

## MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY DURING THE 1980s AND 1990s

*Cengiz Gunes*

On 12 September 1980, when the Turkish army carried out a *coup d'état*, very few in its upper echelons would have predicted that Turkey would spend the next two decades fighting the longest and most intense of Kurdish uprisings. The widespread torture that the army inflicted on the Kurdish political activists in prisons, together with the widespread oppressive measures they used to intimidate ordinary Kurds during the subsequent three years that they ruled Turkey, were seen as necessary and sufficient to suppress the rising tide of Kurdish political activism once and for all. So brutal was the army's response that the leader of the military dictatorship and Turkey's seventh president, Kenan Evren, went even a step further than any of the country's previous rulers by effectively banning the use of Kurdish language.<sup>1</sup> The practices associated with the military rule continued long after civilian rule returned on 6 November 1983. However, ultimately the army's iron fist proved ineffective once the guerrilla campaign led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK in the Kurdish acronym) began to gather pace from the late 1980s onwards.

During the 1970s, the PKK was one of the many new political groups that emerged on the Kurdish political scene in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Its cadres were influenced by Marxism and the PKK's national liberation discourse, which articulated Kurdish identity and national demands with demands for socio-economic equality. Its guerrilla campaign proved to be a vigorous challenge of the state's rule in Kurdish majority areas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the scope and depth of the PKK's guerrilla campaign increased significantly, and through its widespread political consequences

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

the PKK managed to mobilize a large number of Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and amongst the Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe. Through its media and information network, it was able to reach out to many Kurds and evolve into a mass movement, with supporters and sympathizers numbering several millions. By the early 1990s, the PKK had managed to evolve into a transnational mass movement that organized political and cultural activities in Turkey as well as many European countries.<sup>3</sup>

The popular explanation in the existing literature for the PKK's mass mobilization of the Kurds during the 1980s and 1990s highlights the state's excessive use of force and repression and socio-economic regional inequality.<sup>4</sup> The main weakness of such an explanation is that it explains Kurdish mobilization exclusively with reference to the actions of Turkish state and structural factors and at the expense of the actions of the PKK and the wider Kurdish movement as an actor. In contrast, Romano identifies the PKK's strategy to manipulate local politics to its advantage (using the already existing networks and exploiting the conflicts between the landlords and peasants to win the support of and enhance its credibility among the Kurdish peasants) as the key factor for its success: "[w]hat seems to differentiate the PKK from its local competitors is a strategy which would appeal to people who initially cared little for its Marxist–Leninist ideology or a politicised Kurdish ethnic nationalism."<sup>5</sup> Tezcür provides a micro-level perspective looking at individual motivations behind the people's choice in joining the PKK.<sup>6</sup> The study looks at the period before 1980 when mobilization took place in an urban context, and "identifies four causal mechanisms that contributed to the appeal of the PKK among ordinary Kurds in Turkey: credibility, revenge, social mobility, and gender emancipation."<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that "gender emancipation" was not among the main elements in the PKK's discourse before 1984, and there were serious risks involved with taking part in the PKK's activities—such as detention, torture, and even death—which need to be considered, as they would have offset the benefits gained from social mobility.

The second period under examination in Tezcür's study is the period from 1984 to 1990, which is when the PKK's guerrilla campaign spread across many of the majority Kurdish areas. The army's heavy-handed approach to the insurgency features predominantly in his explanation of the PKK's mass mobilization in this period: "[the army's counter-insurgency] operations victimised and radicalised large segments of the displaced Kurdish peasantry who became the core supporters of the insurgency."<sup>8</sup> Despite being victims of state violence, especially during political crises and military rule, some Kurds chose assimilation instead of resistance; and yet some chose to support Turkish left or Islamist groups. Hence, there were other avenues that were used to channel Kurdish discontent, and what made the Kurdish nationalist movement's interpretation and challenge more appealing than its alternatives needs to be explained. Also, while Romano's and Tezcür's accounts correctly highlight the impact of the PKK's strategy on its credibility with the Kurdish population, more thorough analysis of the representation of the PKK's struggle in its political discourse and

## MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY IN THE 1980s & 1990s

through artistic forms are needed to explore the reasons behind its appeal to the Kurds and its hegemony over Kurdish politics in Turkey. We need such an analysis to show how the PKK managed to gain credibility with the Kurds.

