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## Mapping action and identity in the Kobani crisis response

Thomas McGee<sup>\*</sup>

### Abstract

This article compares humanitarian operations associated with Turkish state and pro-Kurdish movement actors in response to the large cross-border displacement of Kurdish-Syrians into Turkey from the September 2014 Kobani crisis. Analysis draws on actor mapping methodologies and fieldwork conducted in the Kurdish-majority town of Suruç in southern Turkey. Parallels with the 2011 Van earthquakes highlight the ethno-national complexities and potential controversy encountered when responding to humanitarian needs of predominantly Kurdish populations in Turkey. The alternative territorial identities generated by practices of Kurdish municipal-level “governmentality” (through camp management and humanitarian assistance) trouble the assumed hierarchy between Turkish state authorities and Kurdish challengers.

**Keywords:** Kobani displacement; humanitarian action; Suruç; Turkey

### Bi nexşekirina çalakî û nasnameyan di hewldanên qeyrana Kobanî de

Ev gotar wan hewl û çalakîyên mirovî yê dewleta tirk û akterên heriketa kurdî berawird dîke ku di hengava muhacîrbûna kurdên Sûriyeyê bo nav Tirkiyeyê de, anku dema qeyrana Kobanî ya îlona 2014an, hatine encamdan. Tehlîlên gotarê xwe dispêrine metodên bi nexşekirina akteran û xebata meydanî li Suruçê piranî kurdnişîn. Hevterîb ligel zelzeleyên Wanê yê 2011an, gotar îşaretê bi hebûna aloziyên qewmî-neteweyî û dubendiyên cor bi cor dîke gava li Tirkiyeyê hewl ji bo qetandina pêdiviyên jiyânî yê kom û xelkên kurd tên dan. Nasnameyên herêmî yê alternatîv ku encama siyasî û kiryarên “hukûraniya” kurdî ya di asta şaredariyan de ne (bi rêya rêvebirina kempan û arîkariyên mirovî) zorê dide wê hiyerarşîya ferazî ya di navbera rayedarên dewleta tirk û berhelistkarên kurd de.

### نەخشەکیشانەوهی چالاکى و ناسنامه له پروبهر و بوونهوهی قهیرانی کۆبانیدا

ئهم وتاره چالاکیهه مرۆفدۆستانهکانی دهولتی تورکیا و ناکتورمکانی لایهنگری بزووتنهوهی کورد لهورکیا له پێوهندی لهگهڵ جیگورکیی کوردهکانی سوریا لهسهه سنورهکان و له کاتی قهیرانی کۆبانى له سنپتامبر 2014دا لهگهڵ بهکتر بهرورد دهکات. لێکدانوهکه پشت به نەخشەکیشانەوهی شیوازیبانه و مهیدانیبانه کا

هاوتهریب لهگهڵ بوومهلرزهکانی شاری وان له سالی 2011دا وتارمهکه ناکوکیه نتهوهی و ئیتنیه و ئالوژییه جوراجوره شاراوکان له پێوهندی لهگهڵ پروبهر و بوونهوهی پنداویستیه مرۆفیهکان لهو شارانهی تورکیا که زۆرینهی دانیشتوومکانی کوردن، دمخاته روو. ناسنامه ناوچهیهه جیگرومکان که دهستکهرتی سیاسهتی "حوکمرانی"ی کوردی له ناستی شارموانییهکاندان (له رێگای دامهزراندنی کهمپ و یارمهتی مرۆفیبانه) دهبنه هۆکاری کیشه لهئیوان هیرارشیهی فهرزیبانهی کاربهدستانهی تورکیا و بهرهلستکاره کوردهکان.

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**Introduction**

"People don't want to go to the tents of AFAD (Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Agency). They lack confidence as they are the tents of the state. They come to the tents of the municipality. At the moment around 3 thousand people are awaiting tents. AFAD negatively responds to our demand for new tents. We demanded that the tent cities be built by us. They only provide some small aid despite our initiatives. For example, there is a problem of electricity. We have electricity here, but TEDAŞ (Turkish state Electricity Company) is not undertaking its responsibilities for the other tent cities." Olcay Kanılbaş, member of Democratic Regions' Party (*Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, DBP)<sup>1</sup> (ANF, 2014).

The above statement by a local Kurdish official speaks clearly to the sense of mistrust, competition for resources, and conflict in perceived mandates between key actors engaged in the provision of relief assistance to displaced Syrian Kurds taking refuge in Turkey. The passage also neatly introduces two broad actor identities: on the one hand the state and its associated institutions (referred to here as "they"), and the localised "we" of the Kurdish movement and its municipal representatives. Building on a contextual understanding of Turkish-Kurdish relations, this paper draws on actor mapping methodology to examine the impact of evidently complex social and political dynamics upon the humanitarian response.

From mid-September 2014, Syria's Kurdish region of Kobani, also referred to by its Arabised name, Ayn al-Arab, became the tragic subject of global headlines. The extremist jihadist group, the Islamic State (IS),<sup>2</sup> which had long surrounded the area, suddenly launched an intensified three-front offensive towards Kobani town. Heavy weapons IS had plundered from gains in Iraq left the Kurdish People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) unable to effectively resist such advances. Prior to this, Kobani had received little attention from the international community during the protracted Syrian conflict, despite a year-long siege and suffering a severe lack of resources.<sup>3</sup>

In Sunni-Arab areas of Syria previously taken over by IS much of the unaffiliated population had remained and submitted (sometimes reluctantly) to the new Islamic leadership. However, awareness of violations committed against Kurdish Yezidi civilians during the August 2014 take-over of the

<sup>1</sup> DBP is a successor party of the perhaps better-known Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP).

<sup>2</sup> The group was previously and alternatively known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that at the start of the 2011 Revolution in Syria, Kobani was the site of regular anti-government demonstrations. Protesters made a name for the town in Arab and international media by being some of the first to take to the streets, beginning their weekly mobilisations even before Friday prayers, which elsewhere served to mark the start of marches.

Shengal region in Iraq motivated the people of Kobani to flee *en masse* (Amnesty International, 2014). This led to the largest single population influx across the border into Turkey since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 (Montgomery, 2014). Indeed over 138,000 people were reported to have crossed the border during the first few days of displacement alone (UNHCR, 2014a). Although many Kurds had left Syria for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where the refugee population was already reported to be approximately 200,000,<sup>4</sup> prior to the Kobani crisis there had been no Kurdish-specific influx of significant size into Turkey. Rather, the increase in Kurds entering the country had to that point been gradual and largely proportionate to the growing numbers of the overall Syrian displaced population.

