew, the military launched “Operation Atmaca-7” to reestablish control in Nusaybin. Fırat and Abdulkadir Paşa districts of the town experienced the most violent clashes. Operations were declared over on 3 June. “Nusaybin’de operasyonlar bitti” [“Operations completed in Nusaybin”], *Habertürk*, 3 June 2016.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Nusaybin, February 2017. 22 per cent of the militants who died in Nusaybin were female, according to Crisis Group’s open-source casualty tally. According to “Behind the barricades of Turkey’s hidden war”, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2016, roughly half the militants in Nusaybin were female. Crisis Group’s casualty tally found the overall percentage of female fighters among the total killed in Turkey to be 25 to 30 per cent.

B. *Who Is at Fault? Conflict Narratives*

While the conflict essentially is being fought between the PKK and the state, its binary nature is blurred by the conviction of government representatives that Gülenist (FETÖ) infiltration and deception also is involved. According to the official discourse, FETÖ-linked cadres have nestled in the state for years, pursuing their own agenda, for instance allowing the PKK to build itself up militarily in some south-east districts during the peace process. Hard-line Kurdish factions close to the PKK, on the other hand, allege that state agents infiltrated the insurgency and orchestrated the escalation in order eventually to discredit the legal Kurdish movement and provide grounds for criminalising its representatives. Amid rampant speculation, retrospective re-interpretations of how escalation was prepared and advanced feed into parallel conflict narratives.

Government officials generally acknowledge they tolerated PKK activity during the 2.5-year peace process so as not to disrupt the talks and on the assumption the mobilisation would dissipate voluntarily once a deal was reached.²¹ But, as noted, some also now say FETÖ played a role in the PKK mobilisation, alleging that FETÖ-linked governors, police chiefs and military commanders acted in ways that put the government in a difficult situation, including purposely underreporting the gravity of the security problem in the south-east. Police suspected of FETÖ ties were disproportionately represented in the south-east: in the wake of the December 2013 corruption allegations against the government, which officials equated with a “judicial coup”, the authorities dispatched those with suspected ties to the Gülenist movement to the area – a decision in line with the traditional practice of sending untrustworthy bureaucrats to the east to live in relatively poor conditions. The paradoxical result, according to Ankara-based state officials, was to put “risky” cadres in positions from where they could undermine the political leadership.²²

Some local AKP politicians are convinced that “contacts” between FETÖ-linked police and soldiers stationed in the south-east started in 2011. Osman Doğru, the former AKP district head of Nusaybin, said:

²¹ Crisis Group reported in 2014 that the government was keeping the armed forces from attacking PKK targets, curbing their autonomy so that any action required provincial or district governor approval. Crisis Group video, “Turkey and the PKK: Saving the Peace Process”, 6 November 2014.

²² In 2015, a Turkish security official explained: “The government had been sending police tied to the Gülen network to the south-east since beginning of 2014 ... a traditional location of ‘exile’, or punishment”. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, November 2015. Also see Etyen Mahçupyan quoted in: “Mahçupyan: Hükümet, cemaat polislerini Doğu ve Güneydoğu’ya göndererek risk aldı” [“Mahçupyan: The government took a risk by sending police tied to the *cemaat* (meaning the Gülen network) to the east and south-east”], *Radikal* 24 July 2015. In retrospect, the government attributed PKK-Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) arrests and the Uludere massacre, to name a few, to FETÖ. “Uludere haini FETÖ’cü çıktı” [“Uludere traitor is also a FETÖ member”], *Sabah*, 27 July 2016; “KCK ana davasında FETÖ iddianamesi istendi” [“FETÖ indictment requested in the KCK main case”], *Milliyet*, 27 August 2016. It is hard to establish how many alleged FETÖ-linked police were sent to the south-east, but the rate of dismissals between the July coup attempt and the 16 April referendum was at least 10 per cent higher in the south-east than the country average, suggesting the government believed more FETÖ-linked officers were in that majority-Kurdish region than in the rest of the country. According to Crisis Group’s open-source estimates, at least 20 per cent of police in Diyarbakır and Hakkari were either suspended or arrested on FETÖ charges. Police suspension percentages are around 18–20 per cent in Bitlis and Urfa, compared to a countrywide average of around 10 per cent.

FETÖ-linked law enforcement personnel turned a blind eye to the entrenchment of the PKK in the town. They did not inform their superiors [in Ankara]. The governor would even inform the PKK of the whistle-blowers [within the PKK, who gave information to the police and the military] so that the PKK could punish them. The police allowed the PKK to threaten people to vote for the HDP in the 7 June elections. It is no coincidence that the former governor, various commanders/generals, police chiefs and chiefs of intelligence units were later arrested for being linked to FETÖ.²³

After the failed coup, such convictions spread more widely in Ankara. Of the four Mardin governors from 2011 to 2016, two have been arrested, and one suspended on FETÖ-related charges.²⁴ The fourth, Ömer Faruk Koçak, who served between February 2015 and May 2016, is now governor of the western Aydın province and vocal in asserting a FETÖ role in the failure to prevent PKK mobilisation in Nusaybin.

Koçak told the press a month after the coup attempt that FETÖ-linked military commanders had caused the district's high death toll. Three of those in charge of Nusaybin operations were arrested.²⁵ He said he warned these generals that the PKK had dug tunnels in the neighbourhoods to move fighters and weapons, but they did not act, allegedly because they wanted to produce chaos, including by not responding to his requests for military help when clashes became too intense for the police, leading to a six-month delay in producing a sufficient security response. He also said they tried to get him to authorise attacks on civilian areas and house demolitions and intentionally drove up casualties by sending troops to streets where they would be killed.²⁶

In contrast, Kurdish movement representatives vehemently deny FETÖ responsibility for the conflict getting out of hand. Those within or close to the HDP do not deny the existence of a Gülen network but say it was always nationalistic and thus had done the most harm to their movement, so collaboration was out of the question. "Even if Gülen ... affiliates were adversarial toward the AKP or used their

²³ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

²⁴ The first two were arrested immediately after the coup attempt, charged with FETÖ links. Their names and pictures have been removed from the governorate website. Former Mardin governors Turhan Ayvaz (2011-2013) and Ahmet Cengiz (May 2013-May 2014) were suspended three days after the failed coup and arrested the next month on suspicion of FETÖ links. Mustafa Taşkesen, another governor (June 2014-February 2015) was suspended in September but not arrested. "Eski Mardin Valisi Turhan Ayvaz gözaltında" [Former Mardin governor Turhan Ayvaz detained], *Sabah*, 15 July 2016; "FETÖ'nün darbe girişimi operasyonu: 60 gözaltı" ["Operation against FETÖ coup attempt: 60 detained"], TRT News, 25 July 2016; "Serbest Bırakılan Valiler Hakkında Yakalama Kararı" ["Arrest warrant issued for released governors"], *Milliyet*, 11 August 2016.

²⁵ "Dönemin Mardin Valisi Faruk Koçak: FETÖ'cü komutanlar sivilleri hedef alacak talimat imzalamamı istedi" ["Then Mardin Governor Faruk Koçak: Pro-FETÖ commanders wanted me to sign an order that would allow for the targeting of civilians"], T24, 19 August 2016. Second Army Commander General Adem Huduti, Seventh Corps Commander Lt. General İbrahim Yılmaz and Brigade Commander Salih Kırhan have been arrested for FETÖ links. "Nusaybin'de PKK'ya rütbeli yataklık" ["Military harbouring PKK in Nusaybin"], *Akşam*, 19 August 2016.

²⁶ "Dönemin Mardin Valisi ...", T24, op. cit. Similar claims have been made by police in the region. A security force member in Hakkari province said, "before the coup attempt we were receiving coordinates by our superiors to conduct operations around Yüksekova [against the PKK]. We would prepare and drive ... to the designated area finding no sign of terrorist activity We felt there was something wrong, but it was very hard to understand what it was until the coup made everything clear". Crisis Group researchers' conversation in different professional capacity.

media outlets for negative AKP coverage in the run up to the June elections, this cannot be construed as collaboration per se with the Kurdish movement”, one argued.²⁷ Some critics of the AKP from traditional nationalist circles, such as those within or close to the MHP and the military, also point out that – far from the government being kept uninformed by alleged Gülenists nestled in the state apparatus – much information was being sent to the AKP and state institutions about PKK activity, and the state was aware of PKK mobilisation during the peace process.²⁸

A very different narrative of infiltration is propagated among the Kurdish movement by critics who argue that the state orchestrated the escalation in the south-east. They say the state started to plot from the time the AKP lost its parliamentary majority in the June elections to create grounds for dealing severe blows to districts considered PKK hotbeds and eliminate the political threat the HDP posed to AKP majority rule. Ankara allegedly was determined to nip Kurdish aspirations in the bud because of its concern over the rise to prominence of the YPG/PYD in Syria and in light of the AKP decision to seek nationalist votes for its project of establishing an executive presidential system.²⁹ Under this view, the government allowed PKK-linked militants to mobilise for an urban fight so as to have an excuse to crack down on them. “Why else would the state watch for 45 days as trenches and barricades were being built by the neighbourhood youth in Nusaybin”, a DBP member asked, “and allow the people to think that PKK was going to win this battle?”³⁰

Kurdish movement representatives say the state calculated that holding off as the PKK mobilised would embolden the insurgents to pursue self-rule initiatives that could then justify a crackdown; criminalisation of HDP politicians; and destruction of neighbourhoods that would subsequently enable a security-oriented reconstruction – wide streets, large police stations – that would make it impossible for the PKK to prevent future state access to districts.