In the first part of this chapter, I provide an account of the PKK's growth as an organization during the 1980s and 1990s, the development of its guerrilla campaign, and its political mobilization. In the second part, I analyze the PKK's discourse and the representation of its struggle to its target groups. To complement the military and security operations that the army carried out to contain the PKK's insurgency, the state discourse contested the PKK's representation of its struggle as the embodiment of the Kurds' national struggle by representing it as a case of "terrorism" and a "security threat." To counter the state's representation of its insurgency and enhance its appeal to the Kurdish civilian population, the PKK reactivated the myth of Newroz<sup>9</sup> to construct a contemporary myth of resistance, which was an important symbolic resource that it deployed extensively to represent its struggle; and this played a key role in the PKK's hegemony over the Kurdish national movement in Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

### *The PKK's organizational growth*

Most of the Kurdish political activists and members of the numerous political parties and groups were arrested and incarcerated in numerous prisons during the military rule. In the early 1980s, the prisons became the main site of Kurdish resistance in Turkey, beginning in December 1980 when PKK members and sympathizers in Diyarbakır prison organized a hunger strike to protest against endemic torture and oppression and the violation of their basic human rights. The PKK's resistance in Diyarbakır prison continued throughout 1981 and 1982, and the fact that PKK members were the leading figures of the resistance enabled the PKK in later years to use the resistance practices there to construct a contemporary myth of resistance, which was a significant symbolic resource that it used extensively to represent its struggle. Also, a significant number of PKK members left Turkey for Syria and Lebanon and established the organization's bases there in 1979 and 1980. Its relocation to Lebanon presented the PKK with an opportunity during the early 1980s to form close links with Palestinian organizations and establish guerrilla training camps in preparation for an insurgency.<sup>11</sup>

The PKK's strategy envisaged a protracted "people's war" to overthrow Turkish rule in military, political, and economic terms, and to unify and reconstruct Kurdish society.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, military struggle was seen as inseparable from political struggle, and the guerrilla insurgency was seen as the first stage of a wider rebellion of the masses and as a tool to accelerate political developments.<sup>13</sup> In this developmental guerrilla strategy, initially small units of guerrillas would carry out attacks against military targets to weaken the army's authority in the majority Kurdish regions and to incite a popular rebellion. In the final phase of the insurgency, the people's army

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

supported by the popular uprising of the masses would overthrow the rule of the state and achieve revolutionary change.

The PKK started its insurgency on 15 August 1984 with two concurrent attacks in the towns of Eruh and Şemdinli. After that, its guerrillas fought the Turkish army and security forces in coordinated attacks predominantly in the rural areas. Initially the PKK's armed forces were organized as the Liberation Forces of Kurdistan (Hêzên Rizgariya Kurdistan, HRK). During 1985 and 1986, the PKK found it difficult to sustain the initial hype generated by its attacks in 1984. As well as lack of experience on its part, this difficulty was caused by the actions that the state took to prevent the development of the PKK's guerrilla campaign. Consequently, the development of its military capacity was the main point of discussion in the PKK's Third Congress held in October 1986, during which a number of significant decisions were taken. One of these was the reorganization of the HRK into the Kurdistan People's Liberation Army (Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan, ARGK). The numbers of ARGK guerrillas together with the resources they had at their disposal ran significantly short of achieving the PKK's ambitious objectives. Thus, the PKK resorted to radical measures in order to increase recruitment, and to this end its Third Congress in 1986 recommended a conscription law to make joining the ARGK compulsory.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, during the late 1980s the numbers of ARGK guerrillas increased significantly and its presence in the region started to grow. During the late 1980s, this led to a gradual increase in the number of attacks against the Turkish security forces and the village guards<sup>15</sup> as well as a widening of the area within which they operated. The mountainous terrain alongside the Turkey–Iraq border provided many hiding places for the guerrillas to shelter, and was particularly suitable for the successful execution of guerrilla war. The guerrillas were able to connect with local populations and establish local militias, who provided the important logistical support and also helped to coordinate the PKK's military activities when needed. The state security forces and village guards were the predominant targets of the guerrillas. The main forms of military activity by the ARGK consisted of raids on gendarme stations and other forms of military installations near the borders with Iraq and Iran, raids on gendarme and army stations in rural areas, ambushes, road checks, raids on villages where the village guards were located, and sabotage against economic facilities or state institutions in the Kurdish regions.

The guerrillas were organized within various levels, from small squads, to teams comprising a number of squads, to larger units equivalent to battalions. Although mainly hit-and-run tactics were deployed, the Turkish army's numerous large-scale operations against the guerrillas and other forms of "hot pursuits" during the early 1990s resulted in large-scale skirmishes that lasted a few days or even weeks. Therefore, the early 1990s were exceptional years in terms of the level of violence, with attacks becoming much more frequent and widespread. The areas in which the guerrilla attacks were carried out also became widespread. The guerrillas were orga-

## MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY IN THE 1980s & 1990s

nized extensively in many Kurdish majority regions, though the main conflict zones were the border areas primarily comprising the provinces of Hakkari, Şırnak, and Siirt (the mountainous areas that Kurds popularly refer to as “Botan”). During the mid-1990s, PKK activities expanded to a wider area extending toward southern Turkey to Hatay and Antakya and toward the Black Sea region in north-east Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Turkey found it impossible to eliminate the PKK presence in the region, despite its numerous military campaigns and large-scale operations. From 1992 onwards every year during autumn the Turkish army carried out cross-border operations supported by air strikes against the PKK.

