Conference Paper – Please do not quote

BRISMES Annual Conference 2012, 'Revolution and Revolt: Understanding the forms and causes of change' 26-28 March 2012, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Title: The Construction of 'Exemplarity' and the Contemporary Myth of Resistance in the Kurdish Nationalist Discourse

Dr Cengiz Gunes[1]

Abstract
This paper analyses the reactivation of the myth of *Newroz* (celebrated traditionally on 21st March) as the myth of Kurdish origin and resistance to 'construct' a contemporary myth of resistance in the Kurdish Nationalist discourse. The contemporary myth was constructed around the resistance practices of the leading members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the Diyarbakir Military Prison during the early 1980s, and was deployed extensively to represent the PKK's struggle in political discourse and through art and music. Its significance was that it constituted the performers of resistance practices as 'exemplars' to motivate ordinary Kurds to perform acts of resistance. The paper will argue that an analysis of the PKK's contemporary myth of resistance is essential to understand the processes at work in its mass mobilisation of a significant number of the Kurds during the 1990s and explain its hegemony over the Kurdish resistance in Turkey. The symbolic representation of the practices of resistance through art and music enabled the PKK to extend its appeal to the masses. Furthermore, organising mass gatherings during the *Newroz* festivals and other important days in Kurdish political calendar in many Kurdish cities and towns, especially in Diyarbakir created '*Newroz*' as the symbol of Kurdish popular resistance. Romanticising its guerrilla war against the Turkish state enhanced its hegemonic appeal by bringing the myth of resistance to the reality, to situate its struggle in a longer timeline and represent it as the embodiment of Kurds' long struggle for independence and freedom.

Key Words: Kurds; Turkey; nationalism; mobilisation; myth; hegemony;

---

[1] Cengiz Gunes holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Essex, UK. He is the author of *The Contemporary Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012). His main research interests are in Identity and Nationalism in Turkey, Democratic Theory, Discourse Theory and Post-structuralist Political Theory. Currently he is an Associate Lecturer at the Open University. Email address: cgunes07@gmail.com

Introduction

The current wave of Kurdish political activism in Turkey is generally traced back to the early 1960s. Kurdish political activists were initially active within Turkey's socialist movement; however, from the late 1960s onwards, many began to call for the establishment of separate Kurdish political organisations. In the 1970s this led to the emergence of numerous Kurdish political organisations, and the articulation of Kurdish identity and demands within the Marxist discourse, which resulted in the constitution of the Kurdish national liberation discourse in the mid 1970s. Since then, with increasing vigour, the Kurdish national movement started to challenge Kemalism – the Turkish state nationalism and the country's official ideology – and the set of relations of identity and difference instituted by it. The political and ideological debates that took place within the Kurdish movement and between Kurdish organisations and Turkish socialist organisations during the 1970s and early 1980s led to the ideological condensation of the national liberation discourse. It characterised the Kurds as a colonised people, their country – Kurdistan – was seen as an international and inter-state colony, and put forward the proposal that their national unification could only be achieved under the leadership of a revolutionary movement led by the Kurdish working class. This framing of the Kurdish question gained widespread acceptance among Kurdish activists and political organisations who, in order to challenge the state's hegemonic discourse depicting the Kurds as essentially Turkish, began to put forward an alternative conception of identity that emphasized the antiquity of the Kurdish nation and its rich culture. The political practices that the national liberation discourse fostered sought to end the Kurds' national oppression by the states that ruled Kurdish populations as well as the prevalent economic oppression and exploitation of the Kurdish masses by Kurdish feudal elites.

While Kurdish politics in Turkey during the 1970s was characterised by organisational disunity and internal conflict, the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by the hegemony of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK in Kurdish acronyms) and its guerrilla insurgency. Initially during the late 1970s, the PKK's use of violence was sporadic and against the Kurdish tribal leaders and some rival Kurdish organisation. From 1984 onwards, however, the nature of the campaign changed significantly with the Turkish army and the state's security forces becoming its main targets. The better trained, equipped and organised militants started to fight the army and security forces in coordinated attacks predominantly in the rural areas. These military practices had, in the long run, the aim of inciting a popular national rebellion that would lead to the overthrow of the Turkish rule in majority Kurdish regions in Turkey. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the scope and depth of the insurgency increased significantly and through its widespread political consequences, the PKK mobilised a large number of the Kurds in Turkey. Through its media and information network, it was able to reach out to many Kurds and evolve into a mass movement with supporters and sympathisers numbering several millions. This period represents the peak of the PKK's insurgency and is characterised by the heightening of the antagonistic relations between the Kurds and Turkey. By the early 1990s, the PKK evolved into a transnational mass movement that organised political and cultural activities in Turkey as well as many other European countries. Its insurgency had major social, political and economic consequences, including significant loss of life.

