

What Explains Violent Events: Grievance, Opportunity and Signaling

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This paper offers a unified framework for understanding violent events. It argues that grievance, opportunity, and signaling (GOS) are integral components of a successful violent event. Violent events are likely to succeed if (a) there is a group of aggrieved individuals who support the event at several capacities; (b) organizers operate with relative ease in harming the targets; and (c) the event presents a good investment for the future by imposing political conformity on civilians and projecting organizers' power. We test our argument with evidence from the Turkish civil war. We focus on PKK attacks in the countryside against civilian targets and property. We limit analysis to the 1984-1990 period when the PKK mainly committed violence against these targets in rural areas. The data are collected at the village level, the lowest administrative unit in Turkey, and have an extensive coverage, including roughly five thousand units. Our findings show that grievance/greed and opportunity/threat are not necessarily competing explanations. Violent events occur when there is a group of people who become aware of their disadvantaged position and support insurgents who then utilize their comparative advantage vis-à-vis their opponent to succeed. Second, the signaling aspect of violent events shows that civil wars have a strong intra-community dimension. Insurgents turn their attention first and foremost to in-group members, punishing them as an example to co-ethnics to ensure group conformity.

There is renewed interest in the study of collective violence. Scholars have fiercely debated the causes of civil war (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004) and extended their efforts to understand the processes at work in armed conflict (Kalyvas, 2006). In sociology, violence entered the debate through social movement studies. Violence is discussed as a coercive tactic to suppress a movement (Earl, 2003) or, as in ethnic competition theory, as a natural outcome when a dominant ethno-racial group is challenged by others (Olzak, 1992). Both research programs have improved our understanding of civil war onset and dynamics (Wimmer et al., 2009), targets of violence and movement outcomes (Martin et al., 2009; Andrews, 2004) and political legacies of violent organizations (McVeigh et. al, 2014).

The literatures on collective violence however have suffered from three shortcomings. First, the determinants of violent events have received far less attention. More often, violence is discussed to explain other political phenomenon. For instance, the research program on civil war processes primarily focuses on the impact of violence on shifting civilian loyalties to understand dynamics of control and insurgent activity (Kocher et al., 2011). Second, theories of violence developed independently in political science and sociology, prioritizing grievance and opportunity arguments respectively. Accordingly, while most onset accounts emphasize grievances, movement scholarship highlights opportunities for violent events to occur (Cederman et al., 2011; Hagen et al., 2013). Third, current research approaches grievance, opportunity and signaling as competing explanations by relying on aggregate accounts of

violence. In doing so, it fails to treat them as distinct mechanisms, which might facilitate violence under certain conditions but not in others.

This paper offers a united framework for understanding violent events. It suggests that grievance, opportunity, and signaling (GOS) represent distinct mechanisms that shape violent events. Grievances consolidate civilian support; logistical opportunity allows for efficient mobilization of resources; and signaling aims at cultivating and securing future civilian loyalties. Accordingly, violent events are more likely to succeed if (a) there is a group of aggrieved individuals who support the event at several capacities; (b) organizers have operational capabilities in harming the targets; and (c) the event presents an investment for the future by imposing political conformity and projecting organizers' power. While grievance and signaling are best suited to capture the intra-community dimension of violent events, opportunity mechanism, defined here as the efficient mobilization of one's resources, is the single most important military-geography account to explain violent events irrespective of targets and repertoires.

We showcase our framework in the context of a civil war and examine insurgent attacks as violent events. Civilians will be more likely to support insurgents if insurgent agenda addresses structural inequality raised by prior activism. A violent event is also more likely to succeed when insurgents have low logistical costs, which allow them to mobilize resources (manpower, equipment) easily and without incurring major losses. This opportunity mechanism is essential for sustained activity because it increases the efficiency of insurgent operations and ensures the safety of insurgents. Finally, violent events are signaling tools for swaying future civilian loyalties: Insurgents can prevent civilians from developing ties with their opponent by

delivering punishments and expose the weakness of government authority in order to convince fence-sitters to their cause.

A few caveats are in order before we proceed. The GOS framework focuses on the intra-community dimension of violent events, underscoring the role of civilians as active supporters and potential audiences. It is less relevant for explaining violence through opponent interactions and does not suggest that GOS is the only way to generate civilian support, mobilize resources and win civilian loyalties. Our argument on grievance is that structural inequalities provide an important basis from which grievances can emerge (McVeigh, 2006). This does not mean that all grievances are related to structural inequalities or formed prior to conflict. We also acknowledge that opportunities change over the course of war. Finally, signaling is an investment for future although there are conditions under which insurgents might refrain from promoting the event over concerns of legitimacy (Schoon, 2015). Overall, the GOS framework is about explaining the determinants of violent events. It does not address the question of why civil wars occur and works best for understanding violent events in early phases of conflict as GOS dynamics will be shaped by processes inside the conflict over time (Balcells, 2010).

We test our argument with evidence from the Turkish civil war. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been waging a guerrilla war against the Turkish state since 1984. We focus on PKK attacks in the countryside against civilian targets and property. We limit analysis to the 1984-1990 period when the PKK mainly committed violence against these targets in rural areas. The dataset is collected at the village level, the lowest administrative unit in Turkey, and has an extensive coverage, including roughly five thousand units. Information about village characteristics is gathered from a recently declassified government document prepared for internal use that details socio-economic and demographic properties of villages in mid-1980s.

Violent events are collected from a variety of sources including daily newspapers, monthly insurgent periodical, and official government announcements. We also geocoded the location of villages to capture the opportunity dynamic.

The paper intends to make three contributions to the literature. First, it shows that grievance and opportunity play distinct analytical roles in facilitating violent political action. By unpacking targets of violence, the study also finds that intra-community characteristics is less useful for explaining violent events when directed against the opponent. Second, grievance and signaling aspects of violent events show that civil wars have a strong intra-community dimension. Insurgents turn their attention first and foremost to in-group members with the input of others from the same group and punish them to impose group conformity. Signaling also explains why insurgents target populous and key sites of state authority to reach out to wider audiences. Third, we demonstrate that GOS is a form of start-up capital that can provide insurgency with a head-start. Violence is more likely to succeed when insurgents adjust their message to incorporate grievances (frame adjustment), aim at targets within their operational reach (logistical opportunity), and find sites that will provides the greatest coverage (exposure).