Conflict narratives involving infiltration and betrayal abound in Nusaybin, where a sense that “agents” are everywhere is prevalent. This is compounded by official pressure to express only the government narrative in public; alternative views are seen as unpatriotic or charged as criminal acts “supporting terrorist interests” or other offences against state authorities. In the absence of a free and open debate and with critical voices curtailed, it may take years to learn the real reasons for state and PKK strategies. Until then, speculation/conspiracy theories will compound the feelings of many that they are victims of games by big players that destroyed their livelihoods.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, HDP representative, Mardin, February 2017.

²⁸ Nationalists harshly criticised the policy. “Paralel devlet PKK/KCK Güneydoğu’ya el koydu!” [“Parallel state PKK/KCK seize the south east”], *Yeniçağ*, 12 January 2014.

²⁹ Desire to curb the HDP allegedly created a shared agenda among the nationalist state establishment and the president. Crisis Group interview, PKK sympathiser, Mardin, February 2017.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

III. Crackdown on the Kurdish Movement

Ankara has systematically sought to silence, discredit and marginalise the HDP and its DBP sister party, particularly after the June 2015 parliamentary election in which the HDP received 13 per cent of the national vote and the AKP lost its absolute majority. Most unprecedented has been removal of elected DBP mayors and the transfer of their responsibilities to governors or district governors already in office under a September 2016 amendment of the law on municipalities that allows trustees to be appointed to substitute for elected mayors or municipal council members “who have engaged in or supported terrorism”.³¹

The removal of Kurdish movement representatives was followed by widespread purges of municipal staff on charges of PKK affiliation after the declaration of emergency rule in July 2016.³² So far, 136 DBP co-mayors have been removed, 84 of whom have been arrested, while the interior ministry has appointed 83 trustees to run relevant municipalities.³³ The government justified the municipal upheavals as necessary to establish public order and security as well as provide better service. But the removal of elected figures and staff with local familiarity has had concrete negative impacts, particularly on use of the Kurdish language and access to services related to women’s needs.

Nationally, HDP parliamentarians and, locally, HDP branch officers have been victims of a crackdown, coinciding with the 16 April referendum campaign. The state also has sought to empower alternative Kurdish actors in an effort to drive a wedge between Kurdish movement representatives and their supporters. That there have not been large street protests against the crackdown has led to state/AKP assumptions that support for the movement is diminishing, but Crisis Group field research suggests that a critical mass in the region disapproves of the current state policies and continues to back the Kurdish movement.

A. Dismissals from Municipalities and Relative Public Silence

In the 2014 local elections, the DBP won at the provincial level. Ahmet Türk, one of the Kurdish movement’s most moderate and inclusive figures, became mayor of

³¹ “[A]n amendment has been invoked with respect to the Law on Municipalities, providing new governing principles to make assignments in substitution for the mayors and members of the Municipal Council who have been actively engaged in acts of terrorism and openly providing support to terrorism. In this respect, 28 mayors are being investigated and prosecuted on account of the charges for providing assistance and support to terrorist organisations, such as PKK-KCK and FETÖ, have been dismissed and relieved of their duties. Among those dismissed were 2 Provincial Mayors, 24 District Mayors and 2 County Mayors. Twelve of them are still under arrest”. Press briefing, interior ministry, 11 September 2016.

³² According to an HDP information notice dated 17 April 2017, the number of detained HDP executives, members and supporters since July 2015 is 10,639, with 2,983 arrested, including deputies, district chairs and members. Since the coup attempt in July 2016, 6,380 have been detained and 1,570 arrested. HDP information notice sent privately to Crisis Group by the party’s press office.

³³ Arrests of DBP mayors began on 5 August 2015 with Lice (Diyarbakır province) co-mayor Harun Erkuş. Between 31 August 2015 and 13 August 2016, eight DBP co-mayors from Mardin – including Nusaybin, Kızıltepe, Derik, Mazıdağı, Dargeçit and Savur district municipalities – were suspended from their duties for “aid and support to the PKK/KCK”. Five of them were subsequently arrested. HDP information notice, 4 April 2017.

Mardin metropolitan municipality. The DBP also won seven of Mardin's nine districts, the AKP two.³⁴ Today, however, the metropolitan municipality and the seven district municipalities are run by state-appointed trustees. Türk was arrested in November 2016, charged with "providing money to PKK and being a member of the PKK". He was released on 3 February 2017. Sara Aydın and Cengiz Kök, co-mayors of Nusaybin, where DBP won 78.8 per cent of the vote, are in prison, charged with supporting the PKK.³⁵

After the appointment of trustees, many municipality employees were suspended for alleged connections to the PKK/Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). A 22 November 2016 executive decree dismissed 413 employees of municipalities across Mardin on the same charges. Nusaybin municipality lost half its personnel that day.³⁶ The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) has underlined concern that "the collective nature of the dismissals and suspensions pose the questions of legality of the grounds for dismissals and the arbitrariness of the precautionary nature of announced dismissals [as well as], the absence of a legal remedy".³⁷ Ahmet Türk told Crisis Group:

Informants supposedly gave information that money was being funnelled to the PKK from my municipality. But we always carried out all our tenders openly and transparently. We have been inspected regularly. There was no irregularity. They also said money was cut from workers' salaries to send to the PKK. Totally groundless. They alleged we had hired people close to the PKK, but every family in the region has a member close to the PKK, so, if they want to try to find links, they always can.... An explosion was carried out by the PKK that involved our municipality disinfection truck. I had reported that this truck had been confiscated hours before. They accused me anyway.³⁸

HDP local officials assert charges are based on unidentified informants because inspections of activities and accounts found no wrongdoing. An ex-employee said she was purged based on informant information, "but we believe it was totally arbitrary. Saying there was a secret informant is just a way to proceed without evidence".³⁹

While the HDP is the Kurdish movement's main legal political actor, the DBP operates at the local administration/municipality level on its behalf and is known to be more hard-line, arguably with closer PKK links. Various moderate HDP figures hold that PKK sympathisers in the DBP municipalities across the region acted with the insurgency by declaring autonomy and igniting "self-defence"-oriented violence, using municipal personnel to aid militants with material and logistical

³⁴ The municipalities run by state-appointed trustees are Nusaybin, Dargeçit, Derik, Mazıdağı, Kızıltepe, Artuklu and Ömerli. Yeşilli and Midyat are run by the AKP.

³⁵ "Ahmet Türk tutuklandı" ["Ahmet Türk was arrested"], *Sabah*, 24 November 2016. Aydın was removed on 31 August for supporting the PKK, arrested on 2 September, released and re-arrested on 26 January 2017, this time with her co-mayor.

³⁶ "Kayyım atanan belediyelerde KHK eliyle işçi kıyımı" ["Presidential decree pressure on workers in trustee-appointed municipalities"], *Evrensel*, 22 November 2016. "KHK ile Kayapınar ve Nusaybin belediyelerinde personelin yarısı gitti" ["With new presidential decree, half of Nusaybin and Kayapınar municipal staff dismissed"], *Hürriyet*, 22 November 2016.

