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## The New Face of Terrorism in Turkey: Actor Unknown Political Murders

**ABSTRACT:** In this study, we have analyzed the temporal and spatial trends in actor unknown political murders in Turkey. A total of 1852 cases, defined as actor unknown political murders, occurred in Turkey between 1975 and 2006, with the peak years being 1980 and 1994. Three different time frames could be defined: 1975–1993, 1994–1999, and 2000–2006. During the first period, cases were common all over Turkey, but during the second and third periods, they were more frequent in metropolitan areas and in the southeast. Incidents occurring during the first period could be attributed to the struggle between right- and left-wing supporters, while most murders occurring during the second and third periods seem to have been related to Kurdish separatism. Although the most crucial factor in preventing actor unknown political murders is a politically stable atmosphere, forensics can also play an important role. Turkey needs to improve its forensic services to bring them in line with international standards, namely the Minnesota Protocol.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, terrorism, Turkey, actor unknown political murder, political violence, GIS analysis, arbitrary and summary execution, Minnesota protocol

Collective violence can be defined as the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group, whether transitory or more permanent. They act against other groups or individuals in order to achieve political, economic, or social objectives (1). At the start of the 21st century, both the structures of these groups and the accompanying manifestations of violence are changing. New forms of collective violence are emerging that involve organized, but highly dispersed, organizations or networks of organizations, groups without a “fixed address,” whose very aims, strategies and psychology differ radically from earlier ones (1). One of the newest methods of terrorism in Turkey is actor unknown political murders. Actor unknown political murder is defined as a murder that is believed to be politically motivated, and where the murderer cannot be found.

Turkey has undergone considerable modernization since the 1960s, resulting in tremendous political and social upheaval. Other factors have contributed to the volatility of this period: rapid urbanization due to migration from rural Turkey to the cities, economic hardship as employment failed to keep up with the exploding urban population, political unrest in the southeastern Kurdish provinces, and nascent radical Islamic and leftist student movements (2). All of these issues have fuelled terrorism and collective violence. During 1978 and 1979, for example, there were 5241 deaths and 14,152 injuries resulting from clashes between right-wing extremists, socialists, and Islamist groups in the streets of major cities (3).

Although there are 49 identifiable ethnic groups in Turkey, the Kurds are the most abundant and are located mostly in the southeastern and metropolitan areas of Turkey (3). From 1984 to 2000, an estimated 30–35,000 Turkish citizens were killed in an almost continuous string of terrorist attacks. In 1996 alone, 3286 people were reportedly killed by terrorism-related events, of which 2516 were caused by the PKK (Kurdish acronym for the “Kurdistan

Workers’ Party”) (3). Due to the increasing number of terrorist attacks, the southeastern areas of Turkey have been administered through emergency legislation since 1987.

Geographic information systems (GIS) can be seen as tools for analyzing spatial data (4). GIS offers the possibility of integrating spatial data sets from a variety of sources, such as surveys, remote sensing, statistical databases, and existing paper maps (5). The interest of law enforcement bodies in using GIS to map the incidence of crime has paralleled research activities identifying patterns in crimes and criminal behavior in the emerging field of environmental criminology (6).

Although a considerable number of actor unknown political murders are known to have occurred in Turkey since the 1970s, we know little about them. In this study, we aimed to analyze the profiles of the victims and the spatial and temporal distributions of the cases, and to emphasize the role of forensic services in preventing actor unknown political murders.

### Materials and Methods

This is a retrospective, descriptive, registry-based study. The data were gathered and combined from two different sources: the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (7,8). The data covered cases in Turkey from 1975 to 2006. To prevent duplications and missing cases, all dates and names were confirmed. During this period, 1852 homicide cases were reported as actor unknown murders, but details of the cases were limited, and information such as cause of death, nationality, or name were often lacking.

Statistical analysis of data was performed using Epi Info 2002. MapInfo Professional 7.8 GIS software was used. The database was composed of semantic data, which were related to the geometric data.

### Results

Victims were mostly male: 1825 (98.6%) men and 27 women (1.4%). The mean age was  $32.9 \pm 14.2$  years. The education level

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TABLE 1—Causes of death among victims.\*

	Number of Deaths (%)
Firearm deaths	1078 (87.0)
Sharp force injuries	39 (3.1)
Bombing	37 (2.9)
Physical torture	26 (2.1)
Traumatic death (beating)	19 (1.5)
Manual pressure to the neck	17 (1.3)
Hanging	10 (0.8)
Strangled with a belt	8 (0.64)
By fire, and fall from height	4 (0.32)

\*Due to missing data, the cause of death was only identified in 1238 cases.

was known in 947 cases, of whom 46 (4.8%) had received higher education.