THEORY

Civil war scholarship has been most vibrant in studying violence. Scholars of civil war processes use disaggregated data on violent events to explain a number of important phenomena that take place in civil wars. Most prominent among them is civilian victimization. Several studies explore the military consequences of violent events targeting civilians and find that the use of indiscriminate violence impacts combatant's level of control and activity (Condra and

Shapiro, 2012; Lyall, 2009). Others focus on the distribution of violent events as a key variable when measuring the success of reconstruction and development projects. A recent study finds that in areas contested by insurgents, material assistance by a counterinsurgent will not help pacification efforts (Sexton, 2016). Overall, process scholarship provides valuable insights on how violence impacts a variety of processes and changes civilian attitudes with long-term consequences (Balcells, 2012). In doing so, this research program demonstrated the constitutive role of violence during a conflict but paid less attention to explaining violent events.

Another important body of work that examines civil war violence is the onset scholarship. This research program examines the structural causes of civil wars in cross-country analysis. The field is theoretically divided over the major cause of civil wars, emphasizing mostly grievances (Kalyvas, 2001). Grievance framework highlights the political exclusion of key minority groups from decision-making process (Cederman et al., 2011). Their evidence resides at the cross-national level and theoretical frameworks suggest an institutionalist argument on nation-state formation. Overall, there is some consensus that civil war violence takes place in poor and populous countries that are characterized by democracy deficits (Hegre and Sambanis, 2006). These robust findings offer a potential to explain the determinants of violent events. However, as in process scholarship, onset literature has certain limitations. It fails to address the question of how structural inequalities translate into violence, observes violent events in a limited time frame without identifying targets and perpetrators, and operates with macro units of analysis (Buhaug et al., 2011).

In sociology, violence entered the discussion through social movement scholarship. Recognizing the role that opponents play in generating movement outcomes, recent work includes discussions on the impact of a violent organization, Ku Klux Klan, on civil rights

movement and institutional politics (McVeigh et al., 2014). This area of research is complemented by studies on the Klan itself. For instance, Cunningham (2013) offers a mediated competition model and shows that both opportunity and threat dynamics shaped the distribution of Klan chapters in North Carolina. Meanwhile, another group of movement scholars turned their attention to violence that emerges out of movement processes. The main question that drives this research program is to understand radicalization (della Porta, 1995; Bosi et al. 2014). From the perspective of explaining violent events though, the major contribution of social movement scholarship is its insistence on opportunity and threat (Tilly 1978; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996), while most accounts still treat violence as an ‘independent variable’, similar to process accounts in civil war studies.

The other body of work that deals with violent events in sociology is studies on racial violence. Ethnic competition theory suggests that what explains violent events in the United States around the twentieth century is rising competition over resources. As blacks and immigrants challenged the dominant position of whites in labor market and other institutional sites, white majority responded to the challenge by initiating violence (Olzak, 1990; Olzak and Shanahan, 2014). Meanwhile, the literature built around lynching events in this period highlights a number of important findings: While downward economic trends and associational ties facilitate violence, victims were socially marginalized individuals (Beck and Tolnay, 1990; Bailey et al. 2011). Hence, the research program on racial violence emphasized the threat factor in understanding violent backlash and more recently incorporated opportunity dynamic that matters most in target selection.

We benefit from literatures on violent events in both sociology and political science and extend them in a number of ways. First, our argument takes both grievances and opportunities

seriously and discuss them as mechanisms. Second, we agree with the onset literature in civil war studies and scholarship on racial violence that underscore the importance of structural features in explaining violent events. Third, we join a growing number of scholars who employ micro level data and capture substantially meaningful variation among a large number of observations. Finally, we propose that signaling is a fundamental aspect of any violent event. Organizers commit violence to influence the future behavior and loyalties of their target constituencies. The next section brings these elements together and offers a unified framework to explain the determinants of violent events.

The GOS Framework

A successful violent event starts with prior civilian support. Most often, civilians determine who the targets are and/or provide context-specific information. Unfortunately, we know little why civilians support insurgent organizations.¹ In civil war studies, process scholarship suggests that civilians will switch sides when they are mistreated by the opponent. This instrumentalist view, which rests on a rationalist premise of civilian loyalties, is recently challenged by Lyall et al. (2015) who showed that prior social ties matter in how violence is perceived. Meanwhile, onset scholarship underscored the role of grievances in explaining violence. We build on this notion and suggest that grievances ‘feed’ violent events by fostering support for the insurgency. When a form of structural inequality turns into a grievance, it familiarizes civilians with the root cause of their problem by establishing a link between everyday realities and slow-moving structures. This cognitive change requires some form of activism prior to conflict and works to divide the community from within. Hence, civilian

support materializes when insurgents tap into an existing grievance. Our first hypothesis on civilian support reflects this idea.

Hypothesis 1a: A violent event is more likely to take place if structural inequalities in a locality are translated into grievance by prior activism.

Economic grievances in particular can generate popular support for an insurgent cause. Not surprisingly, low GDP per capita stands out as one of the few robust findings on civil war onset. Underdevelopment may facilitate violence through civilian support especially when a group of individuals think that the government treats them unequally by failing to provide resources and services compared to others in society. Public goods provision offers a direct way to observe the mobilizing impact of economic grievances on civilian support to insurgency. As an extension of this argument, Berman and Laitin (2008) claimed that it is the lack of public goods that explains joining to a particular set of insurgent organizations. Hence, unlike a GDP measure, which is the product of multiple forces, government is the primary responsible party for the distribution of public goods and its weak record can turn it into an easy target in the eyes of civilians.

Hypothesis 1b: A violent event is more likely to take place if residents in a locality do not have access to public goods.