News coverage of the Kobani crisis mostly focused on the narrative of Kurdish resistance (Abdo, 2014; Salih, 2014),<sup>5</sup> in addition to military developments (Gee, 2014; James and Letsch, 2014), including the subsequent campaign of airstrikes against IS by the international (US-led) coalition, and reinforced support to YPG coming from both the Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions and *peshmerga* fighters sent by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (Spencer and Samaan, 2014). From the onset, commentators have penned advocacy pieces calling for greater international awareness of, and support to, the Kurds (e.g. Graeber, 2014). With the battle to dispel IS ongoing,<sup>6</sup> far less media attention was given to the humanitarian situation of the civilian population, which had almost entirely left the Kobani region, mostly seeking refuge across the border in Turkey. This article aspires to present a contribution to fill the information gap in existing literature on the dynamic relations of relief aid providers to this displaced population, extrapolating on actor engagement in “official”, as well as “alternative”, delivery and coordination architectures.

While part of the affected community had moved further afield, the present study will focus on actors providing assistance to the displaced population based in Suruç (Pirsûs in Kurdish): the area directly bordering Kobani itself on the Turkish side.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, those displaced from Kobani are considered as “new arrivals” within the general Syrian “refugee” caseload in Turkey and, following such logic, are integrated into established assistance programmes.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the Kobani population in Suruç was sufficiently concentrated and visible to constitute its own distinct (sub-) community.

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<sup>4</sup> This figure is based on UNHCR registration data, August 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, #BerxwedanaKobanê (Kobani Resistance) became a popular twitter hashtag to draw world attention to events taking place in the border-town.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of field research, significant advances were being made by Kurdish forces seeking to “liberate” Kobani from IS control.

<sup>7</sup> Excluding those settling in Urfa, Gaziantep or further afield, the number of individuals left in Suruç was roughly estimated to be 50,000.

<sup>8</sup> For further details on the temporary protection regime concerning Syrian refugees, see Özden, 2013.

While appreciating the international legal definition as a person outside his/her country due to a “well-founded fear of persecution,” this author recognises the especially problematic connotations carried by the term “refugee” in the context of displacement for a trans-border stateless nation. In respect of manifest resistance against such identifications by members of both displaced and hosting Kurdish communities, I seek, as much as possible, to avoid reinforcing normative labels that clearly trouble the human subjects in question. When the term “refugee” is used in this article, it is in order to underline the particular rights to assistance and protection conferred by its recognised legal status.<sup>9</sup>

### **Case study justification**

The anticipated value of the selected case study is two-fold. Firstly, observing the challenges faced by external actors in navigating the complex stakeholder relations, it was evident that there remains a general lack of contextual knowledge about the actor dynamics implied by engagement in this field. Of the large number of established international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) who quickly descended on Suruç in order to conduct initial needs assessments in the wake of the Kobani crisis, disappointingly few succeeded in implementing a rapid response. Reasons cited by the organisations’ representatives included limited understanding of the “local access situation,” little prior contact with, and few available entry points into, the community, as well as apprehension about “selecting the ‘wrong’ channels through which to work.”<sup>10</sup> Applying a more comprehensive actor mapping methodology to this case study is pragmatically important for evaluating the inadequate Kobani response, and the challenges still faced in similar contexts. Indeed, observations from this study have been requested by, and shared with, representatives of a number of international humanitarian organisations active in the region.

As such, while sharing the goal expressed by one group of local humanitarian practitioners to “inform and contribute to more coordinated and strategic implementation and assessment processes” with respect to interventions in Suruç (Bihar, 2014: 2), the present article is also driven by a second motivation: namely, to reflect more broadly and conceptually on the implications that actors of “contentious politics” can have on a humanitarian response (Tilly, 2008), and how their relations with others may determine questions of humanitarian access. The particular Kurdish-Turkish identity dynamics in this context further complicate the inherent asymmetrical power relations existent between humanitarian “agencies” and the beneficiaries they

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<sup>9</sup> While Turkish law considers Syrians as “guests” rather than refugees, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) regularly refers to the population of “Syrian refugees in Turkey.”

<sup>10</sup> Explanations provided in author’s interviews with INGO representatives present in Suruç during October 2014.

are mandated to serve. Little academic work has been produced on the challenges posed to the coordination of humanitarian action by tensions between state and non-state challengers. In comparing the approaches of actors associated with the Turkish state and those responding with a visible pro-Kurdish identity, this article contributes a compelling case study to expand knowledge in this very area.

Given the somewhat contemporary nature of the Kobani response, case-specific academic literature remains scarce. While news articles were often accompanied by images from the camps in Suruç as a result of the relatively easy and secure access for photo-journalists, the textual content of most media pieces focused on military developments taking place on the Syrian side of the border. Those publishing on the relief response are in the most part humanitarian actors themselves. Among them, we find two largely distinct political narratives propagated, which tend (if at all) to acknowledge each other's existence only through criticism and accusation. Firstly, the reports most forcefully reflecting the “official” position of the Turkish state are by the Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (*Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı*, AFAD) and the Turkish Red Crescent (*Kızılay*). On the other hand, pro-Kurdish relief narratives are transmitted by the Kurdish-led municipalities (see *Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Belediyeler Birliği*, GABB, 2014), as well as the Kurdish Red Crescent (*Heyva Sor*)<sup>11</sup> and other affiliated actors. Meanwhile, international organisations, including the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), have generally been cautious in publicly mentioning these dynamics, preferring to do most of their advocacy through “quiet” diplomacy with the parties in question.

This article builds on the currently very few contributions that bring together the Turkish and Kurdish narratives (e.g. Bihar, 2014; IMPR, 2014). It is this author's view that a more balanced and faithful description of reality will more justly serve academic analysis of the situation in Suruç. Independent study should account for and comment on, rather than reproduce, the polarisation that governs the logic of aid distribution within this crisis. With generally little consideration given to mechanisms of relief assistance in the Kobani response, even in daily media, this paper draws on literature highlighting actor dynamics after the 2011 Van earthquakes for a comparative perspective.

### **Methodological notes**

This study draws broadly on methodologies of actor mapping; that is the process of identifying and profiling individuals and/or groups whose actions

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<sup>11</sup> This includes both *Heyva Sor a Kurdistanê* founded from Germany in 1993 as well as *Heyva Sor a Kurd* of 2012, which works especially in Rojava/Syria.

are considered to be of significant impact on a given subject.<sup>12</sup> While these approaches are employed in fields as diverse as business and project management, conflict analysis and public policy, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights usefully describes such mapping as a “common tool for understanding key actors, identifying and mapping out power relationships and channels of influence” (OHCHR, 2011: 24). Actor mapping and analysis has useful pragmatic applications in informing and determining “context-sensitive” engagement strategies. In situations of conflict and/or significant hardship, this function is even more crucial given the accepted humanitarian imperative to “do no harm” (Anderson, 1999).