Owing to the early success of the PKK in mobilizing the Kurds, its Fourth Congress held in 1990 hinted at the establishment of a popular government, the creation of “liberated zones,” and developing the people’s army to take the war to a higher level.<sup>17</sup> Overall, the insurgency proved very practical and the PKK grew in strength and size in a short space of time. Being the only Kurdish organization that challenged the state put the PKK in the leading position to hegemonize Kurdish politics in Turkey. Unlike the other Kurdish political groups—who either ceased to exist or relocated to Europe—the PKK managed to maintain its forces in the region and increased its recruitment throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Its Turkish socialist rivals, who also drew considerable support, especially from the Alevi Kurds, also began to experience major difficulties during the late 1980s once the signs of the difficulties in the Soviet Union became more apparent.

Consequently, the rival oppositional political organizations in Turkey that the Kurds supported lost their appeal, which created opportunities for the PKK to mobilize a wider section of Kurdish society. Having a presence in the majority Kurdish regions presented the PKK with an opportunity to reach out to many Kurdish rural populations, and through its political work it managed to win the support and cooperation of many villagers. The PKK’s popularity also increased because of the state’s harsh and heavy-handed approach toward the civilian Kurds. The state’s antagonistic and oppressive practices allowed the PKK to galvanize public opinion. From 1990 onwards, the popular expression of Kurdish identity demands and open support for the PKK became much more common-place in Turkey as Kurdish political activism evolved into a vocal social movement. This was demonstrated in a number of popular uprisings (*Serhildan*) between 1990 and 1993, in which large numbers of ordinary Kurds across Kurdish towns participated and often fought with the police and the gendarmeries.

Starting in the early 1980s, the PKK started to build a strong presence in Europe, mainly Germany, through a network of community organizations. In March 1985, the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (ERNK) was established to carry out the political development and mobilization of the masses.<sup>18</sup> From the mid-1980s onwards much more effort was placed in developing the ERNK, and consequently its activities as well as the organizational network grew rapidly throughout the late 1980s and

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

early 1990s. The ERNK was legally organized through a network of community and cultural centers in Europe. The European activities of the PKK allowed it to draw support from Kurdish communities in Europe, and the funding it collected enabled it to finance and expand its insurgency and political activities. The absence of legal restrictions placed on Kurdish identity and culture in Europe enabled the PKK to organize legally and establish a network of cultural and community organizations to mobilize Kurds in Europe. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s in many cities in Europe, the ERNK organized numerous events such as rallies and demonstrations, meetings, protests, hunger strikes, music festivals, cultural activities, the Newroz celebrations, and commemoration events. Such activities attracted large crowds, built the PKK's support base, and helped raise public awareness of the Kurds' struggle.

The PKK's presence in Europe enabled it to establish institutions that produced and disseminated its discourse. Its publication house, *Weşanên Serxwebûn*, was established in Germany; and both its political magazines, *Serxwebûn* (Independence) and *Berxwedan* (Resistance), were published there and distributed in most European countries. In August 1987, numerous sub-organizations were established within the ERNK to represent women, youth, and workers, and in 1993 more organizations representative of religious groups were established to provide representation for the Muslim, Alevi, and Yezidi religious communities. The existence of such representative organizations enabled the PKK to articulate within its discourse the specific demands of diverse Kurdish social groups and religious communities, and transcend the religious and tribal fragmentation to evolve into a mass movement. Being in Europe offered the space and opportunity for cultural development by enabling the Kurds to establish their own institutions that engaged in and fostered cultural revival. Initially, the PKK's cultural activities included the music group *Koma Berxwedan* [The Resistance Group], which was formed in 1981 in Germany to communicate the PKK's struggle through music to the Kurds in Europe. Furthermore, the members of the group took a leading role in the establishment, also in Germany, of the PKK's cultural organization, *Hunerkom* [Association of Artists], in 1983, which had the wider aim of promoting Kurdish cultural development and revival. Music constituted a significant aspect of Kurdish cultural renewal and development and was an important medium to narrate the PKK's resistance practices and communicate its struggle to the Kurds. In fact, *Koma Berxwedan* established itself as the main vehicle for conveying resistance music, and although it mainly organized performances and musical activities in Europe, its cassettes and CDs managed to reach Kurds in Turkey.