Meanwhile, opportunity is critical for a violent event to be successful. Logistical opportunity arises when insurgency easily mobilizes its resources and enjoys operational

capabilities. This can be the result of two distinct processes: a) insurgents might have a built-in organizational infrastructure in close proximity such as rebel bases (Salehyan, 2009) and b) they might have already cultivated civilian ties by organizing a violent event nearby. In this respect, logistical opportunity can be a function of distance and the magnitude of the effect is expected to be inversely correlated with distance. Accordingly, insurgents will have a better chance to mobilize, adjust and protect their resources such as personnel and equipment in locations closer to their resource bases. Nearby units with a previous violent event will also offer an advantage to insurgents: units in close geographical proximity exhibit strong ties among themselves (Cunningham and Philips, 2007). This feature will help insurgents solve their information problems about potential targets and reduce the time necessary for conducting a violent event.

Hypothesis 2a: A violent event is more likely to take place if insurgents can mobilize their resources easily and enjoy high operational capabilities in an area.

Threat dynamic is equally important for understanding how logistical advantage can translate into a successful violent event. Often times conflated with opportunity dynamic in civil war studies, threat is about the relative strength of an opponent. The level of threat that the government poses is critical for an insurgency because it has typically a smaller size compared to its opponent and cannot afford to deplete its ranks in violent events. As such, for long-term survival, safety of insurgents is a top priority in a violent event.² Low level of government threat usually stems from two conditions: the absence of state authority and/or operational difficulties that limit access to the event location. For instance, Fearon and Laitin (2003) argued that bad

roads and high elevations give an advantage to rural insurgents. This is especially true when there is a mismatch in transportation technology (Zhukov, 2012).

Hypothesis 2b: A violent event is likely to take place if the government forces pose a low level of threat for insurgent action.

Finally, political violence (at least in theory) is not an end in itself. Practitioners and revolutionary ideologues consider violence as an instrument to sway civilian loyalties. Violent events represent a form of investment on future civilian loyalties. Target value of a location (Hegre et al., 2009) partly lies in its signaling capacity. Signaling works in two ways. First, insurgency uses violence to punish in-group members in order to fortify ranks and enforce political conformity. It is a measure to prevent civilians from cooperating with the opponent in the future. As Brubaker and Laitin (1998) pointed out sometime ago, civil wars have a strong intra-community dimension. The fact that ethnic conflicts do not refrain from killing co-ethnics invite us to consider alternative mechanisms through which ethnicity and violence can be related (Weidmann, 2009; Wimmer et al., 2009). Our next hypothesis reflects this point.

Hypothesis 3a: A violent event is more likely to take place where in-group members are concentrated.

Second, a violent event turns into a signaling tool lies in its capacity to project insurgent power and expose government's weaknesses. Civilians are more likely to support insurgents if they believe the latter has power and the government no more enjoys full control over means of

violence. This dynamic lowers the costs of engaging in anti-government action and transforms community perceptions over legitimate authority. In this respect, violent events are organized to promote the insurgent cause to the widest audiences possible. To accomplish this task, insurgents search for targets in locations that maximize their chances of spreading the word. Population size and the presence of state authority emerge as ideal conditions to reach out to audiences beyond the violent event location. Our final hypothesis tests this claim.

Hypothesis 3b: A violent event is more likely to take place in strategic sites to reach out to widest audiences beyond the event location.

This section presented several hypotheses about grievance, logistical opportunity and signaling mechanisms that can facilitate a successful violent event by fostering civilian support, resource mobilization and future loyalties. The next section will substantiate our arguments and discuss the GOS framework in the context of Turkish civil war.

The Turkish Case

The Turkish setting is ideal for understanding violent events through a GOS framework for a number of reasons. First, there is a minority group, which is politically excluded and economically marginalized. Second, the existence of an armed group with a long record of guerrilla warfare gives violent events a patterned character. Third, the conflict took place primarily in a ‘difficult territory’, presenting challenges for the government because of undeveloped infrastructure and advantages for insurgents due to cross-border ties. Finally, the

civil war started as an intra-community affair where both victims and perpetrators belonged to the same ethnic group (Emrence and Aydin, 2017).

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) started a guerilla war against the Turkish government in 1984. Being part of the revolutionary left in the 1970s, the PKK criticized the Turkish state for underdeveloping the Kurdish regions and refusing to grant rights to the Kurds. The PKK's foundational text merged the discourse of underdevelopment with ethnic nationalism and promised economic justice and political independence (PKK, 1978). Kurdish-populated regions did rank at the bottom of development hierarchy. A secret report prepared by the State Planning Organization (DPT, 1981) a few years before the onset of the guerrilla campaign shows that out of 86 districts in Turkey's southeast, only nine were ranked in the top half of the development index. Kurds were also politically marginalized as an ethnic group (Tezcür and Gurses, 2017). In Kurdish populated regions, political parties recruited Kurdish powerfults to represent them in elections. Yet, Kurdish politicians and electorate were not allowed to voice ethnic demands and their inclusion to institutional politics did not necessarily mean group recognition.

Kurdish rights and the issue of underdevelopment in Kurdish-populated regions entered the public debate when a leftist party (Turkish Workers Party, TIP) raised the issue in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The popularity of economic justice agenda and discourses of internal colonization strengthened the ideological alliance between the Turkish left and an ethnic political program in the 1970s. While revolutionary groups became interested in Kurdish rights, the main leftist party (Republican People's Party, CHP) put emphasis on underdevelopment (Ecevit, 1968). With strong precedents in Turkish history, the public discourse also underscored the structural inequalities in the 'East', as a way of acknowledging regional inequalities without

naming their ethnic character. Finally, revolutionary groups began to mobilize Kurdish constituencies, building upon ideas and tactics borrowed from the Turkish left.

The PKK was born in the Turkish capital, Ankara as a revolutionary group. Similar to its contemporaries, it promoted armed struggle to build a socialist experience and operated in college settings. As the Turkish government increased its pressure on universities, the PKK shifted its operations to Kurdish-populated regions and engaged in turf wars with several groups in the late 1970s (Kısacık, 2012). When a military coup suppressed the revolutionary left in 1980, the PKK survived political repression by following a trajectory different than others: Its leadership and a small cohort of militants escaped to Syria. With the help of Syrian leadership, the PKK insurgents received military training in Lebanon from Palestinian groups and were allowed to relocate to northern Iraq in order to start a guerrilla struggle against the Turkish government (Marcus, 2007).