Most of the actor unknown political murder victims were Turkish (1842; 99.5%). Only 10 cases (0.5%) involved other nationalities, including Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, and Romanians.

As shown in Table 1, the commonest cause of death was from firearms (1078 cases). Beating, physical torture, bombing, and sharp force injuries were also common. Two peaks can be identified in Fig. 1; the first peak occurred in 1980 and the second in 1995.

The most common occupations among the victims were self-employed, worker-farmer, and student (Table 2). Eyewitnesses were

TABLE 2—Occupation of victims.\*

	Number of Deaths (%)
Self-employed	237 (28.0)
Worker	128 (15.1)
Farmer	107 (12.6)
Student	92 (10.8)
Politician	76 (8.9)
Teacher	45 (5.3)
Government official	34 (4)
Imam (Muslim priest)	25 (2.9)
Businessman	16 (1.8)
Journalist	14 (1.6)
Medical doctor or pharmacist	13 (1.5)
Temporary village guard	12 (1.4)
Lawyer	9 (1)
Artist	5 (0.5)
Soldier	3 (0.3)
Engineer	2 (0.2)
Lecturer	2 (0.2)
Other	26 (3.0)

\*Due to missing data, the occupation of victims was only identified in 846 cases.

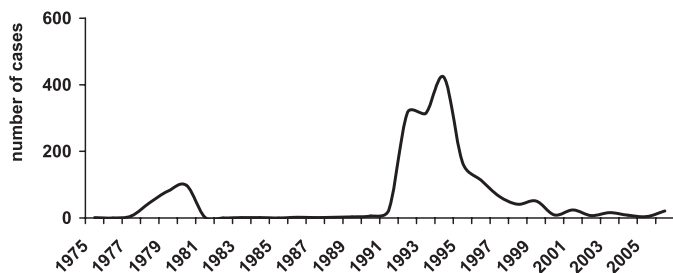


FIG. 1—Number of actor unknown political murders between 1975 and 2006.

TABLE 3—Number of murderers.

	Number of Deaths (%)
One murderer	161 (17.0)
Two murderers	193 (20.4)
Three murderers	13 (1.4)
More than four murderers	6 (0.6)

able to confirm the number of murderers, but not their identities, in 373 cases. In most of these cases, one or two murderers were involved (Table 3).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to analyze actor unknown political murders from a forensic pathology perspective. The number of incidents peaked in 1980, and again in 1995. According to our results, trends in actor unknown political murders were closely linked to the political atmosphere. Such murders were especially common in Istanbul and the southeast of Turkey, and firearms were the most commonly used weapons.

The absence of some data was a limitation in this study; in a large number of cases, the age, educational level, occupation, or cause of death of the victim was unknown. In addition, due to the nature of actor unknown political murders, not all victims were identifiable and complete information was therefore unattainable in some cases. However, the data covered the whole of Turkey over a 32-year period. GIS was used to visualize the data. GIS is an effective tool for the generation and analysis of research hypotheses, the identification of high-risk areas, the planning and programming of activities, and the monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

Although the most common murder weapons were firearms (87%), some terror-specific methods, such as bombing and physical torture, were seen in 2.9% and 2.1% of cases, respectively. Moreover beating, hanging, manual pressure to the neck, and strangling with a belt were seen in a total of 4.2% of cases (Table 1).

The definition of terror includes that “immediate victims may be chosen randomly or selectively (representative or symbolic)” (9), and accordingly almost two out of three victims were from common occupations, namely self-employed, worker-farmers, or students. However, some specific groups were also targeted, such as politicians, imams, and journalists.

Three different maps have been prepared to illustrate the spatial distribution of the data, based on GIS analysis. The first map (Fig. 2) depicts the location and number of actor unknown political murders during the period from 1975 to 1993. It shows that cases were sporadic, and occurred virtually throughout the country. More than seven political killings took place in each of eight out of the 14 cities in southeastern Turkey, and there were 24 cities where more than three killings took place during this period. In summary, no specific spatial pattern of actor unknown political murders between 1975 and 1993 could be identified. Furthermore, the 1980 coup and the conflict between left- and right-wing extremists were thought to be the major factors in promoting actor unknown political murders before 1993.

The second period identified was between 1994 and 1999. As shown in Fig. 3, contrary to the sporadic nature of the first period, two groups of cities were identified in the second period: those located in the southeast, and those with a population of more than a million. It is known that the killings that occurred during this period were strongly related to the Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey. The locations of political killings also support this hypothesis.