Mapping exercises are often used normatively to establish clear parameters that individual actors must respect for the sake of effective systems coordination. While appreciating the need, for example, to “ensure clear division of responsibility of refugee protection actors and the importance of complementarity” (Reach Out, 2005), this article seeks not to limit its analysis to formally mandated roles and officially prescribed inter-institutional relations. Rather, I use material collected through ethnographic field enquiry in order to more accurately describe the complex, and often untidy, reality. Research for this study was conducted with the assumption that daily actor engagements significantly deviate from the ideal-type coordination systems that exist on paper. Moreover, it is noted that much literature on humanitarian coordination mechanisms is produced by actors operating within, or even setting up, such systems, and consequently the bias promoting their predominance is unsurprising. As such, effort is made to consider what are often referred to as non-traditional actors (including pro-Kurdish ones), who due to their extra- (or even counter-) systemic nature are frequently left out of the schema drawn by authoritative commentators in the aid industry.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to a literature search on the specific case, as well as Kurdish-Turkish relations and regional humanitarian action more generally, regular field visits were made to Suruç during the months of September-December 2014. The first visit took place on 21st September as the town was suddenly forced to deal with the mass arrival of people fleeing Kobani. Initial observations indicated a number of actors responding to the crisis, visible in Suruç, for example, through the distribution of cooked meals in the town square. Based on these details, a preliminary inventory of actors was

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<sup>12</sup> While the terms “stakeholder” and “actor” are often used somewhat synonymously, the latter is conscientiously employed in this article to refer to those who not only have an interest (i.e. stake) in decision-making, but indeed are also positioned to influence outcomes.

<sup>13</sup> The expression “non-traditional actors” is frequently used by humanitarian professionals to refer to those operating outside, and independently of, the most prestigious global coordination bodies: the somewhat exclusive Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and/or the UN-convened Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). According to this dominant usage of the term, many non-western and local actors are in practice thus labelled as “non-traditional.”

developed. Contact was made and research meetings set up in order to discuss the situation of assistance provision through semi-structured interviews. While all those encountered were open to discussion and dialogue, it should be noted that conversations with Turkish officials were comparatively limited given the author's ability to communicate in Kurdish and Arabic, but not Turkish. Most of the international NGOs encountered requested non-disclosure of their organisation's identity due to political sensitivities. They have been anonymised accordingly.

During the meetings, respondents were questioned about their activities, interactions with others, and views about the overall crisis response. Finally, they were asked to recommend other actors and/or respondents as a form of "snowballing" (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Following initial engagement, multiple return visits were made to the representatives of relief groups, during which further discussions were held, and aid distributions, as well as interactions with other actors, were observed.

### **The context of humanitarian action in Turkey**

Recognising that the Kobani crisis came about as a direct result of the ongoing Syrian war, which has led to considerable changes in Turkey's humanitarian policy, the following section presents an overview of the national emergency response system, with particular focus on post-2011 developments. The historic impact of Kurdish-Turkish relations on instances of displacement and humanitarian crisis is also briefly traced, as it is considered relevant to understanding the Suruç/Kobani case study.

In parallel with its growth as a regional and world power, the last decade has seen Turkey develop as a humanitarian actor both at home and overseas. Transforming itself from being principally a recipient of external aid, Turkey has in recent years emerged as a significant international donor, indeed it was the fourth largest globally in 2012 (Çevik, 2014),<sup>14</sup> and has built a reputation as a "humanitarian state" (Keyman and Sazak, 2014). Propelled by the ambitious foreign policy approach of key ideologue and statesman Ahmet Davutoğlu, the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP)<sup>15</sup> government has used aid assistance as an entry point to consolidate Turkey's "soft power" influence over strategic geographies under the banner of "humanitarian diplomacy" (Tank, 2015).

With aid transactions and national interests largely coinciding, commentators note that Turkey's various interventions have historically been underpinned by a (sometimes understated) logic of ethnic and/or religious solidarity, and focus primarily on the Turkic and Islamic world (Binder, 2014). The post-Cold War emphasis of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination

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<sup>14</sup> Based on 2013 Global Humanitarian Assistance Report results.

<sup>15</sup> AKP is a socially conservative political entity founded in 2001 from a number of existing reformist and Islamic groups.



Agency's (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, TİKA) overseas development aid on the new Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus has latterly expanded to reflect the country's increasingly multi-regional foreign policy strategy.<sup>16</sup> Following humanitarian and peace-keeping engagement in the Balkans from the mid-90s, the period of AKP rule since 2002 has seen Turkey re-orientate its policy to embrace both geographies of Africa and the Middle East. In the former, high profile exposure for Turkey's "on the ground" approach was gained with the unprecedented visit of then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Mogadishu, Somalia, in August 2011 (Ali, 2011).<sup>17</sup> The bilateral nature of Turkish aid engagement was also highlighted in the context of the Arab Spring revolutions, which presented a unique opportunity to build relationships with emergent powers across the region (Altunışık, 2014: 340-2).

In this context, Turkey showed early and outright support for the popular uprisings of 2011 that preceded the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Moreover, it took a sympathetic position towards political and armed bodies of the opposition, actively hosting the Syrian National Council in exile. An initial policy characterised by "hospitality" to those forced to flee regime repression was enacted to include an "open door" border system and provision of "temporary protection" to Syrians as "guests" (*misafir*) since October 2011 (Kirişçi, 2014).<sup>18</sup> Despite the Turkish humanitarian system mobilising a high capacity response,<sup>19</sup> it became clear that the measures implemented were predicated upon the flawed assumption that the conflict would swiftly conclude, thereby facilitating mass repatriation to Syria (İçduygu, 2015).

Turkey now hosts the largest community of Syrians displaced by the conflict, while its border simultaneously provides vital access routes for aid to many of those internally displaced in northern Syria.<sup>20</sup> As a result, domestic humanitarianism has been forced to evolve from its previous emphasis on preparedness against occasional natural disasters to addressing large-scale, sustained refugee support and cross-border assistance programs.

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<sup>16</sup> TİKA was founded in 1992 to coordinate project engagement in the newly independent Turkic/Muslim republics of Central Asia.

<sup>17</sup> In contrast, western representatives and aid workers tended to work on Somalia remotely from a base in more secure, neighbouring Kenya.

<sup>18</sup> At the time of field research, roll-out of the newly established General Directorate of Migration Management (GDMM) under the Ministry of Interior had not been fully implemented, though it was anticipated that the institution focus on regulating the "temporary protection" regime and harmonising the status of various groups of non-Turkish nationals within the country.

<sup>19</sup> The comparatively high quality of Syrian refugee camps in Turkey has been widely recognised, with the New York Times even praising Turkey for the "Perfect Refugee Camp" (McClelland, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> By August 2014, UNHCR estimated that 815,000 Syrians had already sought refuge in Turkey.