The PKK set up several rebel bases in areas close to the Turkish-Iraqi border, which were under Barzani's nominal control. Unlike the flat Turkish-Syrian border, the Turkish-Iraqi border was on a rugged terrain cut by mountain ranges. As the governor of the emergency rule region (OHAL), Hayri Kozakçıoğlu explained in his first interview to reporters in 1987, insurgents were able to enter several miles inside Turkey without having to travel in low elevations because of topographical advantages.³ Several settlements in the region were located in small valleys squeezed between mountain ranges. Another disadvantage on the government side was that it was ill-prepared for guerrilla warfare. In the 1970s, Turkish governments were pre-occupied with the 'communist threat' in big cities and were mostly unfamiliar with guerrilla warfare unlike their predecessors in the late Ottoman period. Three years into armed conflict, the Turkish government had yet to lease Puma helicopters from France to chase the PKK insurgents.⁴

In its early years, the PKK insurgency concentrated its attacks on civilians whom the organization labelled as collaborationists. To some extent, these political murders followed a sociological reading of the region formulated by Abdullah Öcalan in PKK's manifesto in 1978. Öcalan claimed that the Turkish government ruled the Kurdish region in alliance with Kurdish powerfults who controlled economic resources, political opportunities and ideological authority (PKK, 1978). According to this view, collaborators stayed at the top of the Kurdish society because of their ties to the Turkish government. Civilians were accused of cooperating with the government and providing useful services such as providing tips about insurgents. Spectacular attacks were waged on Kurdish villages along with a more subtle pattern of killing individuals based on a similar accusation. These selective killings coupled with an aggressive hostage taking campaign gave the PKK a lifeline in the 1980s when each successful year was followed by major insurgent losses in asymmetric warfare.

As brutal as they might be, the PKK attacks contributed to two long-term outcomes beneficial to insurgency: first, they increasingly deterred and neutralized civilians who were interested in cooperating with the government, and, second, they exposed the vulnerabilities of the Turkish government in protecting its own citizens and helped to spread the word about insurgent power. Together, these dynamics would set the stage for an all-powerful insurgency in the 1990s capable of organizing multiple attacks in a given day across the country on a range of targets (Aydin and Emrence, 2015). Similarly, recruitment reached record high numbers as barriers on collective action were lowered; political wings were established in cities with growing insurgent power in rural areas; and a full-fledged ethnic movement came into being with a broad civilian base (Öcalan, 1992).

Having introduced our GOS framework and the way it informed violent events in the Turkish civil war, the next section will turn to empirical analysis and provide support for our framework.

EMPIRICS

Why are some localities more like to experience violent events than others? Country-level analyses mask important subnational variation in collective violence. We use a new dataset of PKK attacks on civilians and property across 4,994 villages in 86 districts in eleven provinces of southeastern Turkey between 1984 and 1990. Village is the smallest unit in the Turkish administrative hierarchy which allows us to test our GOS framework at a micro level. Our dataset is cross-sectional since the data comes from a declassified government document, which is only available for 1985. 1990 provides a natural end point. In the 1984-1990 period, insurgents disproportionately targeted civilians and property, which were seven times more likely to be attacked compared to military targets. By the 1990s, the PKK switched to other targets due to its expanding military activity after the Gulf War (August 1990-February 1991) and over concerns of international legitimacy.⁵

PKK violence mostly took the form of village raids in this period.⁶ On June 25 of 1986, insurgents came to Geçitboyu, a village close to the Turkish-Iraqi border, and killed all members of a single family. They were accused of providing tips to the government.⁷ Three days later, insurgents targeted the village powerful Nuri Ağa in Haküstün and shot him on site after a public meeting held in the village.⁸ One year later, insurgents ‘visited’ Dibek, Dağıcı and Üçyol villages in Nusaybin the same night and warned villagers from a loud speaker (probably taken from a mosque!) not to cooperate with the Turkish government. This message was especially directed toward members of a small Christian sect, Assyrians, native to the region, who like the Arab

minority, had historically served as state's natural allies against Kurdish majorities in Mardin province.

As above examples briefly illustrate, the PKK insurgents targeted select households to eliminate opponents (and their families) whom they labeled as collaborationists and destroyed their property. Quite often, they also set school buildings on fire. Insurgents came to villages in groups that usually consisted of seven to nine people (manga), most of whom were men. They were lightly armed and used rifles (G-1), hand grenades, and increasingly had access to semi-automatic machine guns and RPGs. Raids however were more than simple acts of violence. Coercion that fell short of hurting civilians was extensively employed to neutralize potential allies of the government such as village headmen, kidnap young males to join the guerrilla army, and more broadly warn villagers about the costs of cooperating with the government.

Our key dependent variable is *Village Raid*. We operationalize village raids as events of insurgent violence that targeted civilians and destroyed property. We count a total number of 425 violent events, excluding another 42 instances in which village names could not be verified. We code a binary dependent variable which takes the value of one if a village receives an insurgent attack and is zero if not. We estimate logistic regression models. There are a number of villages which received multiple attacks in the 1984-1990 period where insurgents returned to target the same village. We account for this possibility with a count regression model in alternative analyses. The general specification of our models can be written as:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(\pi) = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Road Quality} + \beta_2 \text{Electricity} + \beta_3 \text{Support for HP} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Village Name Change} + \beta_5 \text{SubDistrict Center} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{Attack in Neighbor} + \beta_7 \text{COIN Operation} \\ & + \beta_8 \text{Distance to Rebel Bases} + \beta_9 \text{Distance to Urban Center} \\ & + \beta_{10} \text{Elevation} + \beta_{11} \text{Population} + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

Where $\text{logit}(\pi)$ is the logit function of the probability that a village will be raided. The models are estimated with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors clustered by sub-district (bucak), a cluster of villages that are connected through administrative services and geographical proximity (Özçağlar, 2005).