In the early 1990s, the PKK increased its efforts to establish and develop Kurdish national representative organizations in Europe that would provide democratic representation to the Kurds in the international arena. In Europe elections were held in November 1992 for the Kurdistan National Assembly. The elected delegates met in the areas under the control of the PKK guerrillas in Iraqi Kurdistan during the spring of 1993, to engage in meetings and draft laws for a future Kurdish state. The establish-

## MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY IN THE 1980s & 1990s

ment of the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile in 1994 was the highlight of Kurdish political activism in Europe, and although the PKK took an active part in its establishment, numerous other Kurdish organizations and parties as well as numerous leading intellectuals and independent political figures also helped in its establishment and activities. The Kurdistan Parliament in Exile evolved into the Kurdistan National Congress (Kongreya Netawa Kurdistan, KNK) in 1999, which aspires to be a broader representative organization for Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan. The KNK continues its diplomacy activities in Europe from its headquarters in Brussels, and continues to inform the European public about the situation of the Kurds in Turkey and other parts of the Middle East. Additionally, in 1994 an umbrella organization called the Kon-Kurd [Federation of Kurdish Associations in Europe] was established in Belgium. As a representative organization of Kurdish community organizations in Europe, it advocates Kurdish cultural and political rights as well as organizing many Kurdish political activities in Europe. The development of such Kurdish national institutions enabled the Kurds to form and develop stronger relations with the European Left, who have remained perceptive to Turkey's democratization and granting the Kurds their democratic rights.

### *The myth of Newroz and the PKK's contemporary myth of resistance*

My explanation of the PKK's hegemony over the Kurdish national movement in Turkey and its mass mobilization of the Kurds during the 1980s and 1990s pays close attention to the PKK's reactivation of the myth of Newroz to construct and deploy a contemporary myth of resistance that centres on the resistance practices of its leading members in Diyarbakır prison and its struggle in general.<sup>19</sup> From the 1970s onwards, the construction of the relations of difference—and the representation of the alternative Kurdish society—in the discourses of the newly formed Kurdish political parties and groups were done on the basis of the myth of Newroz.<sup>20</sup> The myth allowed the Kurdish national movement to trace the origins of the Kurds to the ancient Medes and re-activated/recreated Newroz and the “legend of Kawa” as the myth of origin. Furthermore, the PKK re-activated the myth of Newroz to construct a contemporary myth of resistance centered primarily on the PKK inmates' resistance in the Diyarbakır prison during the early 1980s and its ongoing struggle. The PKK's construction of a contemporary myth of Kurdish resistance to represent its struggle and the romanticizing of its guerrilla war against the state enhanced its hegemonic appeal by bringing the myth of resistance into reality. The Newroz festival became the most significant day in Kurdish political activism in Turkey, and during the 1990s large crowds were attracted to celebrate and protest on 21 March. The public celebrations and mass protest enhanced Newroz as the day of national resistance, with many individual acts of resistance and self-sacrifice by PKK members taking place on 21 March. The reference to Newroz enabled the PKK to situate its struggle within a

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

historical narrative and represent it as the embodiment of the Kurds' national struggle, which it used in its challenge of the state's hegemonic representation of the insurgency as "separatism" and "terrorism."

In comparison with its rivals, the representation of Kurdish identity and demands in the PKK's discourse were clearer. This was done via establishing a strong association between the Medes and the modern-day Kurds to invoke a historical "golden age" of the Kurdish nation to construct and represent a homogenous notion of Kurdish identity. The deployment of the myth of Newroz in the discourse, especially the construction of the Medean Empire as the "golden age" of the Kurdish nation, was significant for conceiving the unity and homogeneity of the Kurdish nation. Newroz as a symbol of the triumph of the struggle of the Medes was used to construct a benchmark, as something that needed to be recreated and emulated by the contemporary Kurdish national movement. Many of the acts of resistance were committed on the day of the Newroz festival, 21 March, and during the early 1990s organizing mass gatherings during the Newroz festivals and other important days in the Kurdish political calendar in many Kurdish cities and towns, especially in Diyarbakır, created Newroz as a symbol of Kurdish popular resistance.

The PKK's contemporary myth of resistance constituted the performers of resistance practices as "exemplars," and initially the myth was constructed around the performers of the PKK's early resistance in Diyarbakır prison. The significance of the construction of Newroz as a contemporary myth of resistance lay in the fact that it enabled the sedimentation of the PKK's discourse in practice by constructing it as representative of Kurdish struggle in Turkey. Later on, exemplars were broadened and included women. The mobilization of women by the PKK and its effect on the sedimentation of the PKK's discourse helped to embed the notions of "freedom" and "equality" in practice, bringing about an aspect change which in turn reduced the grip of traditional identities and religion and foregrounded the liberation and Kurdish struggle for freedom.<sup>21</sup>