³⁷ "Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey", UN OHCHR, op. cit., p. 23.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, dismissed municipality employee, Mardin, January 2016.

support. This, in turn, they argue, gave the state the excuse to remove elected representatives.⁴⁰

The many staff who have not only lost jobs but also been dismissed from professions cannot find other work, and so have trouble sustaining themselves and sending their children to school.⁴¹ As one explained, the process of appealing dismissal has been in flux, necessitating multiple renewed applications, most recently with the announcement of a central commission in January that is not yet operational.⁴² Given how slow judicial processes are – particularly after the post-coup purges of prosecutors and judges and the unwillingness of lawyers to take up terrorism-charge cases – there is little confidence in legal remedies. And court cases, of course, require money. Locals sympathetic to the HDP view all this as “punishment” geared to them. A dismissed municipal employee said:

I think this is all an effort to create obstacles, stall processes, gain time, so that we cannot apply to the ECHR [European Court of Human Rights] for a long time. It is also an effort to frustrate and create fatigue among us. In this region we already de facto lived under emergency rule, now it is the emergency rule of the emergency rule.⁴³

A local functionary of HDP’s Mardin branch described the crackdown’s consequences:

Most who work for our party are in prison. The number of police per capita here has skyrocketed. Those of us not in prison are subject to intimidation and harassment. They disperse our party meetings saying they are illegal and search our party office. They use emergency rule to disperse any gathering. We cannot express ourselves Security forces collected 16,000 of our 2017 calendars because they had the picture of Demirtaş [the imprisoned HDP co-chair] on the

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, HDP, DBP representatives, Nusaybin, Mardin, February 2017. “In 2014 the state was preparing for the war to resume. ... They infiltrated the PKK. When the children of PKK martyrs went to university in the west, the state recruited some of them. The children sold themselves for their own benefit. Then the state got them to carry out activities in the region that could be attributed to the PKK. Additionally [some people in the state] leaked information to PKK members on the location of the cars they were to steal. A truck was stolen, bombs were loaded on it, and it was blown up. Then these incidents were used as an excuse to appoint trustees to elected municipalities”. Crisis Group interview, ex-Mardin metropolitan municipality employee, Mardin, February 2017.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, dismissed municipality employee, Mardin, January 2016.

⁴² “Our union helped us apply to the constitutional court. Then, on 13 December 2016, it was announced that committees would be established in the provincial governorate where public servants who thought they had been unfairly dismissed would apply. This local committee was established. As a result, the whole application process had to start from scratch; new petitions had to be submitted. Our cases were heard again by new officials”. Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017. In January 2017, the government announced it would establish an appeals commission to enable challenges to decisions made by emergency decrees, such as dismissals from profession. This was widely viewed as a response to the Council of Europe Venice Commission’s opinion on emergency decree laws, which called for stronger human rights protections. “Appeals commission established for state of emergency actions”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 23 January 2017. But despite its stipulation in the decree, the commission has not yet been established. The justice minister announced it would happen soon. “Bakan Bozdağ: OHAL komisyonu bu hafta kurulabilir” [“Minister Bozdağ: The state of emergency commission may be established this week”], *Akşam*, 22 March 2017.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

cover. Why this level of crackdown? The aim is to get people to give up, ... to shut them up, to marginalise, criminalise them. They want ... the connection between our HQ and the field to be severed. This is why they are arresting our party's employees. We are the only force against dictatorship, and they want us to give up ... for the sake of the president's power consolidation.⁴⁴

Mardin HDP parliamentarian Mithat Sancar confirmed grassroots contacts have become very difficult because the mayors, HDP district branch representatives and NGO activists close to the party have been arrested. They were the ones who ordinarily organised constituency gatherings and HDP legislators' visits from Ankara.⁴⁵

That said, while HDP and DBP activities have been seriously curtailed, there are conflicting views about the effect on constituency loyalty. The dismissed employees say they continue to do party work in their free time – which they now have more of – and that public support for Kurdish movement representatives has if anything increased. In contrast, AKP representatives and state authorities say they are gradually winning away HDP and DBP supporters who are angry at their elected representatives for complicity with or outright support for the PKK. This, they say, is why there was no serious protest in Mardin or elsewhere in the region when Kurdish movement representatives were removed from office. However, a closer look reveals that the restrictive environment is an important reason for the silence; indeed, among some elements, being marginalised has firmed up support for the movement.

In light of the limited space for expression of dissent and the crackdown that has imprisoned figures who might mobilise such dissent, there is no straightforward way to gauge public sentiment. HDP supporters say the main reasons for silence are fear of persecution and lack of conviction that protest can bring positive change. Where locals organised protest or issued statements, some faced dismissal, detention or closure of their organisations, and that now apparently deters others from taking to the streets.⁴⁶ The heavy security presence is also a deterrent. The municipality building's high walls and barbed wire and the tanks that surround it to guard against a PKK attack are reminders that calm may be skin-deep. A local described a feeling that the municipality is run by "invaders": "They erect so many Turkish flags that it is as if they didn't think this was part of Turkey before, and now they have taken it".⁴⁷

Some disillusionment at the apparent futility of HDP political efforts also has contributed to contradictory leanings among locals essentially aligned with the Kurdish movement. Some, resenting the PKK for urban warfare, are fatigued by

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mithat Sancar, HDP Mardin parliamentarian, Ankara, February 2017.

⁴⁶ "Eğitim-Sen üyesi 1923 öğretmene 10 Ekim ve 29 Aralık cezası" ["1923 Eğitim-Sen member teachers punished for protesting in 10 October and 29 December rallies"], *Birgün*, 1 March 2017; "Diyarbakır'daki protestoya müdahale: 26 gözaltı" ["Police intervene in Diyarbakır protest: 26 detained"], T24, 26 October 2016; "Nusaybin'de müdahale: 90 gözaltı" ["Police intervene in Nusaybin: 90 detained"], CNN Türk, 2 February 2016; "Kayyım atamasını protesto edenlere polis müdahalesi ... Gözaltılar var" ["Police intervene against those protesting trustee appointments ... there are detentions"], *Cumhuriyet*, 11 September 2016.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, local business owner, Mardin, February 2017. "Fear and survival concerns – economic and personal safety – are the reasons people are not on the streets". Crisis Group interview, Mithat Sancar, HDP Mardin parliamentarian, Ankara, February 2017.

conflict and destruction and would prefer the state to provide security and address economic needs over continued conflict.⁴⁸ They note that the region's people have had better conditions in recent years with urbanisation, increased access to health facilities and education, improvements in state and municipal services and, while it lasted, the peace process. But for more ideologically driven, reactive youths, the escalation of fighting and removal of elected representatives underscore the need for an armed option and fuel motivation to join the PKK.⁴⁹ An HDP Mardin branch representative explained: "Our constituency is telling us, 'you are being snubbed; the will [of those] you represent is being trampled on; why don't you just give up legal politics'?"⁵⁰

While government efforts to marginalise the HDP seem to be working in the short run to cripple its mobilisation and silence it in public, it also sets in motion a dynamic that in the long run is likely to produce unintended consequences. The crackdown ignites a reaction among the most dedicated in the Kurdish movement: with political channels closed, those who believe armed means are legitimate feel empowered, playing into the PKK's hands. Designating non-violent Kurdish movement supporters as national security threats or terrorists or defining the "enemy" too broadly not only violates rights, but also hinders efforts against the PKK. Closing non-violent channels and decreasing confidence the state can distinguish real threats from political criticism significantly limit options for ultimately settling the conflict.

Measuring Kurdish opinion by the April referendum is tricky. Though the margin was narrow, Ankara has interpreted the support of a presidential system as approval by Turkish nationalists and some segments of the Kurdish electorate for its hard-line approach to the Kurdish movement. That the "yes" vote from Kurdish-majority provinces was 10 per cent higher than the AKP's vote in the November 2015 elections feeds into the claim that more Kurds now support that policy. There are methodological pitfalls in comparing two elections with distinct dynamics, however.⁵¹ Voter turnout in the referendum was also lower in these provinces than it was in the parliamentary election.⁵² Focusing on the higher than anticipated "yes" totals in some provinces downplays the considerable majority that voted "no" despite much pressure. In the sensitive environment in which allegations of irregularities are being voiced, Ankara should abstain from interpretations and discourse

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ahmet Türk, Mardin, February 2017.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Mithat Sancar, HDP Mardin parliamentarian, Ankara, February 2017. The view that PKK recruitment benefits from the sense that political expression or dissent is futile was also supported by other Crisis Group interviews in Mardin.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

⁵¹ If, rather than looking only at the 2015 parliamentary elections, a broader timeframe is taken to assess voting patterns in the region, the "yes" vote does not stand out as significant progress for the government. The referendum "yes" vote is similar to the support the AKP received in the region in the March 2014 local elections.

⁵² The lower turnout in the region also seems to have contributed to the appearance of increased support for the AKP's agenda via the "yes" vote. In Hakkari province, which voted 67.6 "no", 32.4 "yes", for instance, turnout dropped from 89 per cent in the November 2015 elections to 80 per cent. That may have resulted from boycott decisions and/or residents displaced by the conflict being unable to vote.

that increase the sense of alienation among “no” voters. It is also important to show that claims of state pressure and voting violations are investigated transparently.⁵³

Some Kurds do believe that if anyone can solve the Kurdish issue, it is likely to be the further empowered President Erdoğan. These Kurds expect him to return to a constructive agenda. A larger number, however, appear to have no confidence in an end to escalation as long as he is in power and expect the PKK to resume higher levels of attacks.