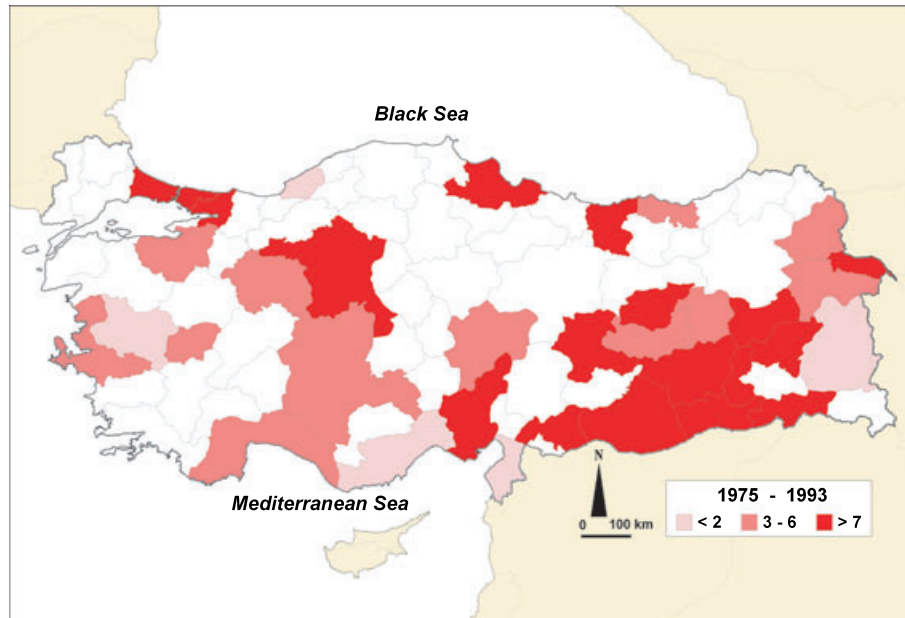


FIG. 2—The distribution of actor unknown political murders between 1975 and 1993 in Turkey.

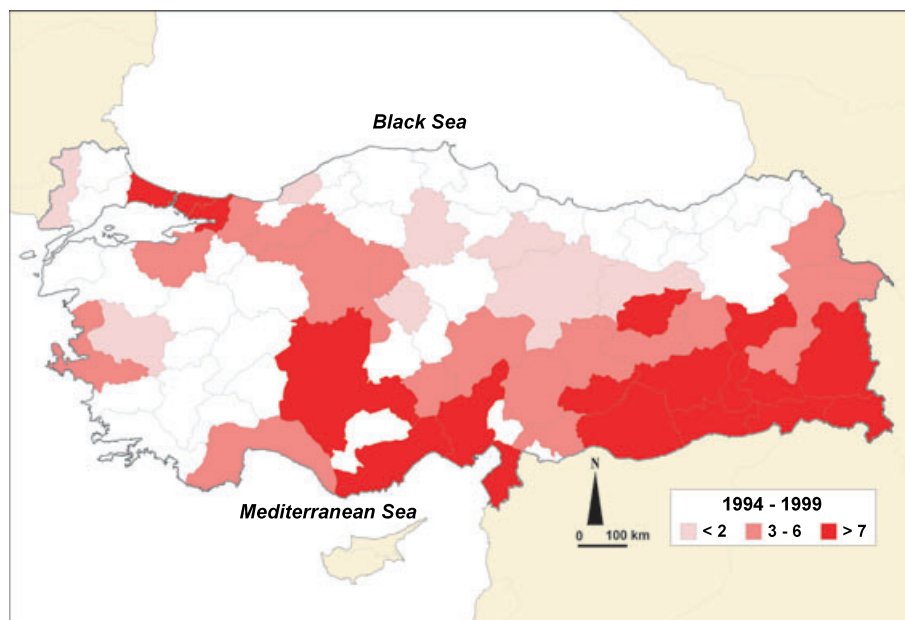


FIG. 3—The distribution of actor unknown political murders between 1994 and 1999 in Turkey.

Lastly, it is known that PKK terrorism was common in metropolitan areas during this period.

During the last period, from 2000 to 2006, political killings were seen in only eight cities in the southeast and in the most highly populated city in Turkey, Istanbul (Fig. 4). The rise in the number of killings slowed down and leveled off during this period, which could also be considered as a relatively politically stable period. Following the arrest of PKK's leader in 1999, the organization reportedly switched its strategy to peaceful methods, and claimed that it would pursue its aims politically (10).

In addition to trends in location, changes in the number of cases were also analyzed. In total, 904 killings occurred during the first

period, equivalent to 47.5 deaths annually. The number of killings peaked during the second period, with 859 killings in 6 years (143.1 annually). The lowest number of killings was seen during the last period, when a total of 89 cases were recorded (12.7 cases annually).