### **Humanitarian actor system**

While much of the literature on the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey has been policy-minded, for example, advocating for migration law reforms (Kirişçi, 2014; İçduygu, 2015), Anglophone academia, as Binder points out, “know[s] little about Turkey’s rapidly increasing humanitarian engagement” (2014). Moreover, far more attention has been paid to TİKA’s role in overseas development projects (Ali, 2011; Özkan and Demirtepe, 2012) than to the system of actors involved in implementing humanitarian action within the country. Historically, the devastating consequences of the 1999 Marmara earthquake represent a revelation in Turkish disaster management, highlighting the state’s dominant top-down attitude and “lack of local involvement and empowerment” of civil society actors (Özerdem and Jacoby, 2006: 59).

Peculiar to Turkey’s highly centralised humanitarian model is the active role played by state ministries and bureaucracies in the daily administration of assistance programs. While the AKP-dominated Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) leads on political aspects of aid and high-level coordination, it entrusts AFAD to be the face of crisis response in Turkey. Founded in 2009 under the auspices of the Prime Minister’s office as a result of a decade-long process to reform emergency response institutions in Turkey, AFAD is now responsible for registration of Syrians as well as establishing and directly administering camps to accommodate them. Treating the refugee response as a predominantly sovereign issue, Turkey’s decisive leadership and insistent non-reliance on the international community has empowered AFAD to perform functions elsewhere associated with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The latter in Turkey has chiefly played a consultative and advisory role since the start of the Syria crisis.

Besides the AKP-led government, Binder highlights two other key forces within the Turkish humanitarian assistance model: i) the conservative business community and ii) the movement of wealthy Islamic philanthropist Fethullah Gülen (ibid). All three of these influential entities generally reference Sunni Muslim ideas of charitable action, and lend their support to respectively associated faith-based national NGOs.

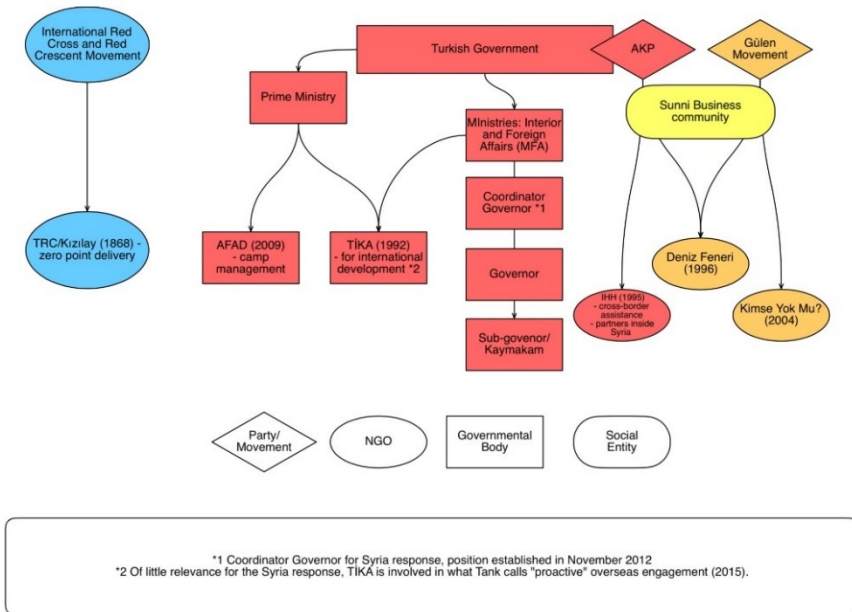
As the diagram below illustrates, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (known commonly as İHH)<sup>21</sup> is considered strongly affiliated to the ruling AKP and receives the ideological, if not also organisational, backing of head of state Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, privileged access, including to refugee camps in Turkey (Özden, 2013: 8-9), has allowed the organisation to become the principal provider of relief aid to Syrians on both sides of the border. However, İHH’s explicitly Muslim-

<sup>21</sup> İHH is an acronym from the Turkish name: *İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı*.

<sup>22</sup> This relationship is confirmed by İHH’s own website, which hosts an article entitled “Support from Erdogan for İHH”: [www.ihh.org.tr/ru/main/news/0/support-from-erdogan-for-ihh/2439](http://www.ihh.org.tr/ru/main/news/0/support-from-erdogan-for-ihh/2439) (last accessed 7 May 2016).

focused origins and scope,<sup>23</sup> with a somewhat militant identity, render it a controversial entity in the eyes of mainstream actors in the international humanitarian community. Questionable trans-national connections to internationally prohibited and extremist groups (including Hamas and al-Qaeda) have added to this notoriety, further complicating the perceived uncritical proximity between the organisation and key state politicians (WSJ, 2010).

**Figure 1.** Pictorial Representation of Turkish Humanitarian Architecture.



Meanwhile, two other Turkish NGOs *Deniz Feneri* and *Kimse Yok Mu?* have been perceived as humanitarian implementers for the Gülen Movement. The usually high degree of support and facilitation by Turkish officials for national faith-based charities noted by several academics (Keyman and Sazak, 2014: 10; Tank, 2015) was complicated somewhat by intensification of the public dispute between former allies Gülen and Erdoğan in 2013. Most remarkably, tensions culminated in the exceptional raid on İHH's Kilis office on 14 January 2014 by the *Jandarma* (military police), with Gülen's movement perceived to have exerted pervasive influence on the latter (Vela, 2014). In light of the tensions between actors of conservative Islam in Turkey, *Deniz*

<sup>23</sup> Founded to provide aid to Bosnia's Muslims in the mid-90s, the organisation continues to treat causes and conflicts affecting Muslims as the core of its work. In Syria, its partner organisations are mostly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

*Feneri* is acknowledged to have re-positioned itself more equidistantly between Gülen and the AKP (reflected in Figure 1).<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC)<sup>25</sup> has a uniquely prestigious status as the oldest and largest charitable association in Turkey preceding the founding of the Turkish Republic (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2003: 45-68). While officially non-governmental, and moreover enjoying formal recognition as a member of the international movement of Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, the organisation is state-mandated and furthermore, according to one study, is “perceived by practically everyone as an extension of the state” (Paker, 2007: 654). While the Turkish government established AFAD as the lead agency of the Syrian Crisis Humanitarian Assistance Operation in August 2012, TRC, owing to its experience in customs clearance, was officially mandated with the responsibility for “zero point delivery” and transfer of cross-border assistance into Syria (Binder, 2014; Kirişçi, 2013).

### **The Turkish humanitarian context and the Kurds**

In addition to the long-time competition between central and local actors, humanitarianism in Turkey is significantly complicated by the government’s anxiety about political challenge posed by Kurds as both the country’s largest ethnic minority and a group of distinctive national identity (Tank, 2015: 3). Since the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne endowed the Turkish nation with a formal state structure while depriving Kurds of the same, academics have mostly reproduced the distinction between Turkish authorities and challenger Kurds as a non-state group (Heper, 2007; White, 2000; Gunter, 1997). Turkish history tends to be ordered according to structuralist logic, examining the consequences of regime change (through both military coup and ballot box), while Kurdish developments are more frequently accounted for by drawing on social movement theory (Watts, 2010; Romano, 2006). Though this binary system of Turkish oppression and Kurdish resistance is clearly a simplification of the reality at the individual level, experiences of exclusion and manipulation by the central government have become central to Kurdish collective subjectivity.

