

From denial to insurgency: the PKK and the reconstruction of the Kurdish identity

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1. Introduction

'There are no Kurds in this country,' said Turkey's then-president on a visit to Diyarbakir in 1960. *'Whoever says you are a Kurd, you must spit in his face'* (Muller, 1996: 177). For a long time, Turkey denied the existence of the Kurds as a distinct people, and avoided the use of the term Kurd in its official discourse. Instead, Kurds were referred to as 'mountain Turks'. Assimilationist policies, including a ban on the use of Kurdish language, were strictly enforced (Bruinessen, 2000). Only in the 1990s did this begin to change. Against the background of an armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), political claims were publicly asserted on the basis of Kurdish identity. People took to the streets. A Kurdish press began to operate openly. The de facto political wing of the PKK won municipal elections in the Kurdish inhabited areas. It also took seats in parliament. Meanwhile, the Turkish state's position towards the Kurdish question shifted from complete denial to conditional recognition. Twenty-five years ago, Turkish courts would respond to the use of Kurdish by noting that 'the defendant tried to speak in an incoherent language'. Today a state-run Turkish TV channel broadcasts in Kurdish.

However this rising public salience of Kurdish identity has been discussed narrowly in the academic world. The emphasis has been on state discourse and specific policy issues (Kirişçi and Winrow, 1997; Barkey & Fuller, 1998; Yegen, 1999; Heper, 2007). Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the agencies involved in the reconstruction and legitimation of Kurdish identity politics in Turkey today, especially concerning the PKK which has acted as the main actor in Kurdish politics since 1990s. In Turkey, most of the existing work on the PKK has been produced by journalists concerned with the security dimension and the question of terror. The volume and scope of research produced in English is similarly limited (Gunter, 1997; White, 2000; Özcan, 2006; Romano 2006; Marcus, 2007).

This study proposes to address this lacuna in our understanding of contemporary Kurdish agency through an investigation of the emergence and growth of the PKK, tracing its origins

in clandestine leftist student organizations of the 1960s, through the period of intensified insurgency in the 1990s, toward the conditional inclusion of Kurdish identity in contemporary Turkish political life. Together with the ascendancy of the Islamic movements, this engagement of the Turkish state in an explicitly Kurdish field of political production points at an overturning of deep-rooted tenets of Turkish republicanism vis-a-vis the ethnic and religious identities of its subjects. It will consider how the emergent Kurdish public has reshaped, and—by virtue of conditional inclusion—been reshaped by, the institutions of the Turkish state. An in-depth empirical investigation of the agencies underpinning the emergence of a Kurdish public thus seems crucial to understanding both the modalities of political action that arise within it, and the de facto modalities of engagement between this public and the Turkish state. By exploring the PKK's role in effecting the changes that have enabled the emergence of Kurdish identity politics, this research also addresses a significant lacuna in our understanding of contemporary Turkish political life.

How and why was the PKK ultimately successful in enrolling significant portions of the Kurdish population into its struggle? Why is it significant for our understanding of contemporary Turkish politics? And, more generally, what might it tell us about how ethno-national identities are made, contested, and eventually embedded in political life?

My doctoral research deals with those questions and the main analytical goal of the research will be to better explain and understand the evolution of PKK from a clandestine organization to one of the most important non-state actors in the contemporary world which succeeded at drawing the institutions of the Turkish republic into a space of sociopolitical engagement in which Kurdish identity can be publicly produced and contested. Through this focus, the project promises to advance knowledge related to our understanding of political life in contemporary Turkey, and make a critical contribution to contemporary discussions related to issues of ethno-national identity formation and struggle. Taking advantage of a broadly comparative framework, the research draws on insights derived from other cases, including (inter alia) the Palestinian, South African, and Northern Irish ones (Gurr, 2000). As such, the research can be positioned vis-a-vis relevant and salient academic debates.