The PKK claimed responsibility and named the individuals that it killed in its monthly publication, Serxwebun. The villages we coded in our analysis as ‘attacked’ were reported by the journal as being ‘punished’ for collaborating with the state. Violent events were also collected from several newspapers in Turkish (Hürriyet and Milliyet in particular) that published their own reports while including public announcements made by the Turkish government officials, province governors and the Turkish Chief of Staff. Daily newspapers covered insurgent attacks widely through their local-affiliates. Reporting PKK violence against the Kurds and property ‘worked’ for the government with the implicit understanding that it would infuriate the Turkish public and keep Kurdish loyalties away from the insurgent organization. Hence, reporting bias should not a major problem in our case (Earl et al., 2004).

Predictors of Village Raids

Which village characteristics predict insurgent violence? A variety of structural factors can facilitate irregular warfare and therefore increase the probability of observing violent events in rural areas. As we pointed out earlier, existing discussions of insurgent violence point to similar factors but do not suggest a mechanism approach that shows *how* grievance and opportunity facilitate violent events. We offer a framework that identifies distinct mechanisms and test them together. Accordingly, there are three sets of explanatory variables (grievance,

opportunity, and signaling) that the empirical models account for. Before we introduce the variables though, we want to discuss briefly why our data is a good fit for testing the GOS dynamics.

This study relies on a recently declassified document, *Kalkınmada Öncelikli İllerin Köy Bazında Altyapı Durumunu Gösteren 1985 Yılı Sonu İtibariyle Envanter Cetvelleri* (Ankara: Devlet İstatistik Enstitüsü, 1986) to explain the determinants of violent events. The report was prepared for internal use by a special bureau within the State Planning Organization committed to understanding underdevelopment in Turkey and it is now available in the library of Turkish Institute of Statistics. The report presents complete and micro-level data about socio-economic characteristics of thousands of villages at the time of conflict onset. These features increase our confidence in capturing substantial variation and getting an accurate picture about conditions prior to conflict. The availability of data on a large set of indicators also make it possible to test GOS mechanisms together and find good matches between variables and the theoretical processes they represent (Buhaug and Rod, 2006; Cederman and Gleditsch, 2009).

The other empirical advantage in the Turkish case is that the GOS dynamics were salient and experienced little change in the time period under study. Put differently, we can observe GOS dynamics with minimal interference from other conflict processes. Until the 1990s, the insurgency emphasized issues of structural inequality that were raised and publicized by a variety of political actors in the pre-conflict stage. The Turkish government was slow to act and close windows of opportunity that worked for the benefit of insurgents. Signaling proved to be essential to PKK's survival in this period because the insurgent organization enjoyed limited support among co-ethnics in initial years and was trying to 'convince' them through force.

Grievance. Most often, structural inequalities are questions about lack of access. When a group of individuals is barred from resources and decision-making processes, they can get

marginalized or face outright exclusion. Marginalization can be domain-specific since it is the outcome of a particular set of policies. We are interested in two domains: economic and cultural marginalization. Economic marginalization refers to relative deficiencies in human development whereas cultural marginalization is the inability to shape cultural forms by the actors that practice them. Grievances however do not emerge automatically; they have to be cultivated. Individuals become aware of their grievances when activists provide the link between their personal misfortunes and broad processes. When activism succeeds, a constituency emerges whose members may be willing to support these ideals and even take action against others in their own community. Violence can convince some especially when claim-makers promote a familiar message.

We use three village-level covariates to identify grievances and understand their formation in a prior period to explain civilian support to PKK insurgency. Economic marginalization, which worked through poor public goods provision, provides an important venue for grievance formation. The delivery of public goods requires a heavy investment in infrastructure and is prone to long-term entrenched policy choices. In southeast Turkey, electricity was the number one item that several households lacked in the 1980s. Investing in electricity infrastructure required spending huge sums of taxpayer money to produce, deliver and monitor the electricity that was not only a basic public good in itself but also was essential to health, security and telecommunication services. Sustaining publicly owned power and transmission lines further designated the Turkish state as the main provider of these goods. We include a binary indicator in our models, *Electricity*, coded 1 if the village has electrical power and 0, if the village is without electricity.

Cultural marginalization may also create a willingness to support insurgency. In line with its nationalist rhetoric, the Turkish government forcefully changed the names of thousands of villages by designating ‘Turkish’ names (*Village Old Name*). As extensively documented in Öktem (2008), renaming villages was a popular policy among Turkish statesmen. Bureaucrats replaced village names with what they saw as more harmonious with the Turkish language and used the new names of villages in official business despite the fact that locals continued to stick with old names in daily interactions. Governments periodically changed village names in southeast Turkey in particular where the use of Kurdish village names were widespread. The last effort in renaming the villages took place in the early 1980s immediately before the onset of insurgent violence.

Structural inequalities can translate into grievance via activist work and be later utilized by insurgency to its own benefit. The section on the Turkish case discussed that southeast Turkey was characterized by underdevelopment and ethnic group rights were not recognized. As a response, revolutionary groups, leftist parties and cultural clubs raised the Kurdish issue and reached out broad audiences for the first time in the 1970s. Around this time, under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit, the main left of center party in Turkey (CHP) also presented underdevelopment as the source of region’s troubles. A successor of CHP, the Populist Party (Halkçı Parti, heretofore HP) followed its footsteps and competed in the 1983 election. HP’s political rhetoric emphasized underdevelopment as the major problem in southeast Turkey, a point shared by all Kurdish political actors to a large extent. We therefore expect to see in areas where the HP cultivated popular support, the insurgency might had a better chance in finding civilians sympathetic to its cause. *Support for HP* is measured as the percentage valid votes that the HP received in a village.