The resistance by the PKK's leading members in Diyarbakır prison has been a mainstay in its contemporary myth. The key events started with the suicide of the leading PKK member Mazlum Doğan on 21 March 1982 in protest at systemic torture. The resistance continued with the self-immolations of four other members (Eşref Anyık, Ferhad Kutay, Necmi Öner, and Mahmut Zengin) on 18 May 1982 and culminated in the hunger strike that started on 14 July 1982 and resulted in the death of four more leading members in September 1982 (Kemal Pir on 7 September, Mehmet Hayri Durmuş on 12 September, Akif Yılmaz on 15 September, and Ali Çiçek on 17 September). Initially the main emphasis was on torture and oppression of political prisoners, and Doğan's death was described in *Serxwebûn* as part of a concerted effort by the Kemalist regime to annihilate all Kurdish political prisoners.<sup>22</sup> However, the statement commemorating the first anniversary of Doğan's death, distributed on 21 March 1983, described him as the "Contemporary Kawa" and his suicide as self-



## MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY IN THE 1980s & 1990s

immolation and an act of resistance.<sup>23</sup> In articles published to commemorate the resistance, the significance of the actions of the leading members became the focal point, and their resistance was described as a “conscious political action”:

Since entering the conscious stage of their life, they have taken part at a leadership level in our people’s national and social liberation struggle. The prison resistance was conscious political action by people who, if needed, were prepared to consciously sacrifice their life for the sake of developing our struggle. Their actions have created the true measures of our people’s national and social liberation struggle under the leadership of the proletariat, and have become the spirit of our struggle. It is its steering and sheltering force and it has left an ineradicable effect that will pull our people into continuous action and organise them.<sup>24</sup>

The historical importance and significance of the resistance in Diyarbakır prison for the Kurds’ struggle and their survival as a nation was also emphasized and the resistance was defined as the beginning of a new era:

To attain an honourable status, human decency, stand on our feet and say a few words or a few sentences in that period of history, we needed to resist. On behalf of a nation and for a section of humanity they said the most significant few words. However, these were such words that if not spoken then our party and our nation would have perished. It would have not made much sense to talk about the other values.<sup>25</sup>

The significance of the resistance lay in the fact that the PKK inmates did not accept the authority of the state, despite continuous unimaginable torture and attempts at subjugation. Their resistance against oppression, the defense of the Kurdish struggle under the harshest conditions, and sacrificing their own lives to defeat the submission imposed on the Kurds were interpreted by the PKK as the “spirit” of its struggle.<sup>26</sup> In numerous articles and books published to commemorate the resistance, the significance of the actions of the leading members became the focal point, and their resistance was described as “conscious political action,” the beginning of a “new era” for the struggle and survival of the Kurds as a nation.

With the start of the guerrilla insurgency on 15 August 1984, the PKK’s resistance took a new dimension and the insurgency started to take center stage in its contemporary myth of resistance. The start of the guerrilla insurgency was described as the “leap of 15 August” (15 Ağustos Atılımı), and the PKK’s activities from 1984 onwards provided ample material that can be used in the construction of its contemporary myth of resistance. The PKK militants who lost their lives in the insurgency were described as “heroes and martyrs of national resistance” and extensive obituaries were published throughout the 1980s and 1990s in each issue of the PKK’s magazines, detailing their “bravery” and “heroism.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition, numerous acts of self-immolation that took place in the early 1990s also received sustained attention in the PKK’s contemporary myth of resistance. They started with Zekiye Alkan, a medical student from Diyarbakır, who set herself alight

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

on the city walls on 21 March 1990; similarly Rahşan Demirel set herself alight in Izmir in 1992; and “Berivan” and “Ronahi,” pseudonyms used by Nilgün Yıldırım and Bedriye Taş, respectively, repeated the same practice in Germany in 1994.<sup>28</sup> All the above-mentioned self-immolations occurred on the day of Newroz and were described in numerous articles published in the PKK’s magazines as “sacred acts of resistance” and “sacrifice for the sake of the nation’s freedom.”<sup>29</sup> The crucial difference, however, was that in the early 1990s women were the main performers of the self-immolations and acts of “sacrifice.”<sup>30</sup>

Hence, during the early 1990s women started to be the performers of resistance acts and acquired center stage in the PKK’s contemporary myth of resistance. From the 1980s onwards, with the gradual increase in the activities of the Kurdish national movement, more and more Kurdish women started to engage in politics. In particular, women participated in large numbers in the numerous popular uprisings. In fact, one of the most significant developments that the PKK initiated, especially in the early 1990s, was the mobilization of women as new political actors, and this had a significant impact on the PKK’s overall mobilization. Not only did it significantly increase the PKK’s overall support base and fighting force, but also the presence of a significant number of female militants within the PKK ranks lessened the appeal and force of traditional values, such as male domination in society, and helped engrave ideas of equality and freedom in society, which were important elements in the PKK’s national liberation discourse.