B. *Municipal Service vs. Representation – Trust vs. Trustees*

While elimination of political representation causes significant grievance among local residents who voted for the DBP, state appointees are realising some expedited infrastructure projects. In both the Mardin metropolitan and Nusaybin district municipalities, the authorities are trying to show that living conditions will improve without the DBP. They are aided by the fact that trustee-run municipalities can work more closely with central state institutions, allowing for more funding and more efficient decision-making. However, they typically are not trusted by the people they are charged with serving, and they are less accessible due to heavy security and language barriers (particularly the upper echelons, most of whom know no Kurdish). Also, DBP municipality services geared to the needs of women have significantly weakened.

Nusaybin’s district governor, Ergün Baysal, now running the town’s municipality as trustee, said that compared to the DBP’s time, government works much better:

With the same budget, we can do much more. They financed 100 people, for example, for cleaning, but only half would really be doing that job. We have twinned Nusaybin and Kocaeli metropolitan municipality. Kocaeli has partnered to build four new parks in Nusaybin, for example. They transfer know-how to the staff here. They share equipment and personnel when needed. We have many new projects, developing sports facilities, a condolence house, a mosque and monastery, a walking track, improved lightening and infrastructure for sewage, water and roads. We have fewer personnel, but we hire based on merit, unlike the HDP that chooses by allegiance. We can better coordinate with central state institutions, increasing productivity.⁵⁴

It may be too early to see all the results, given the tumultuous first six months, he added, but the difference will be apparent in the next six, when the new projects are actualised. “Locals who judge us on the basis of service will see we deliver more than those they elected did”.⁵⁵ This may be so. Crisis Group observed in January

⁵³ The Republican People’s Party (CHP), HDP and MHP dissenters alleged vote tampering with around 37 per cent of the ballots. Their objection was mainly triggered by the High Election Board’s last-minute decision to accept ballots that had not been officially stamped. Also criticising this decision, the International Referendum Observation Mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in its preliminary findings said the referendum “fell short of meeting international standards”. On 17 April, the Turkish foreign ministry called the OSCE’s findings “biased” and “unacceptable”. <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/311721?download=true>; “Turkish foreign ministry slams observer report”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 April 2017.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, district Governor Ergün Baysal, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

2016 in Diyarbakır that lack of cooperation between state institutions and DBP municipalities tended to have an important effect on service delivery. The state knows it cannot win over ideological, dedicated Kurdish movement supporters by performance, but it is trying to appeal to citizens who may have voted for the HDP but can become more favourable toward the Ankara political leadership if living conditions improve. While entering the municipality building is cumbersome for locals because of beefed-up security, it is easily justified: “The threat is real. Where security is lax, the PKK attacks!”⁵⁶

Try as the appointed trustees might, however, some elements of municipal service are inevitably weaker. One reason is that the staff turnover means loss of institutional memory; the new employees often also do not know the local context, feel affinity for the people or places they serve, or see their future as intertwined with the district’s.⁵⁷ Locals lament that they are not comfortable enough to come in and complain when they are displeased with services, as they did when their elected representatives were in office. The reluctance to visit the municipality is particularly pronounced among women. That services are not available in Kurdish is an additional obstacle to accessibility.

Because the HDP and DBP implemented a gender quota, proactively recruited many women as staff in the municipalities they ran and carried out activities aimed at maternal and reproductive health care, domestic violence and/or access to credit facilities, their female constituencies have been affected disproportionately by the municipal staff changes. Overall, the networks set up by previous cadres and their social policies have mostly stopped functioning.

All 96 female HDP and DBP co-mayors in the region have been removed from office. Arrest warrants were issued for 35, mostly for aiding and abetting the PKK or PKK membership; 32 of 84 co-mayors in prison are women.⁵⁸ In many municipalities, female employees have been dismissed or relegated to powerless positions. In most districts where trustees have been appointed, the women’s centres have been closed or their activities suspended.⁵⁹ This is also the case in Nusaybin, where the female co-mayor, Sara Aydın, was sentenced in March 2016 to five years in prison for “membership in an armed group” and “committing crimes in the name of such a group”, and another year and three months for “inciting hatred in the public”. She remains in prison.⁶⁰

A former Mardin metropolitan municipality female employee recounted: “They appointed a man as the head of the women’s centre in the metropolitan municipality. They reduced the number of women working at the municipality by 80 per cent”.⁶¹ She worries that the lack of female staff may prevent women from making formal

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Turkish security bureaucrat, Ankara, February 2017.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, local journalist and HDP representatives, Mardin, February 2017.

⁵⁸ “Party Information Notice, 04.04.2017” HDP, corroborated in Crisis Group telephone interview, HDP parliament consultant Selahattin Gezer on 4 April 2017.

⁵⁹ “Kayyum, kadınlar ve 8 Mart” [“Trustees, women and the 8th of March”], T24, 8 March 2017. The women’s centres gave legal and psychological support to females who had faced domestic, physical or sexual violence, trained them on rights and did programs to develop skills, such as handicrafts and marketing. They gave women opportunity to engage in public life and served as a safety net/support system. “Kayyumlar kadın kazanımlarını nasıl etkiliyor” [“How trustee appointments are affecting women’s gains”], HDP Report, October 2016.

⁶⁰ “Nusaybin belediye başkanına ‘özyönetim’ cezası: Altı yıl üç ay hapis” [“Self-rule sentence for Nusaybin mayor: six years three months imprisonment”], Diken, 10 March 2016.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

complaints about domestic violence. She also said the centre's name had been changed to "family centre", reflecting the government's conservative, stereotyped approach to gender roles that tends to associate women's issues solely with childbearing and marriage, and to value family integrity and conservative values over women's individual rights and liberties.⁶² Moreover, HDP supporters suspect the women hired by the state appointees of being wives of civil servants or police officials from other provinces, stationed in the region, alien to the local social fabric and with no particular background in municipality affairs.⁶³

In light of the sensitivity attached to bringing domestic problems outside the home and distrust of the state, losing trusted municipality figures can have real consequences as to whether women seek help when faced with domestic violence or need other support. Going to the police is even more feared, because its staff generally lacks gender awareness and is widely seen as an extension of the state counter-terrorism apparatus.⁶⁴

Given the vulnerability of women in Nusaybin, the loss of the safety net provided by having women representatives in the municipalities has come at the worst possible time. The authorities would probably be wise to monitor the risk of rising rates of domestic violence in the post-conflict period and to proactively include trusted local women in all public outreach efforts, whether related to urban planning, creating jobs or psycho-social support.⁶⁵

Ultimately, though the state has sought to provide effective municipal services to constituencies whose representatives it removed from office, superior services are unlikely to make up for any infringement upon people's right to be governed by officials they elect. Many think it would be ideal to hold elections to choose new local representatives untainted in the state's eyes by cooperation with the PKK. But a more realistic course may be that appointees running municipalities and local state institutions carry out more inclusive decision-making and engage the people they serve more deliberately and systematically.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, former municipality employee, Mardin, February 2017.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, local residents, Mardin, February 2017.

⁶⁴ "[W]omen citizens of Kurdish origin ... are reluctant to discuss domestic violence outside their community, but also are fearful that police involvement would further increase the incarceration of Kurdish men, without resolving ... violence and its underlying cultural, social, and economic causes". "Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey", UN OHCHR, op. cit., p. 16.

⁶⁵ At consultations, women spoke of their experiences of escalating post-conflict domestic violence and explained that a major contributing factor was weak or absent rule of law institutions. "The 2015 review of UN peace-building architecture highlighted the importance of reconciliation, and addressing the long-term trauma of conflict, to curb the social propensity toward violence, which left unaddressed often manifests through rising rates of domestic violence in the peace-building period". [www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20(1).pdf).

C. Can an Alternative to the Kurdish Movement Gain Traction?

Ankara often has tried to nurture Kurdish actors without even indirect PKK ties to create an alternative for Kurds who want their identity represented politically.⁶⁶ According to local sources and Ankara officials, this also is an element of the strategy to marginalise the HDP. There are signs in the region that point to such an undertaking. The Turkish Kurdistan Democratic Party (T-KDP), an operationally independent branch of President Masoud Barzani's party in northern Iraq, was reestablished after 49 years in 2014. Other legal but small Kurdish political parties (such as the PAK, PSK, Hak-Par, PAKURD, Azadi movement and Hûda-Par), some of which, on paper, appear to voice more radical demands than the PKK or the HDP, have been invited to hold informal workshops with significant clan representatives and religious leaders.⁶⁷ Some local stakeholders in this initiative consider that influential but conservative HDP representatives with whom the government thinks it can work might also eventually consider engaging on such a platform. A leading clan member and ex-village guard who has joined related discussions said:

Our aim is to create a new movement that will not have any armed force behind it, but will be a Kurdish alternative for the people in the region. Around 80 per cent of Kurdish voters vote for the HDP because there is no other *Kurdish* alternative [emphasis added]. When there is competition and they [Kurds] see that there is an unarmed alternative, they will support it. ... Barzani is an important figure for the people in the region. He can mobilise them to support this alternative party.⁶⁸

State representatives confirm that “creating other actors so the HDP and PKK seem less like the only representatives of Kurdish identity” is being considered.⁶⁹ This, officials say, is viewed as a way to break the monopoly of the “PKK-friendly” HDP.⁷⁰ However, such an initiative with no real social base is not likely to get much traction under current circumstances and risks engendering both intra-Kurdish friction and more animosity toward Ankara from supporters of the Kurdish movement.