Opportunity / Threat. Among the opportunity/threat variables, we include five covariates that measure the ease with which insurgents can access violent event locations and the relative difficulties that the government forces face in reaching the same spots. The distinction between opportunity and threat relies on the notion that one's own strengths and opponent's weaknesses might originate from distinct resource mobilization strategies. The first covariate that measures opportunity is *Distance to Rebel Bases*. It is a logged variable (in kilometers) that measures the distance of the village to PKK bases in northern Iraq and inside Turkey. We rely on a map prepared by security forces in 1986 to identify some thirty locations, only one (Mount Cudi) being inside Turkey at this time. Another opportunity variable, *Attack in Nearest Neighbor* is a binary indicator and asks if the nearest village was also exposed to insurgent violence. A previous attack in a nearby village might suggest that (a) there is insurgent presence in the area, and, (b) insurgents can utilize their ties to civilians to collect useful information about targets.

The threat dynamic also impacts violent outcomes. The level of threat posed by government forces in particular has to be taken seriously by insurgents. Troop locations and the quality of roads in particular determine the response time of government forces and in turn give insurgents an estimate about their chances of escape. *Road Quality* is a binary indicator of whether village roads are easily accessible by motorized vehicles. We created this indicator from a four-category variable including asphalt, stabilized, stabilized dirt, and dirt road and coded the villages with dirt or stabilized dirt roads as having bad roads. *Distance to Urban Center* measures the distance of the village (in logged kilometers) to the district center, the nearest urban center with jurisdiction to deploy troops in response to an insurgent attack. Finally, we take into account the possibility that state control might be weaker in areas characterized by difficult terrain. Our terrain variable is *Village Elevation* and it is measured in log meters.

Signaling. Equally important are insurgencies' strategic goals to spread the word about the organization to sway civilian loyalties in the future. We would expect an insurgency to target areas where violence is likely to affect civilian attitudes beyond the event location. The first insurgent objective in this regard is sanctioning. In-group members are often punished to impose political conformity and avoid defection. To test this claim, we include the covariate *Ethnicity*, the percentage of Kurds in a village, to see if the PKK targeted co-ethnics to deter cooperation with the government. Counterinsurgency operation against insurgents within village borders (*COIN Operation*) may attract insurgents' attention for the same reason: Insurgents will punish villagers for providing tips to government forces in order to block similar attempts in the future. Accordingly, we would be interested to see if a COIN operation would bring fresh insurgent violence to the village.

Villages are small rural units with little significance for outside world. Certain village properties will amplify the effect of violence. An attack on a village with a large population size can give an insurgency a better chance to spread the word (*Population Size*, logged). A populous village would mean more ties with the outside world as there would be more diversification in economic activity, better opportunities to travel to district center, and a large number of households with acquaintances and relatives elsewhere. Meanwhile, exposing government failure can be accomplished by targeting seats of government power. In the Turkish case, villages were distributed into sub-districts where a number of them were designated as *Sub-District Centers* (bucak merkezi). Sub-district centers housed an administrator, a council and a commission and operated as a go-between government institutions in district center and a few dozen villages.

Findings

Table 1 describes our variables for the estimation data. An overview of the general patterns in the data show that violent events vary considerably in the countryside of southeast Turkey. First, raids are concentrated in a small number of villages with no reported incidents in the remaining 4640 of the units. Of those attacked villages, 77 units experienced heavy violence, receiving more than one violent event between 1984 and 1990. Second, most affected villages were exclusively concentrated in Hakkari, Mardin and Siirt provinces. These provinces are hot spots that share borders with Iraq and Syria. Border areas are characterized by rough terrain that have historically been unpatrolled and used by locals to smuggle goods into and out of Turkey. These provinces also host predominantly Kurdish populations, with at least 75 percent of residents estimated to have Kurdish origins. Finally, violent events were deadly where 65 percent of events led to civilian casualties. In the majority cases, insurgents ended up killing a single individual, indicating the selective and strategic character of violence.

Table 1 Summary Statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Road Quality	4944	0.417	0.493	0	1
Log Elevation	4761	7.032	0.417	5.852	8.710
Distance To Urban Center	4761	2.750	0.571	0.018	4.657
Distance to Rebel Bases	4761	5.073	0.675	0.654	6.057
Attack in Nearest Neighbor	4944	0.050	0.219	0	1
Support HP	4900	29.681	28.400	0	100
Electricity	4890	0.688	0.463	0	1
Village Old Name	4890	0.787	0.410	0	1
COIN Operation	4944	0.027	0.162	0	1
Sub-district Center	4940	0.029	0.169	0	1
Log Population	4878	6.041	0.724	0	8.843
Ethnicity	4944	66.168	13.295	31.89	89.5

In Table 2, we examine predictors of violence at the village level. All three mechanisms show significant effects and are empirically valid in explaining violence. We begin by testing for the effect of the opportunity/threat mechanism on violence. We then investigate the relative explanatory power of two additional mechanisms: grievance and signaling. One of the strongest predictors of violence is *Distance to Rebel Bases*. Villages closer to insurgent bases in northern Iraq and inside Turkey are far more likely to experience a raid. This opportunity dynamic suggests that more than anything else resource mobilization holds the key to conduct a successful violent event. *Attack in Nearest Neighbor* also increases the probability that a village will receive a raid, revealing the indirect benefits of spatial proximity on insurgent action.

Threat factors also explain PKK attacks to some extent. Villages that are harder to reach by motorized vehicles are more likely to receive an insurgent raid (*Road Quality*). It is worth mentioning that the PKK insurgents rarely used vehicles and preferred to travel on foot in the 1980s. The fact that violence is more pervasive in areas with dirt roads indicates that difficulty of state control provides opportunities for conducting village raids although this observation does not hold across targets as will be discussed in the next section. Meanwhile, there is no statistically significant pattern of increased likelihood of a raid targeting villages situated on relatively higher elevations (*Village Elevation*) or those distant from the urban center with the jurisdiction to deploy troops (*Distance to Urban Center*). While surprising, these null findings suggest that *Road Quality* is a more robust indicator of difficulty of state control and mobility of armed forces.