These members who carried out numerous acts of resistance constituted “exemplars” representing resistance practices in the PKK’s discourse. Drawing on Conant’s discussion of exemplars in the work of Nietzsche, Norval argues that “the role of the exemplar is to ‘unsettle us’ and create an impersonal feeling of shame.” The importance of exemplars for politics is that their presence “acts as a call, as a reminder of another self, and another state of things, capturing . . . the possibility of another self, another way of doing things.”<sup>31</sup> In the commemoration events of the practices of resistance and the statements published on their anniversary, these individual acts of resistance and sacrifice are described by the PKK as the catalyst of a prolonged period of active resistance. For example, the suicide of Mazlum Doğan has been described as the event that activated the resistance in Diyarbakır prison and the PKK’s guerrilla war. Similarly, the self-immolation by Zekiye Alkan is described by the PKK as the catalyst of a prolonged period of active resistance and *Serbildans* in the urban centers of the region in which many ordinary Kurds took part.<sup>32</sup> Although it is highly unlikely that a strong casual connection, as emphasized in the PKK’s discourse, was present, the importance of such a claim is that the individuals and their resistance practices are constructed as “exemplary” of the PKK’s resistance and their actions are used to motivate others to take part in resistance. Given the mobilization of a significant number of women by the PKK and their participation in politics, it is unsurprising that they became performers of resistance practices from the early 1990s onwards, and increasingly began to be seen as exemplars.

## MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY IN THE 1980s & 1990s

Above all, the constitution of the exemplars in the PKK's discourse and the commemoration practices associated with their "resistance" and "sacrifice" had the aim of motivating ordinary Kurds to perform such acts of self-sacrifice for the movement and the Kurdish struggle. The resistance of the leading members has been discussed widely in numerous articles published in *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan* throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as well as during meetings and public gatherings that took place on the anniversary of these events to commemorate their resistance. The story of their resistance was narrated and disseminated widely in countless commemoration events and practices held for the leaders of resistance and the earliest "martyrs" of the PKK's struggle. It is standard practice to display pictures of the PKK's leading figures in Kurdish community centers across Europe, especially those of Mazlum Doğan, the performers of resistance practices in Diyarbakır prison, and Mahsum Korkmaz, who was the first commander of the PKK's guerrilla forces and died in March 1986. Extensive obituaries of these leading PKK members, as well as of other militants, frequently appeared in its publications. Remembrance ceremonies were organized in the Kurdish community centers run by the ERNK. These commemoration practices, especially the obituaries and life stories of the PKK militants, romanticized the guerrilla life and were used to disseminate the PKK's contemporary myth of resistance.

The representation of resistance practices was not confined to political discourse, but appeared in other artistic forms, such as music. The stories of resistance practices were narrated in the music of Koma Berxwedan from the early 1980s onwards, and in the music of other groups later in the 1990s. In fact, the contemporary myth of resistance constituted the center of Kurdish cultural revival, as the PKK's resistance was the main theme that the resistance music of Koma Berxwedan and many other groups and musicians narrated. In the early years the resistance was depicted as a celebration or *Dilan* in many popular songs. Songs commemorating specific events, such as the PKK's establishment on 27 November 1978, the start of its war on 15 August 1984, the resistance in Diyarbakır prison in the early 1980s, songs glorifying the guerrilla insurgency, the popular uprisings, and those that commemorated the resistance and sacrifices of the PKK's members, all featured frequently. Through music the story of the PKK's struggle and resistance was narrated and made accessible to many people, and such a representation enabled the PKK to reach out to wider Kurdish communities. The resistance music used and recreated popular folk melodies that many Kurdish people were familiar with, and was used in folk dancing, which added a performative aspect to the commemoration practices.

The PKK's contemporary myth of resistance was used extensively in the mobilization process, and images of the performers of the PKK's resistance practices, including pictures of its women fighters, were widely used in PKK publications. The importance of the contemporary myth of resistance for the PKK's mobilization of the Kurds was that it added force to the PKK's discourse, enhancing its widespread credibility among the Kurds. The guerrilla insurgency and the popular resistance the

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

PKK organized meant that resistance was something that occurred on a daily basis and convinced many that the PKK was capable of achieving Kurdish independence; this then added force to the PKK's discourse. By representing and interpreting its activities in light of the contemporary resistance myth, the PKK was able to define its struggle as the embodiment of the Kurds' struggle for freedom. Such a representation enabled the sedimentation of the PKK's national liberation discourse in practice and enhanced the PKK's hegemonic appeal by bringing the myth of resistance into reality, which in turn played a key role in its mobilization of the Kurds.

### *Conclusion*

The PKK's political and military activities throughout the 1980s and early 1990s led to the mobilization of a large number of Kurds in Turkey. From the early 1990s onwards, this started to acquire the characteristics of a mass mobilization, with popularly attended demonstrations, protests, and uprisings taking place frequently. The PKK established a well-organized network of community organizations and cultural centers in Europe. The Kurds in Europe played an important role by providing financial support for the PKK and establishing the information and organizational network that forged links with socialist and human rights groups and harnessed diplomatic support.