Barzani is well respected among the mostly conservative Kurds of Turkey, but in the short run, given the lack of a real social base, discrepancies among the respective visions of the other parties/factions and the dominance of the HDP, DBP and PKK, a new Kurdish political actor seems unlikely to be a game changer. A loose coalition of diverse Kurdish actors, if formed, likely would attract conservative Kurds who already vote for the AKP; more broadly, any state effort to nurture an alternative movement probably would be viewed sceptically by Kurdish movement supporters and face serious threats from the PKK. Nevertheless, some pundits believe that if President Erdoğan is willing to take up longstanding legitimate Kurdish demands like full mother-tongue education, such an alternative actor eventually might gain traction.

⁶⁶ “Bölgede yeni partiler çıkacak” [“New parties will emerge in the region”], statement by Faruk Çelik, then labour and social security minister, *Hürriyet*, 17 November 2016.

⁶⁷ “Türkiye KDP 49 Yıl Sonra Yeniden Kuruldu” [“KDP in Turkey established again after 49 years”], *Haberler*, 19 January 2014. “Could an alternative Kurdish party succeed in Turkey?”, *Al-Monitor*, 27 June 2016.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish security bureaucrat, Ankara, February 2017.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, February 2017.

That Hûda-Par (Free Cause Party), a small Sunni-Islamist Kurdish political party, openly supported the “yes” campaign in the referendum was widely seen as a reflection of the political leadership’s efforts to nurture relations with alternative Kurdish entities.⁷¹ In his speech in Istanbul on the night of the referendum, Erdoğan specifically thanked Hûda-Par for its support, thus strengthening the belief that further collaboration is envisioned.⁷²

⁷¹ Hûda-Par is known to be the legal continuation of Kurdish Hizbollah, which allegedly was involved in assassinations, kidnappings and executions of PKK and Islamist figures in Turkey’s south-east in the 1980s and 1990s. The fact that the “yes” vote was higher than expected in some majority-Kurdish provinces can be attributed partly to Hûda-Par’s support. Though the party received only around 90,000 votes in the south-east in the 2014 local elections, its considerable presence in rural areas around the region may have played a role in boosting the “yes” vote and advancing an alternative discourse to a Kurdish movement that had been crippled by the state crackdown.

⁷² “Erdoğan’dan Hûdapara Teşekkür” [“Erdoğan thanks Hûda-Par”], 16 April 2017: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O5AdFY97Ho.

IV. Remediating the Human and Material Losses

A. *Rebuilding Homes and Lives*

As noted above, between March and June 2016, some 6,000 buildings that had housed around 30,000 individuals in six of fifteen urban neighbourhoods of Nusaybin were heavily damaged or destroyed.⁷³ Locals believe a majority of the destruction was conducted deliberately by the security forces after operations had ended. Many consider the flattening of these neighbourhoods unnecessary, disproportionate and meant to punish the residents for supporting the Kurdish political movement or the PKK.⁷⁴ Reflecting a wider perception, a resident said:

Only around 5 per cent of the buildings in the six conflict neighbourhoods were damaged as a result of fighting. Despite that, the military came in and demolished all other buildings. This was not necessary. They are trying to punish us.⁷⁵

Officials say most buildings were destroyed during clashes, but others had to be demolished later because they were uninhabitable or because PKK militants had planted bombs inside them and dug tunnels underneath them. “During the clean-up of rubble, our security forces were detonating around 70 explosives a day planted in the houses. This was one of the main reasons why the whole process took so long in Nusaybin”, a Turkish official explained.⁷⁶

Plans for Nusaybin’s reconstruction were announced on 6 December, when Minister of Environment and Urban Planning Mehmet Özhasseki visited and said in a speech in the town, “[N]ow it is time for the government to show its compassionate face; now it is time for construction and recovery”. His ministry announced that day that the Zeynel Abidin neighbourhood, located in the southern part of the town adjacent to the Syrian border, would be turned into a “security corridor” and not fully rebuilt.⁷⁷ Turkish officials said the neighbourhood was designated an archaeological site, and hence was not suitable for housing complexes.⁷⁸ Authorities also confirmed that reconstruction of other neighbourhoods would not replicate the narrow streets and irregular buildings that made it easier for PKK militants to build themselves up militarily and fight security forces.⁷⁹

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, environment and urban planning ministry officials, Ankara, April 2017.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local civilian residents, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Nusaybin district governor, February 2017; environment and urban planning ministry officials, Ankara, April 2017.

⁷⁷ “Bakan Özhasseki Nusaybin’de” [“Minister Özhasseki is in Nusaybin”], environment and urban planning ministry website, www.csb.gov.tr/turkce/?Sayfa=faaliyetdetay&Id=1692. “Bakan Özhasseki Nusaybin’de önemli açıklamalarda bulundu” [“Important announcements by Minister Özhasseki in Nusaybin”]: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogBZdUUy-Pk&feature=youtu.be.

⁷⁸ “I think the main goal here is for the buildings close to the border to be cleaned and moved to the upper side of the street. They want to increase security”. Crisis Group interview, local businessman, Nusaybin, February 2017. Crisis Group interviews, environment and urban planning ministry, Ankara, April 2017.

⁷⁹ A local state official in Mardin elaborated: “We need to make sure the security problem of terrorists coming in and establishing themselves does not occur again. Thus, necessary security measures in rebuilding will be taken. One will be to build large roads in the town and security posts”. Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

Environment and urban planning ministry officials explained that as compensation for their destroyed houses, residents will have three options: new flats in demolished neighbourhoods of Nusaybin; stand-alone houses with barns/gardens reflecting previous life patterns in a “reserve area” around 3km outside Nusaybin; and housing complexes provided by the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) in other provinces, based on availability.⁸⁰ The size of the new flats will correspond to that of the resident’s lost property. Residents who opt for a larger flat will be able to apply for bank loans at reduced interest rates. The option of stand-alone houses – with 135, 160 or 185 sq. metres for living and 500 sq. metres of private gardens suitable for animals – will apply only if a sufficient number of residents choose it.⁸¹ If they prefer moving to Istanbul, Ankara, Hakkari or other cities, valuation will apply, and they may need to pay the difference. Residents with damaged or destroyed belongings will also receive 12 per cent of the value of their demolished houses after they sign a contract agreeing to one of the three options.

Following the initial displacement, the district governorate apparently paid displaced citizens who applied a monthly social aid stipend of some 600 Turkish liras (TL, about \$160). A total of 6.5 million TL (about \$1.8 million) was paid to 13,000 people by the interior ministry through local governorates. The environment and urban planning ministry disburses another form of monthly assistance, a rent subsidy of 745 TL (about \$200), to displaced residents who sign contracts for new housing. These are negotiated at the local Urban Transformation Bureau that opened on 8 February in the centre of Nusaybin. Since then, ministry officials say, 100 to 150 residents have visited daily.⁸²

As of 5 April, 183 residents had signed contracts with the ministry for flats in the central neighbourhoods. So far none has opted for stand-alone houses in the reserve area or asked for housing in another city. Judging from experience in other conflict districts such as Silopi, ministry officials estimate that as the word spreads promises are being kept, sign-ups will quickly increase. Residents with a title deed (around 70 to 80 per cent of those who lost homes) will also be compensated at the value of their land, while residents without one will receive a deed for a new house. It is envisioned that residents with title deeds are also to be compensated for half the value of their previous gardens/barns. Irrespective of whether they signed contracts, a lump sum payment of 5,000 TL (about \$1,400) for belongings began to be distributed in March to residents who lost houses.⁸³

After the clearing of rubble was completed in February and March 2017, the ground-breaking ceremony in Nusaybin was held on 30 March. During the ceremony, the environment and urban planning minister announced that construction of some 4,500 housing units was to be completed toward the end of the year.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, environment and urban planning ministry officials, Ankara, April 2017.