Frequent references to the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion and the repressive response by the Turkish government in discourses on Kurdishness (e.g. Olson, 1989) exemplify the construction of national identity around a broad “dialectic of denial and resistance” (Vali, 1998: 85). The history of multi-faceted social engineering, including co-option, assimilation, non-recognition, neglect, forced displacement, combat etc. undertaken by Turkey’s successive governments against the country’s native Kurds (Üngör, 2008), presents significant challenges to the possibility of needs-based and neutral

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<sup>24</sup> This assertion is informed by the anecdotal observations shared by several key respondents during October 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Also known as (Türk) *Kızılay*, the Turkish word for “Crescent.”

humanitarian action. Moreover, Kurdish identity itself retains somewhat controversial associations in Turkey due to the highly political history of conflict between Kurdish rebels and the state.

While Kurdish society has been significantly influenced by (conservative) Islamic and tribal traditions, contemporary usage of the term “Kurdish Movement” typically refers to a specific leftist, secular mass mobilisation that emerged in the early 1970s (Romano, 2006: 99-182). Founded by a leader perceived to have “c[o]me out of nowhere” (Marcus, 2007: 30), the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) increasingly became the dominant voice representing Kurdish ethno-political demands. The outbreak of armed hostilities between guerrilla insurgents on behalf of an emboldened Kurdish national movement and the Turkish state military around 1984 opened a chapter of further polarisation, framed by the latter within an anti-terrorism and “security regime” narrative (Dorronsoro, 2008).

In this context, population movements and humanitarian crises involving Kurds are particularly contentious, as demonstrated by the displacement of Iraqi Kurds to Turkey after both intensification of Saddam Hussain's Anfal campaign of ethnic cleansing in 1988, and the 1991 Gulf war (Ihlamur-Öner, 2013). Fearful of a potential security threat on its territory, Turkey sought in 1988 to contain the risk that there might be PKK sympathisers among the more than 60,000 refugees by keeping them in 12 tightly controlled camps. During the 1991 influx, Turkey blocked the entry of fleeing Kurds, thus forcing the creation of a safe haven in Iraq, which would facilitate the cross-border return of Iraqi Kurds who had come to Turkey (Özdamar and Taydaş, 2013). These experiences left traces of deep paranoia about Kurdish ethno-national identity within the institutions of Turkey's asylum system, the policies of which already historically favoured those of “Turkish descent and culture” (Kirişçi, 2014: 7; İçduygu, 2015).

The general dynamics changed somewhat after the arrest of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, with the movement entering an official peace process with the state, renouncing separatist armed struggle and shifting its ideology to embrace “radical democracy” for all in Turkey (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012). Nonetheless, pro-Kurdish actors have in the main part, and sometimes wilfully so, retained their “challenger” status. Moreover, the legal Kurdish parties, starting with the People's Labour Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP) in 1990, that seek representation through contesting elections are often perceived as PKK surrogates (Watts, 2010: 13). However, through accessing municipal resources, pro-Kurdish representatives have used their hybrid “activist-politician” identity to acquire new status as official authorities and transcend traditional characterisation of Kurds as largely reactive to hegemonic actions of the central state. This article argues that despite often still espousing a somewhat extra-systemic identity, the municipalities have demonstrated their capacity for pro-active mobilisation of

their own responses to the (humanitarian) needs of Kurdish areas during the crisis in Syria.

While the Turkish government has elsewhere facilitated cross-border relief shipments (particularly at the Bab Al-Salame and Bab Al-Hawa crossing points into opposition-controlled Aleppo), access to Kurdish populated areas of Syria has been restricted, with only occasional transfers of humanitarian aid being permitted. Despite the UN Inter-Agency convoy of 79 aid trucks via the Nusaybin-Qamishli border to al-Hassaka Governorate in March 2014, three months later this crossing point was excluded from the 2165 Security Council Resolution, which authorised the use of four other border gates for United Nations cross-border deliveries into Syria. In addition to the Kurdish municipalities managing to arrange for some aid to be delivered, Turkish NGO İHH has, as a result of its close connections to the AKP government and consequent ability to gain the necessary approvals, been the dominant actor sending aid to Kurdish regions of Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Preliminary research interviews with Kurds from Syria highlighted the criticisms and controversy manifest in popular perceptions of humanitarian assistance delivered cross-border from Turkey. Besides accusations that relief shipments present a screen for support to (Islamist) armed groups in Syria (Humeyr and Tattersall, 2015), it was generally considered that decisions governing humanitarian access were politically motivated. A case in point was the Turkish government's attempt to establish a border wall at Nusaybin, separating the Kurdish communities on the Syrian and Turkish side of the border in November 2013 (Letsch, 2013).

### **Humanitarian Action in Suruç**

While, as mentioned above, INGOs quickly took an interest in the needs around Suruç, they were met with the task of situating themselves within the field of national and local actors already engaged in aid provision. Broadly speaking, most of these operational entities can be classified through actor mapping according to their proximity to, and identification with, the two main “forces at work” (OHCHR, idem: 25): specifically the Turkish state response and that of the Kurdish national movement. In many cases, similar activities are conducted by actors on both sides of this political divide (see the example of camp administration dealt with in detail later in this article). Table 1 presents in the most basic terms the key actors associated with each affiliation.

The state-supported response is administered by the sub-governor's (*kaymakam*) office as representative of the central government at local level. While the sub-governor is appointed and not a local of Suruç, his office employs a number of Kurdish civil servants from within the community. The

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, İHH had sent assistance into Kobani only a few days before IS began advancing on the area: Retrieved from [www.ihh.org.tr/tr/main/region/suriye/8/ihhdan-rojava-ve-kobaniye-27-yardim-tiri/2489](http://www.ihh.org.tr/tr/main/region/suriye/8/ihhdan-rojava-ve-kobaniye-27-yardim-tiri/2489) (last accessed on 12 April 2015).

*kaymakam* has hosted coordination meetings, and serves as the “officially” correct interlocutor for UN and INGO agencies, through endorsement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Executing state-directed action on the ground are foremost AFAD, and the governmental directorates (e.g. Department of Health), with the support of TRC/*Kızılay*.