Additionally, the existence in Europe of institutions that played a key role in Kurdish cultural renewal meant that the restrictions that applied in Turkey could no longer suppress Kurdish cultural production and dissemination and presented the PKK with the opportunity to project Kurdish culture publicly. The Kurdish cultural revival constituted a significant aspect of the PKK's mobilization. Kurdish culture was made available to many people in a variety of contexts, making it part of people's daily life. The fact that music and folk dancing constituted the key components of Kurdish cultural renewal meant that it was accessible to a wide section of Kurdish society and they could easily connect to and consume it.

The PKK's contemporary myth of resistance played a significant role in the mobilization process and the sedimentation of the PKK's national liberation discourse in practice. It added affect and force to its discourse and enabled it to construct and represent resistance acts as the embodiment of the Kurds' long struggle for freedom and independence. In fact, an analysis of the PKK's construction of a contemporary myth of resistance highlights an interesting dimension of the nationalist discourse and shows the importance of the symbolic resources, such as myths, that the nationalist movement uses in its interpellation of the national subject. My analysis has also highlighted the importance of the PKK's reinvigoration of Kurdish culture and music, which played a significant role in the sedimentation of its national liberation discourse in practice.

- He cites Nazmi Sevgen's series of publications on the Kurds: "Kürtler," *Belgelerle Türk Tarihi*, esp. nos. 11-19 (1968-9).
42. "Bedirhan Bey," *Kurdistan* 14 (7 Nisan 1315, 19 April 1899); in Bozarslan's collection, Vol. 1, original at end of volume, transliteration from Ottoman article on p. 282.
  43. "Welat-Weten," *Kurdistan* 9 (3 Kânûn-i Evvel 1314 / 15 December 1898); in Bozarslan's collection, Vol. 1, original at end of volume, transliteration of Kurdish article on p. 227.
  44. *Kurdistan* 6 (28 Eylül 1314 / 10 October 1898); p. 3, in Bozarslan's collection, Vol. 1, original at end, transliteration of Kurdish article on p. 179.
  45. *Kurdistan* 2 (23 Nisan 1314 / 5 May 1898) p. 1; in Bozarslan's collection, Vol. 1, original at end, transliteration on p. 122.
  46. Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, pp. 6-7.

### 13. MOBILIZATION OF KURDS IN TURKEY DURING THE 1980s AND 1990s

1. Article 2 of the "Law regarding publications in languages other than Turkish" (Law no. 2932, enacted on 19 October 1983) prohibited the expression and dissemination of thought in languages other than those that were the first language of the states recognized by Turkey, effectively banning the Kurdish language; Derya Bayır, *Minorities and Nationalism in Turkish Law* (London: Routledge, 2013) p.103.
2. These include the TKSP (Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan), which was established in 1974 but changed its name to the Socialist Party of Kurdistan (PSK in Kurdish acronym) during its 3<sup>rd</sup> party congress in 1992, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) which was formally established on 27 November 1978 but had existed as a small political cell since 1973, Rizgarî (Liberation, 1976), KUK (Kurdistan National Liberationists, 1978), Kawa (1978), Ala Rizgarî (Flag of Liberation, 1979) and Tekoşin (Struggle, 1979). Rizgarî, Ala Rizgarî, Tekoşin, Kawa, were able to exist only as small groups publishing pamphlets and magazines, while others (such as the TKSP) proved to be more durable; but since the military coup in Turkey in September 1980, most of its activities have been taking place mainly in Europe.
3. For a more detailed discussion of the PKK's mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s, see Cengiz Gunes, "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey: Hegemony, Myth and Violence," *Ethnopolitics* 12:3 (2013) pp. 247-67.
4. Two examples of these are Omer Taspinar, *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Demet Yalcin Mousseau, "An inquiry into the linkage among the nationalizing policies, democratization and ethno-nationalist conflicts: the Kurdish case in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers* 40:1 (2012) pp. 45-62.
5. David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilisation and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 73.
6. Güneş M. Tezcür, "Violence and nationalist mobilisation: the onset of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers* 43:2 (2015) pp. 248-66.