The sudden success the PKK had in mobilising large numbers of Kurds and the broader political challenge by the Kurdish national movement in Turkey led, in the past 15 years, to an increase in academic studies on the rise of Kurdish nationalism and the conflict in Turkey. The histories of the early manifestations of Kurdish nationalism, such as Van Bruinessen (1992) and Olson (1989), have been supplemented by conflict analysis and political history accounts that have a narrower focus on the re-emergence and evolution of Kurdish nationalism from the 1960s onwards and the conflict during the 1980s and 1990s (Olson 1996, Kirisci and Winrow 1997, Barkey and Fuller 1998, Van Bruinessen 1998, McDowall 2000, White 2000, Bozarslan 2003, Natali 2005, Taspinar 2005, Romano 2006, Özcan 2006). These provide a causal explanation that highlights the significant role that socio-economic factors (increased urbanisation, spread of education, and the economic backwardness of the majority Kurdish regions, etc.) played in the re-emergence of the Kurdish national movement and the growth of Kurdish nationalism since the 1960s. It is argued that socio-economic transformation contributed to the growth of Kurdish nationalism by making available new forms of consciousness and creating new opportunities for the Kurds to form links and associations with other progressive forces (Van Bruinessen 1998, p.41; Taspinar 2006, pp.88-92; McDowall 2000, pp.404-5). However, the more specific questions concerning the ideological and political debates over strategy that took place within the Kurdish movement during the 1970s, the subsequent hegemony of the PKK over Kurdish politics in Turkey and its mass mobilisation of the Kurds remain somewhat under-explored.

The state's excessive and often indiscriminate use of force and repression, which was most acute during the military rule between 1980 and 1983, and included the use of indiscriminate violence against ordinary people and widespread torture against activists, is cited by Taspinar (2006) as the reason behind the PKK's success in mobilising large numbers and its strong appeal amongst the Kurds (p.97). Barkey and Fuller (1997) attribute the PKK's dominance to its ability to fight the Turkish military and survive against the efforts to eradicate it (p.30). The PKK's nationalist mobilisation also features significantly in Romano's (2006) case study of Kurdish nationalist movement, which draws our attention to the effectiveness of strategies, tactics, and resource mobilisation that the PKK deployed. Romano argues that by using the already existing networks and exploiting the conflicts between the landlords and peasants – by fighting against landlords in defence of peasants rights – the PKK's early cadres enhanced the movement's base and operations and managed to win the sympathy of the peasants (pp.72-4). In fact, the PKK's strategy to manipulate local politics to its advantage is identified by Romano 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' (p.73).

While the explanations provided in conflict analysis and political history accounts do well to draw attention to the conditions that made antagonism between the Kurds and the Turkish state possible, they do not provide sufficient focus on how the Kurds' experience of *oppression* was interpreted by the Kurdish national movement. Despite being victims of state violence, especially during political crises and military rule, many 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. While Romano's account correctly highlights the impact of the PKK's strategy in its credibility with the Kurdish population, more thorough analysis of the PKK's discourse and the representation of its struggle in political discourse and artistic forms are needed to explore the reasons behind its appeal to the Kurds and its hegemony over Kurdish politics in Turkey.

The main claim that this article advances is that a detailed analysis of the discourses of the Kurdish national movement is needed to offer a broad assessment of the mass mobilisation of the Kurds in Turkey. In part 1, by drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory and the theoretical concepts of 'hegemony' and 'myth', I elucidate the approach I take. The discourse theory and analysis framework is used to provide an account of the constitution of Kurdish political subjectivity, the representation of Kurdish identity and difference in the past 30 years in Turkey, and enquire into why such a representation has been *affective* and *resonated* with the Kurdish population. In Part 2, I reflect on the political debates that took among numerous Kurdish political organisations to highlight the contestation over strategy and Kurdish identity during the late 1970s and to search for 'clues' for the PKK's subsequent hegemony from the early 1980s onwards. In part 3, I analyse the PKK's construction of its contemporary myth of resistance, its extensive use in the representation of its struggle to the Kurdish masses and in the mobilisation process. The discussion offered in part 2 and 3 examines the contents of manifestos, political programmes, political magazines, pamphlets and resistance music, which were the main outlets used by Kurdish organisations to disseminate their discourse to the wider Kurdish civil society.