**Table 1.** Basic terms and key actors affiliated

Turkish Actors	Kurdish Actors	International Actors
Sub-governor of Suruç ( <i>kaymakam</i> ); Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD)	Suruç Municipality ( <i>belediye</i> ) and other Kurdish-run municipalities (Diyarbakir/Van etc.)	United Nations (UN) Agencies: principally UNHCR
Turkish Red Crescent (TRC/ <i>Türk Kızılayı</i> )	Kurdish Red Crescent ( <i>Heyva Sor a Kurdistanê</i> )	International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement
Turkish NGOs (e.g. İHH)	Kurdish (& diaspora) NGOs (e.g. Kurdish Doctors Union)	International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs)

Besides this highly centralised, state-led response, which represents the established system for refugee administration in Turkey, is another network of actors grouped around the local Kurdish authorities represented at the municipal office (*belediye*) level. Pro-Kurdish organisations operating in coordination with, and under the wide umbrella of the municipalities, include *Heyva Sor* (Kurdish Red Crescent) and diaspora-based branches of the Kurdish Doctors Union. Despite the municipalities being legally elected bodies, officially integrated into the system of state governance, their Kurdish representatives often maintain their popular legitimacy by stressing extra-systemic identities and counter-hegemonic discourse. While receiving the standard funding allocation from the Bank of Provinces, Suruç Mayor Orhan Şansal confirms not having received any state support specifically to respond towards the Kobani displacement crisis.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, and with little professional humanitarian experience (by international standards), they were, building on local community knowledge, able to mobilise an early response. Public buildings were opened up to house the displaced, and the team of volunteer loaders and sorters operating from the municipal *garaj* (depot) was

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview via social media on 9 January 2015.



quickly expanded. According to their own capacity assessment, they “meet to a great extent the needs of the people, despite limited facilities” (ANF, 2014).

In spite of the physical proximity of the governor's office (*kaymakam*) and that of the municipality (*belediye*), both around Suruç's central square, coordination and transparent information sharing appear limited, with the relationship instead characterised by competition between parallel service provision mechanisms. Two largely distinct bodies have evolved with the purpose of coordinating humanitarian action in Suruç. First, the Crisis Desk was established by the sub-governor with its counterparts AFAD and Kızılay. This Desk holds authority to determine which external actors are permitted to engage and provide assistance in the area. Effectively excluded from coordination opportunities associated with the above structure, the municipality established the Kobani Crisis Coordination, which is essentially a second crisis desk, through a central coordination committee with participation from various entities belonging to the Kurdish movement (GABB, 2014: 3). Likewise, the Rojava Assistance and Solidarity Association (*Rojava Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği*) was founded in an attempt to professionalise the organisation of in-kind assistance collected and sent by organisations, other municipalities (Van, Diyarbakir etc.) and the public, as well as to accommodate monetary donations.

### **Van earthquake comparison**

With many similar actors and conceptual issues at play, the two earthquakes that struck the Van region of Turkey in 2011 present a precedent and useful parallel for understanding the dynamics of the 2014 Suruç response. Like the Kobani crisis, the Van earthquakes demonstrated the potential controversy surrounding relief responses in majority-Kurdish areas in Turkey, with these tensions easily amplified by media reactions (AFP, 2011).

Both emergencies generated much introspection as well as accusations of mismanagement on the part of the national authorities. However, a clear difference is that while in Van the government's actions were described as “turning a natural disaster into a political one” (Sharifi, 2011; also Schäfers, 2016), the people of Kobani suffered a purely human-induced tragedy; one that was both political and military from the outset. For the former, a number of studies and publications responded to the call for evaluation by addressing the possible infrastructural weaknesses and inadequate technical preparations for a region prone to seismic activity.<sup>28</sup> Such a scientific reading was not

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<sup>28</sup> The majority of Anglophone academic publications on the Van earthquakes are written by engineers and scientists (especially those with architectural and seismological specialisations), and deal exclusively with technical deficiencies. Specific criticisms focus on negligent engineering practices, including buildings built too high, illegal construction, use of poor quality concrete (Mimarlar Odası, 2012; Taskin and Sezen, 2012), and lack of “disaster sensitive planning” (Turan, 2012).



tenable for the Kobani crisis. With Turkish foreign policy decisively favouring certain parties to the war in Syria (Vela, 2013), not to mention its fierce opposition to the emergence of a *de facto* Kurdish administration across the border, the forced displacement of civilians from Kobani is at origin an issue marked by pronounced political sensitivity.

Nonetheless, in both cases, there are attempts to provide an explicitly apolitical (and moreover actively de-politicised) presentation of the field situation. In several works addressing questions of post-disaster coordination in Van, a narrative consciously cleansed of Kurdish agency is propagated, with no mention of the affected population's Kurdish ethnic identity. For example, Celik and Corbacioglu's relatively in-depth network analysis of earthquake responders fails to reference efforts of the Kurdish-run municipalities and NGOs (2013). In Suruç, it was observed that a similar discourse was being reproduced at the *Ad Hoc Inter-Agency* meetings facilitated by UNHCR. There, the municipality-run camps of Suruç, with their symbolically powerful Kurdish names (discussed later in this article), were referred to only by assigned numbers. Kobani camp, for instance, had effectively been renamed as "Camp 1." As such, in both cases, the ostensible commitment to humanitarian and/or scientific objectivity embedded within the "officially" correct discourse of relief action disguises a powerful hegemonic state logic.

Despite its cross-border dimension, and the Kobani crisis primarily affecting a non-citizen population (i.e. foreigners to the Turkish Republic), relief action in both Suruç and Van is framed through a narrative of state-managed disasters (De Maupeou, 2013). A statement by the then Prime Minister Erdoğan after the Van earthquake that "[t]he state is there with all its institutions" could equally apply to the Kobani response (Avci, 2011), with the Health Department, AFAD, TRC/*Kızılay* all stationed on the border together with the police and national security forces. The central role of the state is significantly reinforced by traditional humanitarian actors in what Ozkapici refers to as the official coordination system (2012). For example, a report by IFRC states that the:

"[Van] response operation has been led by the government, notably by the Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) assisted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other agencies [...] The Turkish Red Crescent participates as a permanent member in the boards, which are established by AFAD. These boards are responsible for determining rules and principles of relief operations to be conducted during disasters. At provincial level, the responsible body is the concerned Provincial Directorate of Disaster and Emergency that is working in close cooperation with the Turkish Red Crescent" (2012).

A few rare reports on the earthquake crisis hint towards a more complex actor reality. While providing little analysis of inter-actor relations, Zaré and Nazmazar present a more objective timeline of events and description of other (including Kurdish) responders involved in the relief process (2013). More thorough examination of civil society-public sector cooperation in the crisis (TUSEV, 2013) highlights the significant, yet somewhat ambiguous, role of the local municipalities as “activists in office” (Watts, 2010). Their association with the pro-Kurdish movement results in a spill-over of politicised identity into the humanitarian field. Referring to long-standing unresolved grievances and disputes labelled by the Turkish state as the “Kurdish problem,” it is noted that “provision of relief aid after the 2011 Van earthquake [...] clearly brought some of these social problems to the surface” (Özerdem and Özerdem, 2013: 5). Interviews from the field in Suruç suggest that this phenomenon remains highly prevalent in 2014.