Table 2 Three Mechanisms of Violent Events

	(1) Full Model	(2) With Ethnicity	(3) Count Model
<i>Grievance Factors</i>			
Electricity	-0.603*** (0.168)	-0.692*** (0.161)	-0.622*** (0.155)
Village Old Name	0.457* (0.243)	0.453* (0.235)	0.413* (0.221)
Support HP	0.013*** (0.003)	0.010*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)
<i>Opportunity/Threat Factors</i>			
Road Quality	0.733*** (0.170)	0.836*** (0.170)	0.716*** (0.161)
Log Elevation	-0.069 (0.203)	-0.176 (0.212)	-0.017 (0.188)
Distance To Urban Center	-0.082 (0.159)	-0.070 (0.161)	-0.072 (0.134)
Distance to Rebel Bases	-0.880*** (0.147)	--	-0.845*** (0.132)
Attack in Nearest Neighbor	0.661** (0.265)	0.880*** (0.240)	0.988*** (0.233)
<i>Signaling Factors</i>			
Log Population	0.453*** (0.132)	0.461*** (0.132)	0.501*** (0.134)
Ethnicity	--	0.058*** (0.013)	--
COIN Operation	0.599** (0.283)	0.817*** (0.268)	0.568** (0.265)
Sub-district Center	0.813** (0.329)	0.928*** (0.310)	0.801*** (0.270)
Constant	-1.564 (1.604)	-9.206*** (1.751)	-2.291 (1.535)
<i>N</i>	4687	4687	4688
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-871.163	-890.082	-1092.280

Note: Robust standard errors are clustered at the sub-district level (in parentheses). *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

Underscoring the importance of structural inequality on civilian support, we find that a form of public goods provision, *Electricity* appears to have a consistent relationship with the

likelihood of a village raid. Moreover, *Support for HP* in the village also indicates support for the insurgency and suggests that political articulation inequalities in a previous episode is crucial for creating aggrieved individuals who might be more willing to buy into similar claims by insurgents. While we believe that state repression is still an important grievance-maker, our *Village Old Name* variable seems to be a noisy indicator that does not capture overtly political processes and remains to be a bureaucratic measure with little practical significance for villagers.

Next, we examine variables associated with signaling mechanism. The idea of reaching out to wider audiences finds strong empirical support in the statistical analyses. Hence, *Population Size* (logged) is one of the strongest predictors of village raids in the analysis suggesting that insurgents have a strong incentive to target areas where violence is likely to have an effect beyond one's immediate area. A major motivation behind signaling is sanctioning: Insurgents punish group members to prevent civilians from cooperating with the government in the future by imposing high costs on defection. Insurgent violence following a COIN Operation might accomplish this goal. Indeed, there is a statistically significant difference between the average predicted probability of receiving raid in villages that received a *COIN Operation* and those that did not. The other objective that informs signaling is to sway civilian loyalties by demonstrating the weakness of government authority. To accomplish this task, insurgents target government institutions. Accordingly, villages that are also *Sub-district Centers* are more likely to receive insurgent attacks compared to others.

Finally, villages located in areas close to rebel bases are also home to the geographic concentration of Kurdish residents in southeast Turkey. The interaction between *Ethnicity* and *Distance to Rebel Bases* precludes us from including them in the same model. In Model 2 (Table 2), we test for the effect of ethnicity on insurgent activity and find that civilians in villages with a

higher concentration of Kurds are more likely to be victimized by insurgents. Harming co-ethnics in ethnic violence demonstrates the intra-community dimension of violent events. Co-ethnics represent the potential constituencies that the insurgent message is intended for. Preventing defection and winning civilian allies by delivering punishment not only serves military goals but also bolsters the legitimacy of the insurgents.

Unpacking Targets and Repertoires

Our empirical results revealed the complementarity of GOS mechanisms for a successful violent event by enlisting civilian support, enabling resource mobilization and swaying future loyalties. We also hinted in the introduction that each GOS dynamic might have different a role to play depending on the type, repertoire and targets of the event. In fact, GOS framework has more empirical validity in explaining the intra-community dimension of violence. In this section, we unpack targets and repertoires of village raids and compare them with insurgent attacks on security targets. We show that opportunity variables equally affect violence towards civilian and military targets. However, while grievance and signaling factors are robust predictors of violence directed against community members, they have no discernable impact on military targets.

We disaggregate village raids in two ways. First, we take a subset of village raids, *Deadly Events* that resulted in at least one civilian casualty. Roughly speaking, two-thirds of villages that received a raid experienced civilian casualties in this period. Another subset of village raids, *Coercive Events* involved situations where insurgents stopped short of harming civilians but forced them to cooperate involuntarily. Most prominent among these repertoires were forced

gatherings at village squares, hostage-taking, and verbal threats against village headmen and village guards. Finally, we discuss violent events in which the PKK attacked military targets in rural areas. Most often, *Security Targets* consisted of military personnel who were attacked while they were travelling or patrolling an area.

Table 3 replicates our main model with three alternative dependent variables. Model 4 shows that when insurgents target civilians, grievance factors are highly significant and in the expected positive direction. However, as models 5-6 (Table 3) show, the predicted probability of an event that involves coercion or attack on security targets is insensitive to grievance variables. This variation registers an important theoretical point: It shows that grievances facilitate violence only when violent events involve punishing community members. One of the ways that grievances may translate into civilian support is through informing. This observation also explains PKK's success in selective targeting of civilians: the number of civilian casualties remained extremely low in deadly events, resulting in less than three deaths on average. Therefore, grievances form an important basis for denunciations and are relevant for explaining violent events when they are intra-community affairs (Kalyvas, 2006; Lyall et al. 2015).⁹

Opportunity mechanism registers a different trend. Independent of targets and repertoires, *Distance to Rebel Bases*, which measures logistical opportunity is highly significant: Proximity to a rebel base leads to a higher probability of insurgent violence. This robust finding suggests that *an insurgency's capabilities in resource mobilization is the single most important item in conducting a successful violent event* (Andrews, 2004; Zald and McCarthy, 1987). The other opportunity dynamic, *Attack in Nearest Neighbor*, is also significant across models by demonstrating the advantage of proximity in insurgent collective action, showing stronger results in count models (not shown here). Finally, opportunity trumps threat; that is, one's own strengths

are more important over opponent's weaknesses in the successful realization of a violent event. One of the threat variables, *Road Quality*, fails to explain attacks on military targets. However, the same factor is highly relevant for explaining *Coercive Events*, which do not rely on selective targeting and require extended period of time to conclude.