⁸¹ “Bakan Özhasseki Nusaybin projesini açıkladı” [“Minister Özhasseki announced the Nusaybin project”], Nusaybinim.com, 6 December 2016.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Ankara, April 2017.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, environment and urban planning ministry officials, Ankara, April 2017. “Nusaybin’de Eşya Parasının Bir Bölümü Ödenmeye Başlandı” [“Compensation for lost belongings began to be paid in Nusaybin”], Nusaybinim.com, 9 March 2017.

⁸⁴ “Nusaybin’de 4 bin 600 Konutun temeli atıldı” [“Ground broken for 4,600 houses in Nusaybin”], Nusaybinim.com, 30 March 2017. “2017 Yılı Bütçe Sunuşu” [“2017 Budget Presentation”], environment and urban planning ministry, 11 November 2016. In September 2016, Ankara announced a \$40 billion reconstruction and economic development package for the south-

Nevertheless, despite diligent efforts by the central government and their local outposts to compensate residents for material losses, residents complain that the process has dragged along, and that they have been promised a lot without concrete results.⁸⁵ Many still bemoan that reconstruction plans do not meet their demands. Some say they would rather get back their land and receive money to rebuild the houses themselves. Ministry officials say they try to keep affected residents informed by text message and with public meetings, but locals say public communication has been delayed and inconsistent.⁸⁶ Indeed, Nusaybin residents asked Crisis Group staff whether they had information on what was being planned and what steps they would have to take.

Local HDP representatives criticise the government for a security-oriented approach to rebuilding and reconstruction. They say the process is managed from the top down, without much consideration of the residents' demands and needs.⁸⁷ Crisis Group observed, however, that the state is demonstrating a distinct effort to take into consideration people's demands and wishes. More problematic is that reconstruction is largely equated with physical rebuilding of houses dominated by security considerations, neglecting the need for regenerating the town's social fabric and economic life and providing adequate psycho-social support. A middle-aged woman who lost her home in Nusaybin and had to move to an apartment in nearby Mersin province said:

I used to live here with my family and all my social circles. I used to visit my friends who were next door. Now everyone is spread out. It will be impossible to rebuild the life I had here. They think building us houses will remedy our losses, but what about my family, relatives, social life? ... Once we move to apartment complexes, women like me will not be able to leave home. This happened to many women from around here who had to leave their previous housing. They got stuck home because their family would not let them wander around among strangers, and the women had psychological distress and physical ailments from not getting outside the house.⁸⁸

east to run until 2027. It also said it would build some 67,000 houses there. "Hükümetten Doğu ve Güneydoğu'ya 140 milyar liralık yatırım programı ..." ["An investment program by the government for the east and south east worth 140 billion Turkish liras ..."], T24, 4 September 2016. A new water infrastructure system is also to be built in Nusaybin, along with social centres, mosques, schools and health clinics. Local officials said they plan to build a "faith course" (*inanç parkuru*) between the historic Assyrian Mor Yakup Church and the Zeynel Abidin Mosque, two important sites in the town centre designated as historical heritage sites by UNESCO since 2014. Officials say the historical value of the Zeynel Abidin neighbourhood is a reason it will not be rebuilt. Crisis Group interview, Ergün Baysal, district governor, Nusaybin, February 2017 and environment and urban planning ministry officials, Ankara, April 2017.

⁸⁵ A Nusaybin resident explained: "We went to the office and submitted our petitions three times without receiving any information on when the process would be initiated. There are big promises, but nothing is being done right now. They are making us wait under very difficult conditions, and they also stopped paying rent aid". Crisis Group interview, February 2017.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Mardin and Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁸⁷ An HDP official in Mardin explained: "Six neighbourhoods were completely destroyed. This actually is a policy of distancing a people from their culture [and] lifestyle. The whole reconstruction process is managed in a very top-down fashion. They are not really providing residents with sufficient options, telling them they would be given places in apartments in those six neighbourhoods or in houses in another area". Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

Other women expressed similar concerns, worried about proximity to health centres or familiar neighbours.⁸⁹ Indeed, being driven from their homes impacts women in unique terms of daily life and psychological health. Some interviewees were months later still recounting the loss of their belongings, memories and social circles.⁹⁰ Women's participation in public life and mobility is drastically curbed when they no longer live among neighbours and vendors whom their family knows well or to whom they are related. There are cultural and economic barriers to socialisation outside their homes and visiting markets or hospitals. Officials in charge of designing the new compounds, however, explained that residents who sign contracts for housing will have the chance to choose flats near their preferred families, and that health centres, grocery shops and the like would all be in close proximity.⁹¹

State initiatives to address post-conflict traumas and deep-seated grievances to enable rebuilding of lives and show improved practices have been far from adequate. The provincial head of the family and social affairs ministry in Mardin said publicly in September 2016 that 34 staff members had given psychological support to 13,000 families in Nusaybin.⁹² Crisis Group interviews with ex-social workers sent there suggest, however, that rather than psychological support, the work was aimed at identifying material needs and residents' personal/family details. An ex-social worker whose duty was in Mersin province and whom the ministry appointed to one of the field teams said he was informed only a day in advance:

We began our work without any prior information or briefing on the situation/conditions there and what the aim of our mission was. They gave us ... meaningless survey questions that had nothing to do with psychological support and explicitly told us to ask about nothing else.⁹³

Another problem was that social workers centrally appointed to conflict regions did not speak Kurdish. One appointed to Şırnak's Cizre said, "we were there for two weeks but were not able to speak to 40 per cent of the people because no one in the team could translate Kurdish. We reported this to our superiors, but no measures were taken We filled in the forms with whatever information we could get".⁹⁴ Some residents did not respond to questions or let the social workers enter their houses. Some perceived questions like "where is your husband?" as an effort to determine if the family's head took part in active fighting or joined the PKK ranks. Adequate psychological support is needed to address the main drivers of the conflict and the multiple layers of grievances.

The state's physical reconstruction plans largely recognise the complexity of people's needs and rights, and authorities try to accommodate preferences in this regard. While officials say it is normal it has taken this much time to begin building new housing, given the infrastructure and technical work entailed, residents who

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Nusaybin, February 2017. On 19 July 2016, two women died in Nusaybin in an explosion while trying to retrieve their belongings in the rubble of their home "Nusaybin'de tuzaklanmış bomba patladı" ["Planted bomb exploded in Nusaybin"], *Habertürk*, 19 July 2016.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, environment and urban planning ministry, Ankara, April 2017.

⁹² "Efetürk: Nusaybin Sosyal Hizmet Binası % 35 oranında bitti" ["Efetürk: 35% of the Nusaybin Social Services Building Completed"], *Nusaybinim.com*, 21 September 2016.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2017.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2017.

are fundamentally suspicious of any state initiative tend to perceive delays as intentional. Implementation and communication challenges trigger concerns about officials' sincerity. The government might consider more effective dissemination of information through local authorities so that residents clearly understand how and when the reconstruction process will proceed and so that groundless speculation, which the PKK is keen to capitalise on, can be avoided.

B. *The Economic Cost*

The conflict's economic cost has profoundly impacted lives in Nusaybin. Small shopowners and tradesmen living on border trade have been hit particularly hard. Around 2,500 of 4,500 small shops/businesses (such as tailors, barbers, welders, servicemen, grocers, and restaurants) were damaged. After the curfew was lifted on 25 July 2016, 1,000 went bankrupt.⁹⁵ Though the state has offered some compensation and the option to apply for interest-free loans of up to 30,000 TL (\$8,300), shopowners complain this amount does not cover losses and say bureaucratic obstacles make access to resources difficult.⁹⁶ A shoe-seller explained:

During the operations, I lost goods/materials at the value of around 120,000 TL [\$33,000]. I presented all invoices of the goods that were in my shop as proof. Despite that, the district governorate offered me compensation of only 3000 TL [\$830]. Of course, I did not accept.⁹⁷

Local shop owners and tradesmen also cite looting, allegedly by security force members, as the main cause of losses. A local business association representative said:

Right after the main operations in Nusaybin began in March and everyone had left the town, around 2,500 shops were completely plundered. These were shops in areas where no active fighting was ongoing and which were under the control of security forces. The people lost all their goods; their lives have been completely shattered.⁹⁸

It might be that compensation for economic losses and restoration of Nusaybin's bazaar is important not only to revive economic activity, but also to show that the state stands by residents. Indeed, as time goes by, belief that the state will take concrete steps appears to be withering.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin business chamber representative, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁹⁶ Banks are a problem. Ankara asked them to lift the condition, but they want clean credit records most small conflict-region businesses lack. This prevents many from accessing loans. Local business owners also said an interest-free 50,000 TL (\$14,000) loan was promised but only smaller ones were provided. Crisis Group interviews, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

⁹⁹ A local business owner said, "shopowners in Cizre and Sur received considerable compensation and support. In Nusaybin we were promised a lot, but that support has not reached us. We are in a much more difficult position compared to other conflict regions. There has been a loss of confidence because authorities ... did not deliver.... The PKK's actions in urban areas, and the [fact that] people turned critical toward it, opened opportunities for the state to ... address peoples' problems. But they have missed that opportunity, and the winds have started blowing from the PKK's side again". Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017.