Mistrust between local Kurdish and central Turkish authorities in Van resulted in coordination and organisational obstacles to effective aid management. Lack of communication and consultation on the part of the government and its provincial sub-offices with the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP)-run municipalities led to significant tension and accusations that the insufficient state response was politically motivated (Akgönül, 2011). This was clearly manifest in the municipalities' exclusion from the AFAD-led coordination committees despite the former's evident pre-crisis local knowledge (TUSEV, 2013: 5). Culpability for limited cooperation is contested since “the [BDP] mayor complained that he was not invited to coordination meetings, while the governor [appointed by Ankara], claiming that an invitation is not needed, said that it was the mayor who was not present in the meetings” (Onur, 2011).

Political tensions increased with Kurdish voices criticising the government for initially refusing offers of international assistance, while the government provocatively accused “those [Kurdish actors] who are able to organise people to throw stones at police and soldiers, vandalizing the streets, throwing Molotov cocktails [...] fail[ing] to reach out to an area that is right next to them” (Avci, 2011). The historic mistrust that the Kurdish movement has for the government of Turkey was reiterated in Suruç with pro-Kurdish commentators there implicating Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria and well-known displeasure for the Kurdish administration project in Kobani as factors facilitating IS's successful displacement strategy.<sup>29</sup> Post-crisis criticism was equally strong, with a report by Kurdish municipalities stating that the “central government hasn't shown the required sensitivity on this issue, and established only 3 camps for 8,960 people from Shingal and Kobani. And, the

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<sup>29</sup> According to an interview conducted by a coalition of Human Rights Organisations (2014) “the opinion that Turkey knew about the attacks on Kobani beforehand was prevalent.”

government hasn't developed any policies for the remaining war victims" (GABB, 2014: 3).

While the immediate needs for temporary shelter and basic relief items were common to both Van and Suruç, the Kobani crisis took place against the backdrop of an emerging Kurdish self-administration in Syria and a more empowered Kurdish municipal representation in Turkey. Nonetheless, it is considered that the Van case provides a valuable parallel for understanding the Suruç response. It presents a precedent landscape, in which "it would not be an exaggeration to claim that political interests and calculations accompany every initiative from the collection of aid to its distribution" (Akgönül, 2011). Nowhere, perhaps, is this phenomenon more clearly manifest than with assistance provision in the camps of Suruç.

### **A comparison between AFAD and municipality-run camps**

Shortly after the initial cross-border movement of civilians fleeing Kobani, two overlapping yet identifiably differentiated caseloads began to emerge in Suruç. As those unable to accommodate themselves with friends or relatives upon arrival turned to communal settings for shelter options, families often found themselves, sometimes unconsciously, selecting spaces associated with either pro-Kurdish or state-supported entities. As an immediate response to the sudden influx, the Suruç municipality allowed people to settle in public buildings including the wedding hall, cultural centre and several mosques. Meanwhile, state-run transit camps in rural Suruç were used to take in newly arrived families. It was reported that some 9,000 individuals moved to pre-existing Yibo and Onbir Nisan AFAD centres near Suruç.<sup>30</sup> While in December 2014 AFAD had begun preparations to open a much larger and better designed state-funded facility further out at the Ali Gör junction to house some of the more than 40,000 Kobani population self-accommodated or hosted in Suruç region, the municipality had – for its part – established three "tent camps" on the northern exit road from Suruç towards Urfa with a total capacity for more than 10,000 individuals.<sup>31</sup>

While the AFAD-administered camps are mostly known after the area in which they are located, for the municipality naming camps serves as a powerful symbolic practice. Not only do the camp "signifiers" resonate strongly with Kurdish nationalist terminology, but they also enact the associated territorial claims discursively. Given that "Rojava" refers to Western (i.e. Syrian) Kurdistan, for example, its appropriation as a name for a camp on the northern side of the international border is deeply troubling for Turkey and its conception of state sovereignty based on inviolable territorial integrity. Challenging the organisational terrain of the state, the name also

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<sup>30</sup> Statistics provided by UNHCR in December 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Idem; The number of municipality-administered camps in Suruç had increased in early 2015, but by June of the same year they had, besides hosting a few remaining families, essentially ceased to operate as camps.

invokes a determination to return to the homeland, as such confirming the camp as a symbolic space of dual resistance: both against the Islamic State aggressors and Turkish state policy, which has historically been reluctant to acknowledge Kurdish existence in the country.

**Figure 2.** Signage to “Rojava” camp administered by the Suruç municipality



Such a satellite settlement of Rojava within the borders of the Turkish Republic emphasises the broader geographical nature of Kurdish identity, and substantiates subversive trans-border solidarity. Moreover, the administrative structure of elected community representation within the camp strongly resembles the “commune” governance system evolving in Kurdish-controlled territory of Rojava/Syria. Establishing the respective identities of the Kobani and Shehid [Martyr] Arin Mirkan camps (the latter named after a female fighter who carried out a suicide action against IS while defending the city) can be understood as willed acts of commemoration, symbolically compensating for losses incurred across the border, and continuing the trans-border dialectic of repression and resistance.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, these “out-of-place” names can present a point of embarrassment for Turkish officials when brought up in coordination meetings and, as mentioned earlier, were eventually replaced with numerical identification.

Not only symbolic, camps are of course also “lived” spaces for their communities. In the municipality-established camps, people were heard speaking openly about support for Kurdish People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) forces, with children seeming spontaneously to

<sup>32</sup> See parallel practices by the Palestinian diaspora observed by Peteet, 2005; Schulz and Hammer, 2003.

sing pro-Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) songs whenever international visitors were present.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, such behaviour is remarkably absent in the camps of AFAD. Based on interviews with those living in both municipality and AFAD-run camps, the identity of the camp administration seems to condition the kind of political expressions people are comfortable to make, rather than necessarily forming opinion; nor does it appear that political ideology strongly determines who settles in which camp. After establishing relations with people residing in the municipality camps, a number explained that they are simultaneously registered with AFAD and regularly attend AFAD distributions outside the camp. “My political views and my family's needs are separate issues,” says one such resident. “I have always supported the Kurdish movement, and continue to do so, but we all know AFAD's resources are greater.”

Confirming Liisa Malkki's analysis of the camp as a “technology of care and control” (1992: 34), a space of humanitarian aid and containment, many in Suruç were left with somewhat ambivalent sentiments. While his description of the municipality-run camps as “places of liberation and resistance” underlines the opportunity for emancipatory demarcation of collective identity, one research participant hosted by relatives in the town nevertheless stressed: “I will do everything in my power to avoid the camps, for to live in a camp here is to enter the big battle between the state and the [Kurdish] party.” It is clear that the camps of each actor serve to support its respective political narrative: the state emphasises its role as primary service provider, while the Kurdish movement asserts itself as the legitimate custodian for its ethnic kin.

