

Media and Terrorism

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The media, both written and audiovisual, should be impartial, unbiased and objective while performing their duties by principle. The main aim and responsibility of the media is to give correct information to the public based on truth only. As a guest lecturer at many communication faculties I have stated for over fifteen years to my students the above mentioned rules as the key factors of media coverage. Having these facts in mind, which should be considered as the "Magna Carta" of all media, both local and global, the biased attitude of media coverage of terrorism by the PKK, as printed and published in the democracies of today should be considered rather unfortunate. It is a very well know fact that the PKK is a terrorist organization and has been listed under the terrorist organization list in most of the EU countries and the US. Although in fact the PKK is accepted for what it is from the governmental perspective, I find it astonishing that certain media channels in these countries still present the PKK as a guerrilla group or insurgents.

When considering that the core mission of the media is to enforce the freedom of information, and provide unbiased information to the public, the question that comes to mind is whether the execution of this mission should face any limitations. Since any limitation on the media by governments is considered censorship and a constraint of freedom, can the media be constrained with the conditions that laws and the media's own ethics will not be violated, in an era where individual rights and freedoms have become core values. The answer to these questions is a firm negative in democracies and free societies. Based on these two negatives we can now express the critical question: if and when the media chooses to distribute biased and single sided information knowing that it may adversely affect a states national security, should the government intervene for the sake of the humanity.

While defending our own democracy and free society, as well as free press, how can we avoid to give mortal damages to other nations' democracies, free societies and of course national securities?

This brings us to a conflict where the reformists, regarding the concept of national security in second place to democracy and unlimited freedom, argue that obstacles to the freedom of communication brought about especially by globalisation and the information age should be removed, and the classicists, who defend national security, and assess democratic ramifications in this light. Can the constraints on media be transformed into a universal law on issues that concern national security? This question also warrants a negative response, because there are no two countries whose concepts of national security and perception of threat and concern are same. Moreover, the concept of national security is almost entirely dependant on the global situation, what was of prime importance yesterday may have become trivial today.

In an environment of such rapid change and continuous revision of the parameters of freedom, how will the media succeed in remaining unbiased in matters of freedom, how will the media succeed in remaining unbiased in matters concerning national security such as terrorism, without challenging the concept itself? This rhetoric can extend to eternity through similar questions; however, since my subject is analysing how this can be possible, I should provide you with a negative or positive answer or propose a method.

I would like to give some examples regarding the media coverage of the PKK terrorism both in Turkey and abroad. These examples could be applied easily to the media coverage of other terrorist organisations all over of the world; such as Chechnya, Spain, Afghanistan, Palestine, Somalia, Iraq, Lebanon, etc. The excerpts are selected from the nationwide leading Turkish newspapers through 1984-1995. At the beginning of the PKK terror campaign, the Turkish press had difficulties on how to name these violent actions.

For example on the 18th of August 1984 after the PKK's brutal attack on a village in southeast of Turkey, *Milliyet*, one of the most distinguished and leading newspaper in Turkey used this headline: "Separatists attacked. One dead, 12 wounded." On the very same day the office of Chief of General Staff made a statement and described the attack as; "armed terrorists attacked a village, killed one civilian and wounded 12." On the very same day the most circulating newspaper in Turkey, *Hürriyet* gave this attack the title "Traitors, killed one and wounded 12." As you notice there were three different definitions for the same event; separatists, traitors and armed terrorists.

On the 25th of January 1987, another news article published in *Milliyet* after two houses were attacked by the PKK terrorists. "PKK militants attacked two houses and killed 10, seven of them were children aged between 1 and 12." On the 26th January, just a day after, *Milliyet* published another news article regarding a new attack by PKK. "Separatist PKK militants attacked a wedding ceremony with hand grenades, 15 killed and 27 wounded." The literature has become richer with the additional definitions militants and separatist militants after

traitors, separatists and armed terrorists. When we came to March of 1987 another news article appeared in *Milliyet*. "PKK killers raided a village, killed 8, 6 of them were children."

While the Turkish media were trying to find their way on how to name these brutal and violent attacks targeting innocent civilians, let us have a look at the foreign media and how they have reacted to this inhuman escalate of violence in Turkey. There was not even a single news article let alone any headlines in the European and American media. Contrary to the Western World, radios in Tehran and Tabriz broadcasted warning messages to Turkey on the same day, 9th of March, demanding Ankara to immediately stop the military operations against the Kurdish guerrillas. One of the speakers that took part in the Tehran radio broadcast was Jelal Talebani, the leader of the KYB, now president of Iraq, maybe the first person to ever name the PKK terrorists guerrillas.