Actor unknown political murders can be classified as extra-legal, arbitrary, and summary executions, which include: (a) political assassinations; (b) deaths resulting from torture or ill-treatment in prison or detention; (c) deaths resulting from enforced "disappearances"; (d) deaths resulting from the excessive use of force by law-enforcement personnel; (e) executions without due process; and (f) acts of genocide (11).

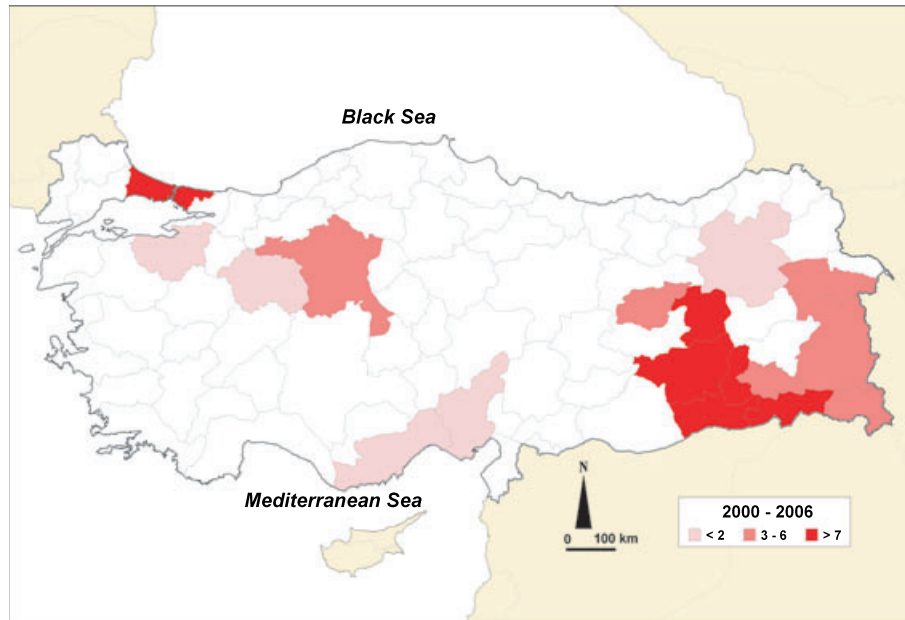


FIG. 4—The distribution of actor unknown political murders between 2000 and 2006 in Turkey.

Most countries have a system for investigating the causes of death in extra-legal, arbitrary, and summary executions. However, even if the government is willing to investigate these executions, investigators often find it difficult to ascertain the facts surrounding such incidents. Eyewitness accounts may be hard to obtain because witnesses fear reprisals, or because the only witnesses were those conducting the executions (11). In our study, eyewitness accounts were only available in 373 (20%) cases. Another obstacle that investigators need to deal with is the condition of the corpse. To destroy evidence and dispose of the body of the victim, corpses are often buried and may not be found for some time. Disposal in this manner often complicates identification of the body and determination of the cause and manner of death. In some cases, the natural decomposition of the body's soft tissue erases evidence of trauma such as bruising, stab wounds, or gunpowder burns (11). Other problems can be encountered when investigating extra-legal, arbitrary, and summary executions, such as a lack of resources and expertise, or a lack of impartiality in the agency assigned to conduct the investigation (11). Hence, for effective prevention of extra-legal, arbitrary, and summary executions, suspected cases should be investigated under international standards, namely the Minnesota Protocol (United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary, and Summary Executions). Compliance with these international standards for governments not only makes it easier to punish those found guilty, but can also provide an opportunity for convincing the international community and its own people that the government is committed to showing respect for human rights.

The European Convention on Human Rights was signed in Rome in 1950 and came into force in 1953. It was ratified by Turkey 1 year later, in 1954. As a contracting party, Turkey is committed to compensate violations of the Convention.

There is no information available on whether or not proper forensic examinations were carried out in the cases analyzed in this study. The European Court of Human Rights has found more than 20 cases against Turkey since 1995, because of deficiencies and errors in the application of forensic medical procedures, including failure to have an autopsy performed by a forensic pathologist, lack

of photography, or inadequate crime scene investigation (12). Hence in order to reduce the incidence of actor unknown political murders, as well as the number of cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights, Turkey must improve its forensic services. This should include increasing the number of forensic pathologists, introducing new forensic services in areas where actor unknown political murders are known to take place frequently, as analyzed in this study, and creating a better infrastructure for the forensic services, including improved crime scene investigation.

Actor unknown political murders, as a tool of terrorism, have been used in Turkey since the mid-1970s. Although the major contributing factors to these murders are political instability and social upheaval, forensic services can play an important role in preventing them. Turkey should improve its forensic services, which should be encouraged to meet international standards, such as the Minnesota Protocol.

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