### **Impact on the humanitarian space**

While in many conflict-induced crises, humanitarian space and access are limited by the presence of armed groups, in Suruç negotiation of the relations between aid actors of various identities is as much of an obstacle as are legal and bureaucratic restrictions. Competition between parallel assistance systems, and significantly two sets of governance structures, results in a polarisation of the humanitarian response. Though difficult to ascertain the extent of overlap in services and particular “beneficiaries” served,<sup>34</sup> there is a clear duplication of assumed institutional missions between the Turkish state authorities (AFAD, ministries etc.) and local Kurdish municipal representation, as well as, for example, the respective Turkish and Kurdish Red Crescent organisations.<sup>35</sup> The distinction between Turkish (state) actors and those

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<sup>33</sup> Observation based on a number of visits by the author to the camps during the research period.

<sup>34</sup> The possibility of duplication, particularly in non-camp settings, was highlighted as a cause for concern by several INGOs during coordination meetings.

<sup>35</sup> According to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, “there can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent society in any one country.”

related to the Kurdish movement is, therefore, less structural or typological (i.e. not public sector verses civil society) than it is based on political identity and ideology.

While AKP's ruling strategy has included empowerment of the municipalities as decision-makers in local matters, and indeed the party's first victories in Turkey were experienced at the municipal level (Buğra and Savaşkan, 2014: 68), Turkey's humanitarian response system continues to devalue the role of local-level actors, including non-government-affiliated NGOs. The engagement of the Kurdish-run municipalities in the organisation of emergency humanitarian assistance and their partnership with a number of mainstream international NGOs in Suruç exceeds their officially prescribed institutional mandate, and destabilises the highly centralised system of crisis management in Turkey. Moreover, entering this field as an alternative set of authorities allows pro-Kurdish entities to transcend the reductive characterisation of Kurds as reactive non-state challengers, and instead to transform their challenge by pro-actively performing parallel state-like duties on a localised level. Recognised as interlocutors well acquainted with the affected population by representatives of the international humanitarian community provided a level of legitimacy to the Kurdish-run municipalities, even if this did not always lead to direct funding or support for pro-Kurdish actors.

At the same time, this polarisation of actors presents a direct threat to the maintenance of humanitarian neutrality and can present obstacles to access for humanitarian engagement. This has led to some of those sympathetically learning about the Kobani people's suffering from afar encountering difficulties in finding an "appropriate" way to send support.<sup>36</sup> Donors (large and small) as well as INGOs have hesitated before making a commitment within this political minefield, and many implementers have found themselves labelled with unwanted partisan identities. The polarisation and perceived obligation to choose one side over the other became a reality for a number of actors. Responding to the municipality's attempts to enter the coordination field, and recognising that they are operationally relevant, UNHCR engaged them in bilateral meetings, and visited the camps they administer (UNHCR, 2014b), but was only authorised to implement directly through the state. Others took risks by trying to conduct distributions independently of both the Turkish and Kurdish authorities. Indeed, one INGO arranged for a group of

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Acting as a parallel body to TRC, the Kurdish Red Crescent's very existence consequently troubles the neat organisational logic that one national society can serve all peoples in Turkey while observing the movement's other essential principles, notably: Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality and Independence.

<sup>36</sup> Based on the author's e-mail correspondence with potential funders, a number of would-be individual donors sought a neutral organisation with a good track record and access to the affected population, expressing their anxiety about possible legal repercussions should they send funds internationally to a group perceived to be associated with the PKK.



civil society activists from Kobani to implement the delivery of their commodities to the urban-based population in Suruç without the knowledge of either the state or the municipality. While successfully bypassing the coordination deadlock in this way presented a solution for a rapid response, the most effective sustainable INGO interventions were conducted by those maintaining relations with both Turkish and Kurdish authorities simultaneously.

One interesting case is the engagement of the Turkish Red Crescent. While, based on lessons learned from the Van earthquake, it might be assumed that TRC would be situated squarely within the state-directed response and therefore distance itself from pro-Kurdish actors, observations from the ground in Suruç (particularly from the municipal depot) highlight a good degree of field coordination with municipal authorities. Through its role in border-crossing facilitation of previous aid deliveries to Kobani, TRC members had already developed a “friendly” working relationship with the municipality at the local level. Such pragmatic field relations led pro-Kurdish actors to consider TRC as a useful facilitator with the institutions of the state, while AFAD was more typically viewed as the unapproachable implementer of state policy. Though TRC is a national ambassador acting on behalf of the state, AFAD’s sovereign identity is coupled with perception of being an uncompromising agent of the ruling AKP. Thus, the collaborative relationship between TRC and the Kurdish municipalities in Suruç demonstrates the sometimes blurred and negotiable boundary between state and society actors in Turkey’s complex humanitarian infrastructure.

## **Conclusion**

Through presenting the key actors engaged in the Kobani response, this article has documented the clear presence of competing systems of “governmentality” affecting humanitarian action in Suruç. The two broad networks, associated with the Turkish state and pro-Kurdish movement respectively, constitute largely parallel structures, conducting similar yet uncoordinated activities. This dichotomy operates less on the level of typological actor variation (i.e. public sector versus civil society) than through the distinct political identities accompanying actions in the field. While all actors may be motivated by a humanitarian imperative to respond to the crisis, their engagements are framed through contrasting ideological commitments. Kurdish relief actors generally express a sense of solidarity and duty to assist their ethnic kin from across the border, while Turkish assistance providers underscore the high capacity of the state to comprehensively meet humanitarian needs within the national territory.

While the local authorities would ordinarily be one of the essential pillars of a coordinated humanitarian response, the municipalities run by the Kurdish party had, prior to the Kobani crisis, generally been treated by the state and international bodies as non-conventional relief actors. The strategic position

of the pro-Kurdish municipalities to respond to the situation in Suruç, however, presents a unique opportunity for the Kurdish movement and associated relief bodies to gain exposure to the international humanitarian community. Highlighting the municipality's capacity to facilitate access to the field as an alternative authority, this article applies to the context of humanitarian action the "Yes, but ..." re-assessment of the traditionally assumed state-versus-society/oppressor and victim distinction in Turkish-Kurdish relations, as considered by recent literature (Watts, 2009).

Finally, it is hoped that the Kobani case study serves to elucidate some of the complexities manifest more generally in relations between humanitarian response actors. This article concludes by calling on those engaging practically and academically in humanitarian action within situations of political contention to further reflect on the implications of (ethno-national) identity upon questions of disaster coordination and humanitarian access.

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