7. Ibid., p. 249.
8. Ibid.
9. See also fn. 20. “Newroz” is the popular Kurmanji Kurdish spelling, but there are other spellings used, including *Nawroz* in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and *Nevruz* in Turkish. The spelling of the word has been contested, but the popularly attended celebrations organized by the Kurdish in Turkey use “Newroz,” and the official celebrations organized by the state use “Nevruz.” Lerna Yanik, “‘Nevruz’ or ‘Newroz’? Deconstructing ‘the invention’ of a contested tradition in Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46:2 (March 2006) pp. 285-302.
10. The concept of hegemony is drawn from Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and refers to “ethical, moral and political leadership.” Aletta Norval, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 46.
11. Ahmet H. Akkaya, “The ‘Palestinian Dream’ in the Kurdish Context,” *Kurdish Studies* 3:1 (2015) pp. 47-63.
12. Abdullah Öcalan, *Kürdistan Devriminin Yolu – Manifesto* [The Path of Kurdistan Revolution - Manifesto] (Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1992) p. 198.
13. PKK, *Politik Rapor: Merkez Komitesi Tarafından PKK 1. Konferansına Sunulmuştur* [Political Report: Submitted by the Central Committee to the PKK First Conference] (Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1982) p. 162.
14. Abdullah Öcalan, *3. Kongre Konuşmaları* [Discussions of the Third Congress] (Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1993) pp. 143-4.
15. The village guard system was established in the mid-1980s; some took part in it voluntarily, but many people were coerced into becoming village guards. It functioned as a Kurdish pro-state paramilitary force, and they frequently took part in military operations against the PKK guerrillas.
16. Abdullah Öcalan, *Kürdistan Halk Savaşı ve Gerilla* [People’s War and Guerrilla in Kurdistan] (Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1993) pp. 301-22.
17. *Serxwebûn* (September 1991) pp. 1- 2.
18. The program of the ERNK was drafted in the early 1980s and appeared as one of the PKK’s key political texts in 1982: PKK, *Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluş Problemi ve Çözüm Yolu: Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluş Cephesi Program Taslağı* (Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1984 2<sup>nd</sup> edn).
19. For a more detailed discussion of the PKK’s reactivation of the myth of Newroz to construct a contemporary myth of resistance, see Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012) pp. 31-7, 101-23.
20. It is generally accepted that Newroz has been celebrated for nearly 3,000 years in the Near and Middle East. It has a strong connection with Zoroastrianism and Persian mythology; however, there are various other ancient festivals celebrated by ancient societies, including the Hittites and the Babylonians, to which its origins are also traced. Delal Aydın offers an extended discussion of the construction of Newroz as a myth of origin. She draws

attention to the various discussions in the Kurdish journal *Jîn* during 1918-19, which highlighted the lack of a national holiday for Kurds; and it was within this framework that the legend of Kawa was constructed as a Kurdish national figure. However, initially the celebration of a national holiday was proposed for 31 August as opposed to 21 March. Further attempts were made in the 1930s to construct the legend of Kawa as the myth of origin by the leader of the Ararat Rebellion, Ihsan Nuri. Nuri associated the legend of Kawa with the festival of Tolhildan rather than Newroz, because Newroz had already acquired a national character in Iran, strongly associated with the Persian legend of Jamshid. See Delal Aydın, “Mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey: Newroz as a Myth,” in Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and Reconciliation* (London: Routledge, 2014) pp. 68-89.

21. Aletta Norval uses Wittgenstein’s discussion on “aspect dawning” and “aspect change” to provide an account of the way in which political grammars are challenged and the changes that take place in them: “Aspect dawning and change occurs when one realizes that a new kind of characterization of an object or situation may be given, and we see it in those terms.” Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, 113.
22. The headline “Diyarbakir Cezaevinde Katliam” [Massacre in Diyarbakir prison] was used by *Serxwebûn* to announce the death of Mazlum Dogan (*Serxwebûn*, June 1982, pp.10-11).
23. *Serxwebûn*, March 1983, p. 9.
24. *Serxwebûn*, December 1982, p. 4.
25. *Berxwedan*, Special Issue, June 1994, p. 4.
26. *Serxwebûn*, March 1986, p. 24.
27. See for example *Serxwebûn*, 15 April 1994.
28. *Serxwebûn*, 15 April 1994, pp. 16-19.
29. *Serxwebûn*, April 1994, p. 19.
30. *Berxwedan*, Special Issue, March 1994.
31. Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, p. 179, emphasis in original.
32. *Berxwedan*, 31 March 1994, pp. 15-16.

#### 14. TURKEY’S KURDISH PROBLEMS, THE KURDS’ TURKISH PROBLEMS

1. Erik Meyersonn, “How Turkey’s social conservatives won the day for HDP”, 8 June 2015, <http://erikmeyersonn.com/2015/06/08/how-turkeys-social-conservatives-won-the-day-for-hdp/>, last accessed 14 June 2015.
2. “Ruling AKP regains majority”, 2 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34694420>, last accessed 22 January 2016.
3. Amnesty International, “Turkey: end abusive operations under indefinite curfews”, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/3230/2016/en/>, last accessed 22 January 2016.
4. “28 mayors replaced with trustees by Turkish government”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 September 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-interior-ministry-appoints->