2. Context

Spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, Kurdish nationalism has developed dialogically with the 'nation building' policies of those nation-states that emerged at the expense of Kurdish nationalist aspirations (Bruinessen, 2000). The situation of the Kurds in Turkey thus presents a very specific case which needs to be understood in light of the peculiarities of the

Turkish republican project for modernization. Under the dominance of military-bureaucratic elite, the Turkish Republic espoused a French version of secularism and nationhood. Accordingly, Kurd and Muslim were rejected as legitimate public identities following the Republic's establishment in 1923 (Taspinar, 2005). This legacy of modern-authoritarian statism has continued to condition Turkish politics. Kurdish national self-awareness thus developed in this climate of physical violence and symbolic repression in which even otherwise mundane cultural practices were turned into defiant symbols of Kurdish identity

In the face of the homogenizing vision of Turkish republicanism, Kurdish groups have — throughout the 20th century — organized several uprisings. Over the last 30 years, the Turkish state has faced an insurgency instigated by the PKK which is one of the most important secular insurgent political movements in Kurdistan and the Middle East. Following its incubation during the 1970s and after ample preparation, the PKK initiated a prolonged guerrilla war in 1984, and by 1990 the 'liberation of Kurdistan' had become not at all unthinkable. The on-going war between the PKK and the Turkish state since 1984 cost more than 30,000 lives; the majority of those were of Kurdish descent. The war has been considered as *'the biggest challenge to the Turkish state in the 20th century'* (Olson, 1996, p.2), thus highlighting the wider political salience of the struggle (Heiberg et al., 2007).

Unlike most Kurdish political parties, which adopted a rather conservative outlook and were organized around tribal leaders and structures, the PKK originated from the left in Turkey and drew its leaders, members and militants from the disenfranchised. The party's radical political outlook (with its view of Kurdistan as an international colony and its objective of unification, both of Kurdistan and the revolutionary forces in Turkey) and strategy (the determination that liberation can be accomplished only by a means of a people's war, and its lack of hesitation in adopting violence as a tactic, not only against the state but also against powerful Kurdish tribal leaders and those who were considered to be collaborators) had been always at the heart of controversy (Bruinessen 1988; Kutschera 1994; McDowall 2007).

However it should be kept in mind that the PKK has not been only an insurgent movement, rather it has evolved from a small, clandestine organization into a transnational movement with its own mass-based organizations, political parties and press organs in Turkey as well as in many European countries. It has proven itself capable of simultaneous engagement in armed struggle and popular political mobilization. The legal political party associated with the PKK has controlled over 100 municipal councils in the last decade, which has enabled it to reclaim local geographies and inscribe them as Kurdish (Watts, 2006). This participation in all

spheres of public life provided a new institutional basis through which Kurdish identity in Turkey could be reconstructed.

In the last decade, the PKK has experienced severe difficulties following the arrest of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The incarnation of Öcalan brought crisis to the PKK and, the focus of discussion has shifted towards an alleged radical break in the PKK's political outlook and its capacities to act. Did the organization throw off its PKK heritage, and give up the ideal of a united Kurdistan (Özcan, 2006)? Or was the PKK undergoing a similar fate as Shining Path in Peru, an organization losing its way after the capture of its leader (Hoffman & Cragin, 2002)? Yet the party did not abandon the idea of a united Kurdistan, neither was pushed into marginality, but remained a strong pan-Kurdish political actor. Even it has shown a strong ability to transform and return after its virtual defeat. Despite experiencing severe difficulties during the 2000s, and contrary to the expectations of most observers, the PKK nevertheless managed to reinvent itself, through a series of ideological and structural transformations (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2010). More importantly, it has managed to keep Kurdish identity demands in Turkey politically alive.

To summarize: since the 1970s, the PKK has gone through different phases, evolving from a small, clandestine organization to a transnational social-political movement, containing an armed wing of 5000 guerrillas, an extensive mass media complex of satellite TVs, radios, newspapers, periodicals etc., and various 'front and grassroots organizations' in Turkey as well as in many European countries. It is this distributed field of political engagement and production that forms the primary context for this study.

In this context, my aim is to produce a critical history of the PKK's evolution as a socio-political and militant organization over the past thirty years.

3. Research:

This study is theoretically at the junction of the (ethno)-nationalism, insurgency and identity politics. The research will deal with the theories of (ethno-) nationalism (Smith, 1998; Bruinessen, 2000;) which allows to ground the origin of the ethno-national political conflict in the Kurdish case.

Within this theoretical structure, the methodological framework is broadly ethnographic, drawing insights from political geography and historical sociology. Research draws on interview-based fieldwork, participant observation and discourse analysis. It makes use of techniques of multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) ethnography, since the activities of the PKK covers a vast area. In this framework research activities aim at producing a political history account

of the PKK, which has extensive and accessible written and visual documentation of its activities, ranging from a main ideological monthly review (published regularly since 1982) to satellite TV channels, daily newspapers and books, the reports of all party congresses and even some internal educational materials. As well as the analysis of those documents-texts, data gathered via semi-structured interviews will be used to assess the narrative of PKK.

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