Nusaybin, on the historical Silk Road, has traditionally been a regional trade centre. Following the drawing of modern Turkey's borders, legal and illegal border trade/smuggling shaped its economy, and in the late 1980s Nusaybin was one of the centres where new electronic devices of all sorts could be found.¹⁰⁰ It was also a transit hub for trade from Europe to the Middle East. "In the '80s Nusaybin was the Dubai of the Middle East", Gani Bilge, president of its Chamber of Merchants and Craftsmen, explained.¹⁰¹

On 8 December 2011, Syria closed the Girmeli border crossing from Nusaybin to Qamishli, telling Turkish officials it was for "repair and maintenance".¹⁰² The closure was politically influenced, however, by Turkey's anti-Assad stance. It came four days after the Syrian regime imposed a 30 per cent tax on Turkish goods and a day after Ankara said it would respond with the same tax on Syrian goods.¹⁰³ The border crossing to Qamishli had been an important trade route for small businesses and tradesmen, with some 1,000 people using it daily.¹⁰⁴ Local shopkeepers brought tea, sugar and agricultural products such as cotton and linen as well as fuel oil and spices from Syria; manufactured goods such as carpets and flour were sold to Syrian buyers.¹⁰⁵

The closure has also hit larger companies operating out of Mardin province hard. Business owners complain they must take long detours to the Öncüpınar border gate in Kilis, 430km from Nusaybin, to send goods across the border, some of which end up in Qamishli city. Turkey's decision to build a wall along the Syrian border in 2013 made border trade nearly impossible, further crippling Nusaybin's main economic activity. Kurdish movement representatives say the wall's aim is to cut off Kurds' social, economic and political relations, while the authorities cite security concerns, including illicit crossings of PKK militants and weapons.¹⁰⁶

Only ten months before the closure, a promising step had been taken to modernise the Nusaybin Border Gate and turn it into a Customs Gate mutually operated by Turkey and Syria. Ground was broken on 26 February 2011.¹⁰⁷ The plan was to open the gate that August, but construction was never finalised.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Mardin and Nusaybin, February 2017.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Nusaybin, February 2017. Nasır Duyan, Mardin Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MARSİAD) president, elaborated: "Before the Gulf War, the Nusaybin economy was very vibrant. You could find new electronic devices even before they were in Istanbul. With the Gulf War in 1990, everything stopped Many big trucks from Europe used to cross through Nusaybin The people working in companies here used to speak five languages Goods were shipped to Iraq and Kuwait and other Middle Eastern countries. We had a serious problem of traffic congestion then". Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

¹⁰² "Syria says pipeline blown up by Syrian rebels", Reuters, 8 December 2011.

¹⁰³ "Turkey: More trade measures imposed against Syria", *The New York Times*, 7 December 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local businessmen, Nusaybin, February 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nasır Duyan, Mardin Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MARSİAD) president, Mardin, February 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Mardin businessmen, February 2017. In response to construction of the wall, Nusaybin's then elected mayor, Ayşe Gökkan, went on a hunger strike, 30 October-7 November. On 5 November, she said, "this wall is a dark stain for the whole world.... built as a product of a 20th-century Hitler mentality This mentality is being resurrected again". "Duvar Kara bir Leke" ["The wall is a disgrace"], *Evrensel*, 5 November 2013. Crisis Group interviews, Ali Aslan, HDP Mardin provincial co-chair; local official, Mardin, February 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Information note, The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), www.tobb.org.tr/Sayfalar/Detay.php?rid=278&lst=MansetListesi.

Since the new cycle of conflict began, exports in Mardin province (with an economy based on agriculture, construction, agro-industries, tourism and logistics) fell from a \$1 billion value in 2014 to around \$860 million in 2015, and \$880 million in 2016. Closures of the Habur gate at the Iraq border, 142km east of Nusaybin, for 22 days between 14 December and 5 January 2017 and of the Mardin Organised Industrial Zone for 43 days for security reasons dealt further blows to the province's export-driven economy. A local businessman said 90 per cent of Mardin's nearly 270 export companies' business was channelled to northern Iraq through the Habur gate: had it been closed one more week, all would have gone bankrupt.¹⁰⁸

Mardin's tourism fell 60-70 per cent in 2016, according to local sources. With a history dating to the eleventh century, Mardin has a rich fabric of cultures, languages and religions.¹⁰⁹ The province attracted up to a million foreign and domestic tourists per year in 2013 and 2014, when the peace process was ongoing, and the south-east was relatively quiet.¹¹⁰ Some prominent hotels had to close after violence increased; shopkeepers also suffered severe tourism losses.¹¹¹

Unemployment, endemic in the south-east, is on the rise, contributing to radicalisation of youth and PKK recruitment. A 2014 study found that the age for militants to join the PKK is between fifteen and 21; prior to joining, 1 per cent had worked in the public sector, and 21 per cent in the private sector, while 78 per cent had been unemployed.¹¹²

Measures that could help generate jobs, improve regional well-being and help citizens to envision a brighter future might include extra support for small businesses. These steps also might help discourage youths from joining the PKK – and might be especially important in towns that saw massive loss of jobs as well as lives and homes.¹¹³

In the short run, many observers say, it would be satisfactory to compensate small businesses in the region for their financial losses. In the long run, to win

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Nasır Duyan, Mardin Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MARSİAD) president, Mardin, February 2017; local businessman, Mardin, February 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local business owners, Mardin, February 2017. To read more on Mardin's historical and cultural value, see www.lonelyplanet.com/turkey/the-black-sea-and-north-eastern-anatolia/mardin.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Nasır Duyan, Mardin Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MARSİAD) president, Mardin, February 2017.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Mardin, February 2017.

¹¹² According to TÜİK figures, Mardin, Batman, Şırnak and Siirt provinces averaged 24.8 per cent unemployment compared to 10.3 per cent nationally. This has not been helped by the volatility the Turkish economy faces. A rigorous academic study showed PKK members' educational level was overwhelmingly (72 per cent) below or equivalent to primary school; high school graduates made up 16 per cent and university graduates or those who dropped out of university 12 per cent. Hakkari, Tunceli, Siirt, Şırnak, Muş, Mardin, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır and Batman provinces provided the most recruits. Süleyman Özeren, Murat Sever, Kamil Yılmaz and Alper Sözer, "Whom Do They Recruit? Profiling and Recruitment in the PKK/KCK", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 4 (2014), pp. 322-347.

¹¹³ A 21-year-old male told the press: "I only have 150 lira [\$40] I can live on that for ten more days. Before the clashes, I worked in a restaurant, but most of the city is rubble, and I have no job". "Youth unemployment poses latest danger to Turkey", *Al-Monitor*, 24 November 2016.

hearts and minds the state would need to invest more in providing and institutionalising services. Holistic reconstruction would have to include comprehensive plans for reactivating economic life and revitalising local business.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ AKP's Mardin provincial head, Mehmet Ali Dündar, said, "we need to build a modern city that provides ample opportunities for growth and development. This is the only long-term solution to the regions' endemic economic problems that create a breeding ground for terror". Crisis Group interview, Mardin, February 2017.

V. Conclusion

Nusaybin residents in the last year have experienced what many felt, at first, was a PKK siege but now liken to occupation by Ankara. After witnessing disproportionate destruction, suspension of rights under emergency rule and removal from office of chosen politicians, the area is reigned by a sense of hopelessness. It may be hoped that Ankara will better understand that giving physical compensation for property does not restore lifestyles and social fabric; efficient municipal services provided by state appointees do not compensate for the loss of elected representatives; and imposing allegiance to the state or conservative religious outlooks does not erode the Kurdish movement and its ideological pull. The perception is strong that what happened in Nusaybin resulted from the state's hostility to their identity; countering it will be difficult.

Alongside the priority it puts on restoring public order and protection from PKK intimidation and violence, Ankara might also consider how to avoid alienating communities. Otherwise there is a risk that the state could play into the PKK's hands and empower those who see violence as legitimate.

Most neutral observers agree there is no military solution to the conflict and that peace talks between Ankara and the PKK are the best way forward. Such talks, most believe, should be accompanied on a separate track by serious efforts to address the demands for democratic rights of Turkey's Kurdish population: full mother-tongue education, decentralisation, a lower electoral threshold, reform of anti-terror laws and an ethnically neutral constitution.