Now, I am sure you added the two new definitions on your list; killers and guerrillas, so the number of names given to PKK terrorists have now reached seven but this is not yet the end. On the 20th of August 1987 when PKK terrorists raided a village in Eruh, southeast of Turkey, and killed 25, 19 of them were women and children, *Milliyet* named them "Bandits." A year later *Milliyet* published a new definition for PKK terrorists, "Separating organisation militants." At this time the foreign press such as *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Le Monde*, *Chronicle*, etc. insisted on presenting the PKK as "Kurdish Fighters" and "guerrillas" but not for what they really are, TERRORISTS.

In the early nineties the PKK started changing its tactics dramatically and began to attack schools, mine pits, road construction sites, government buildings, pipelines, military barracks, border stations, shopping malls, public buses and trains. The PKK raided a mine pit in Elazığ on the 23rd March 1990 and killed 6 mine engineers along with 3 civilians. Two days after the attack the new target was a primary school in Lice, Diyarbakır. The terrorists killed 4 teachers and set the school on fire. On the 26th of December 1991 the PKK terrorists were in Istanbul, they set a shopping mall in Bakırköy on fire just before Christmas, result 11 dead 18 wounded. The only comment regarding this vicious attack came from Belgium on the 28th of December. *La Libre Belgique* wrote; "Mystery in shopping mall fire in Istanbul." While the Belgian press described this attack as some mystery trying to create question marks, the leader of the PKK, Öcalan, surprisingly accepted the responsibility for the attack. There was not even a single comment regarding *La Libre Belgique's* misleading article which was obviously written on purpose. But on the same day as the publication of *La Libre Belgique*, the PKK organised mass demonstrations in various cities of Europe such as Hamburg, Essen, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Köln, Munich, Rotterdam, Zurich and, of course, Brussels. In order to protest against the pressures and oppression on the Kurds in Turkey.

A month after the shopping mall fire on the 26th of January 1992 the PKK bombed the Covered Bazaar and Galleria one of the most crowded shopping malls in Istanbul, killed one and wounded 12. Unsurprisingly there were again no news articles in the Western press. On the 22nd of March 1992, also named Nevruz, a traditional Turkish spring festival the PKK

attacked various civilian targets, killing 30 and wounding 32. On the same day PKK sympathisers were on the streets of Stockholm, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Oslo. The European press was full of news articles regarding these demonstrations; as you have already guessed; there were no articles whatsoever regarding the events in Turkey. On the 17th of May 1992 PKK terrorists from northern Iraq raided two border gendarmerie stations in Şırnak, Taşdelen and Işıkveren. As a result of these raids 27 soldiers and officers lost their lives and 40 terrorists were killed during the action. Three months after the raids the German TV channel SAT broadcasted a film, shot during the combat between soldiers and terrorists naming the terrorists "Kurdish guerrillas."

On the 7th of July 1993, PKK terrorists raided a village near Erzincan. The terrorists killed 28 civilians worshipping in the mosque and set the whole village on fire. This purposeless, vicious attack did not attract the attention of the foreign media in any way. It was the same when 24 civilians in Bahçesaray, a small town near Van, were killed by PKK terrorists on the 20th of July 1992. 15 of these innocent victims were children, aged between 1 and 11 and the rest were women, two of them pregnant. This vicious attack, regardless of the nationality of the victims, so called justifications by the attackers, and where it took place, deserved to be published as a news article from the headlines to be shared with the world in all civilized countries and their media. It is possible to give hundreds of examples of such news articles.

The real astonishing side, and what amazes me after all these years, is the behaviour of the foreign press, I have difficulties in understanding the approach towards the PKK. If terrorism is considered as a global threat for humanity, world peace and tranquillity how can one justify the PKK's abstraction from terrorism? How can PKK sympathisers take over the streets of western capitals whenever and however they please? How is it that the PKK is given legal permission to open representative offices in western countries? How can the PKK have its own TV channel "*Roj*" broadcasting freely from Denmark? Can we define this as a result of free society and democracy or freedom of press? Is it civilised to call terrorists "guerrillas" or "freedom fighters" and try to make them decriminalized and legitimate?