Table 3 Unpacking Targets in Violent Events

	(4) Deadly Events	(5) Coercive Events	(6) Security Targets
<i>Grievance Factors</i>			
Electricity	-0.697*** (0.191)	-0.458 (0.283)	-0.468 (0.371)
Village Old Name	0.516** (0.259)	0.155 (0.327)	0.060 (0.455)
Support HP	0.011*** (0.003)	0.007* (0.004)	0.009 (0.006)
<i>Opportunity/Threat Factors</i>			
Road Quality	0.874*** (0.204)	0.707*** (0.248)	0.547 (0.356)
Log Elevation	-0.350* (0.210)	0.585* (0.324)	0.149 (0.352)
Distance To Urban Center	0.002 (0.204)	-0.384* (0.213)	-0.136 (0.248)
Distance to Rebel Bases	-0.635*** (0.159)	-1.441*** (0.191)	-0.742*** (0.206)
Attack in Nearest Neighbor	0.634* (0.328)	0.818** (0.327)	0.724* (0.399)
<i>Signaling Factors</i>			
Log Population	0.626*** (0.142)	0.480*** (0.171)	0.423 (0.264)
COIN Operation	0.863*** (0.277)	-0.287 (0.438)	1.325*** (0.400)
Sub-district Center	0.567 (0.382)	0.736 (0.589)	0.942 (0.602)
Constant	-2.587 (1.864)	-3.661 (2.512)	-4.909* (2.879)
<i>N</i>	4688	4688	4688
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-654.740	-410.832	-238.079

Note: Robust standard errors are clustered at the sub-district level (in parentheses). *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

Finally, how does signaling fare across different target types and event repertoires? Signaling suggests that reaching out to wider audiences is an important key in explaining violent events. This dynamic is captured by *Population Size* variable in our analysis and models 4-5 show that the probability of a violent increases with population size. For instance, signaling idea finds strong support in terrorism cases where it is not necessarily the frequency of events but the strategic targeting of civilians or high-profile political murders that connect violence to projected audiences. However as expected the signaling mechanism is not associated with attacks in military targets.

In *Deadly Events* and incidents involving *Security Targets*, the main objective is to sanction civilians by delivering punishments. Accordingly, in both event types, a prior counterinsurgency operation increases the probability of an insurgent attack. As models 4 and 6 show, *COIN Operation* is highly significant and performs better than in Table 2, Model 1 that includes all village raids. Hence, insurgents send a plain message to civilians that they will not tolerate cooperation with the government and possess the necessary military capabilities to attack government security forces when necessary. A previous COIN operation however does not predict a coercive event, where the goal is not outright punishment but to win civilian loyalties through propaganda, peer socialization and by exposing the tenuous nature of government rule. Finally, contrary to our expectations, *Sub-district Centers* with administrative authority over surrounding villages fails to predict coercive events across disaggregated models.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper argued that a successful violent event can be explained by taking into account three mechanisms: grievance, opportunity and signaling that respectively help with securing civilian support, resource mobilization and future loyalties. We demonstrated that Kurdish insurgents attacked villages where there were civilians aware of their bad economic fortunes and this awareness translated into support for the insurgents who framed their struggle in terms of ethnicity and underdevelopment. Insurgents also benefited from proximity to rebel bases, a previous attack in a nearby location, and bad roads that gave insurgents a logistical opportunity and kept government security forces at bay. The PKK also targeted villages that were predominantly Kurdish and hosted government institutions.

By offering a unified framework through mechanism thinking, we attempted to bridge the analytical divide between grievance and opportunity arguments and suggested another key aspect of violent events: signaling. First, we offered an analytical strategy to connect structural inequalities to grievances and argued that aggrieved civilians provide tips to insurgents about alleged allies of the government. Second, we unpacked the opportunity/threat mechanism and suggested that the strength of insurgency and weakness of state control stem from processes of resource mobilization. Finally, we demonstrated that violent events are future investments that intend to punish non-conformists and reach out to potential target audiences.

We also disaggregated targets and repertoires of violent events to show that *violence is generated through different mechanisms depending on the nature of violent event*. Opportunity, as an enabler of resource mobilization, is the most critical indicator of violence. Logistical opportunity is a mechanism for effective mobilization of resources and easy access to an organizational base is the most powerful predictor of violent events across targets and repertoires. The effect of grievance and signaling however are limited to civilian targets. This

important finding suggests several points. Most critical, violent events in civil wars have a strong intra-community dimension. Accordingly, grievance translates into civilian support for insurgency only when targets are in-group members. More research is needed to observe grievance at work and how it contributes to choosing sides in violent events.

Meanwhile, signaling sheds light on a less known dimension of ethnic wars and explains why co-ethnics are main targets of ethnic violence. Insurgents first and foremost punish group members to fortify ranks and avoid defection. In this respect, it might be worth thinking ‘ethnic wars’ not only as conflicts between groups but rather concerted efforts to create groups through intra-group violence.

ENDNOTES

¹ There is a fair amount of literature that discusses why civilians join insurgent organizations but the same is not true why civilians give support to insurgencies.

² As a rule of thumb, it is always harder to replace an insurgent than a soldier.

³ “İlk Hedef Telefon,” *Milliyet*, August 4, 1987.

⁴ “PKK’ya Karşı Puma.” *Milliyet*, December 2, 1987.

⁵ Turkey’s Kurdish question was internationalized in the 1990s when the European Union imposed sanctions and harshly criticized Turkey for its treatment of Kurdish citizens. The PKK also had extensive networks among Kurdish diaspora in European countries. Switching targets in this period was necessary to avoid losing the sympathy of European publics and governments.

⁶ Village raids in southeast Turkey corresponded to more than half of all violent events across Turkey in this period.

⁷ *Ayin Tarihi*. June 26, 1986.

⁸ *Serxwebun*. Vol. 57, September 1986.

⁹ As it is often suggested, denunciations might well originate from inter-personal disputes and local cleavages. What we show here is that they might tap into grievances which are formulated at the national level and work to polarize local settings.

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