But unfortunately, an early return to Turkey/PKK negotiations, however urgent, is unlikely in the present political circumstances. Both Ankara officials and PKK figures insist the other will compromise only if forced; neither is in the mood to take the first step. Both are looking to regional and global developments to strengthen their position.

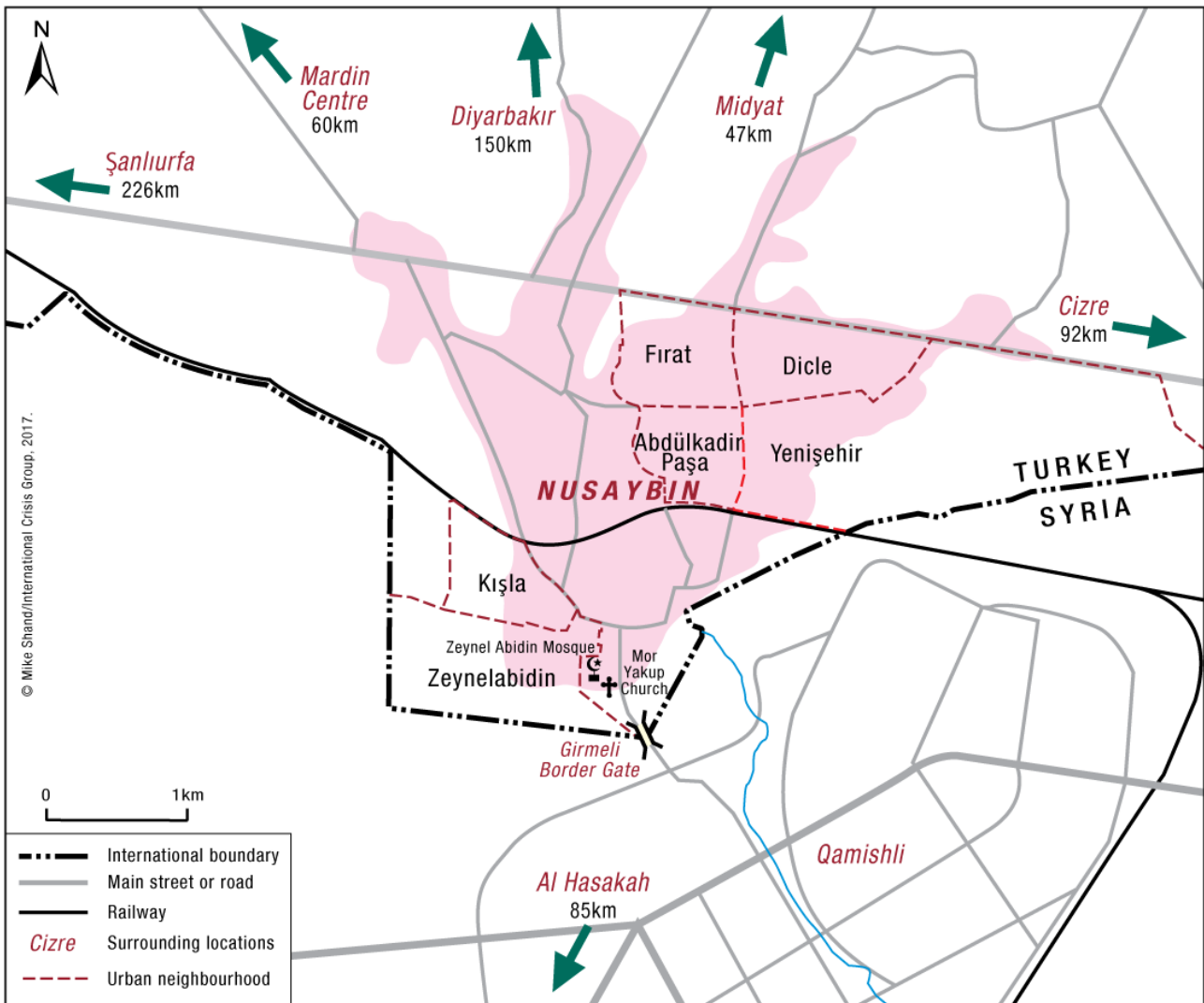
Still, there are steps Ankara can take immediately to alleviate the suffering of ordinary citizens caught between the PKK and the Turkish state and restore to them a sense of justice and hope. An important beginning might be to adopt a discourse that engages rather than marginalises the Kurdish movement's constituency, reopening channels for legitimate political representation by the legal political parties of the Kurdish movement, nationally and locally, and investing in regeneration of social and economic life in the south-east.

May 2017

Appendix A: Map of Turkey



Appendix B: Map of Nusaybin



[illegible]

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Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party): Turkey's ruling party, currently led by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. It received 49.5 per cent of the vote in the November 2015 parliamentary elections.

CHP – Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party): Turkey's main opposition party. It received 25.3 per cent in the November 2015 parliamentary elections.

DBP – Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi (Democratic Regions Party): The main legal political sister party of the HDP that operates only at the local level. In the 2014 local elections, it won in eleven provinces, 68 districts and 23 town municipalities in the majority Kurdish south east.

ECHR – European Court of Human Rights.

EU – The European Union.

FETÖ – Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü (Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation): The designation given by the Turkish authorities to Gülen movement members the state considers responsible for illicit infiltration into state institutions and the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt. The Turkish government seeks the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled Muslim scholar living in the U.S. state of Pennsylvania.

Hak-Par – Partiya Maf û Azadiyan (The Rights and Freedoms Party): A pro-Kurdish political party in Turkey established in 2002. It has a limited social base and advocates federalism.

HDP – Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Peoples' Democratic Party): The main legal party representing the Kurdish national movement in Turkey. It received 10.75 per cent of the total vote in the November 2015 parliamentary elections.

Hüda-Par – Hür Dava Partisi (Free Cause Party): Sunni-Islamist Kurdish political party known to be a continuation of the Kurdish Hizbollah, formally only operational in Turkey's south east. In the 2014 local elections, which it contested only there, it received 89,655 votes – 0.2 per cent of the national vote. It is known to have a strong influence especially on rural residents in the south east.

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: The best known of the jihadist militant opposition groups fighting in Syria and Iraq, it generates strong criticism for its authoritarian tactics, public executions, ideological extremism and vicious sectarianism.

KCK – Koma Ciwakên Kurdistanê (Union of Communities in Kurdistan): Created by the PKK in 2005-2007, it is an umbrella organisation for all PKK affiliates in Kurdish communities in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the diaspora.

MHP – Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party): Turkey's largest nationalist

party. It received 11.9 per cent of the vote in the November 2015 parliamentary elections.

OHCHR – Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

OSCE – Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

PAK – Parti Azadi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Freedom Party): A Kurdish political party in Turkey with a very small social base, established by Mustafa Özçelik in 2014 and sympathetic to Masoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and leader there of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

PAKURD – Partiya Kurdistanî (Kurdish Party): A Kurdish nationalist party in Turkey led by İbrahim Halil Baran that enjoys very limited social support.

PKK – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party): Co-founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, it started an armed insurgency in Turkey in 1984. It is banned as a terrorist and drug-smuggling organisation by Turkey, the EU, the U.S. and a number of other countries.

PSK – Partiya Sosyalist a Kurdistan (Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party): A Kurdish party with a small social support base, legally founded in Turkey in May 2016 and informally operational in the country since the 1970s.

PYD – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party): The Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK/KCK, founded in 2003.

SDF – Quwwat Suriya al-Dimuqratiya (Syrian Democratic Forces): A multi-ethnic coalition dominated by the YPG fighting in Syria and supported militarily by the U.S.

T-KDP – Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey): A Kurdish political party formally established in 2014 in Turkey, affiliated to the northern Iraqi KDP and its leader Barzani. Though through its affinity with Barzani it enjoys some sympathy, its social base is limited compared to that of the Kurdish political movement.

TOKİ – Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı: Housing Development Administration of Turkey.

TÜİK – (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu): Turkish Statistical Institute.

YDG-H – Tevgera Ciwanan Welatparêz Yên Şoreşger (Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement): The youth wing of the PKK, it reorganised itself within the YPS in December 2015.

YPG – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units): The PYD's armed wing in Syria, established in 2012 and deriving from the PKK. It is the dominant armed Kurdish force in Syria.

YPS – Yekîneyên Parastina Sivîl (Civil Protection Units): A PKK-affiliated urban militia group consisting of PKK youth militia and rural PKK militants that fought against Turkish security forces in predominantly Kurdish-speaking urban areas in Turkey's south east predominantly between January and June 2016. It was formed by the PKK in late December 2015 with the stated aim to better organise the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H).