1. Accounting for the re-emergence of Kurdish political subjectivity

The theoretical framework I deploy in my research focuses on the study of nationalism as a discourse and seeks to highlight its specificity and particularity by emphasising its ideological nature and the particular elements that it articulates. Finlayson (1998) stress that 'individual nationalisms always contain a very particular "content" that aims to define the general culture and values of the "national" people and which, in turn, is related to the construction and deployment of such values within political ideological discourse' (p.99). The ideological nature of nationalism is also stressed in Freeden (1998), which assesses the claim whether nationalism can be seen as a distinct ideology or not. Freeden argues that nationalism's 'conceptual structure is incapable of providing on its own a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources and conflict management which mainstream ideologies address' (p.751). Instead he characterises nationalism as oscillating between a 'thin-centred ideology' – defined as an ideology that 'severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by deliberate removal and replacement of concepts' – and a component of other ideologies, such as liberalism and conservatism (p.751).

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and discourse analysis framework is chosen as it allows me to focus on Kurdish nationalism as a discourse and to explore the issues of hegemony and mass-mobilisation in greater detail by situating it within a historical framework that examines the historical and structural conditions that gave rise to it and

influenced its evolution since the 1960s. Discourse theory 'investigates the way social practices systematically form the identities of subjects and objects by articulating together a series of contingent signifying elements available in a discursive field' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p.7). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) define articulation as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' and the 'structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice' is defined as discourse (p.105). On a more narrow sense, discourse can be seen as 'social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p.3-4).

The concept of hegemony plays a central role in a discourse theoretical explanation and it is drawn from the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. To counter the political power of the bourgeoisie, Gramsci argued that the working class needed to institute its own hegemony and achieve internal control over the social classes and the nation. For a class to become hegemonic and achieve power it needed to, in addition to dominating or coercing other classes or groups, provide ideological leadership and struggle, with ideology seen as the means through which one group dominates the others in civil society (Gramsci 1971, p.12 and pp.57-8). Crucially however, Laclau and Mouffe untangle the association between a hegemonic force and a fundamental class that Gramsci and other Marxist theorists maintained. Norval (2007) highlights that in this theorisation hegemony 'becomes a form of social relations in which the unity of a political force is constituted through a process of articulation of elements with no necessary class belonging' (p.46).

The concept of myth plays a crucial importance in the institution of hegemony. Laclau (1990) defines myth as a 'space of representation which bears no relation of continuity with the dominant "structural objectivity"' and states that myth fulfils an important function by providing a 'surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed' (p.64). Dislocations – which 'refers to the process by which the contingency of discursive structures is made visible' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p.13) – create the conditions for the emergence of new political subjectivities and their significance is that *myths* of an alternative social objectivity emerge and challenge the existing social objectivity. In any given time however, an individual chooses to identify with a particular subject position out of various others or emphasise hers/his identification with one subject position more than the others. In order to investigate issues concerning how individuals identify with a particular subject position or why they mobilise as a subject, discourse theory utilises the concept of *political subjectivity*. Generally, thorough contextual analyses are needed to determine the emergence of new political subjectivities and their challenge of the existing order. In the context of nationalism, the framework used here seeks to uncover the 'force' and 'grip' of nationalist discourse and identify why a nationalist mobilisation is able to generate *affect* amongst the target populations (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p.107; Stavrakakis 2007, pp.190-96).

Dislocations can be conceived of specific events or of more common processes, such as the development of capitalism, the socio-economic modernisation and spread of education. On the specific issue of dislocations and the emergence of new political subjects, Laclau (1990) states:

> We thus have a set of new possibilities for historical action which are the direct result of structural dislocation. The world is less given and must be increasingly constructed. But this is not just a construction of the world, but of social agents who transform themselves and forge new identities as a result (p.40).

In the case of Kurds in Turkey, the combined dislocatory effects of the development of capitalism and the mechanisation of agriculture which led to the Kurds' migration to Western Turkey, the transformation to multi-party democracy in 1946, the rise of an oppositional left-wing movement during the 1960s, the rise of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, the Kurds' experience of oppression and discrimination and the spread of education in Turkey, created the conditions for the emergence and growth of a Kurdish movement that began to challenge the practices of assimilation and the denial of Kurdish identity. This, in the 1970s, led to the emergence of the Kurdish national liberation discourse, which proposed to construct a counter-hegemonic order.

Therefore, gradually during the 1960s and 1970s, the 'myth' of Kurdish society resurfaced in Turkey to structure political discourse and as a space to register dislocations. 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 organisations were done on the basis of the myth of *Newroz*. This allowed the Kurdish movement to trace the origins of the Kurds to the ancient Medes and was used in the discourses of the newly formed Kurdish organisations to construct their own representation of the alternative Kurdish society and to provide a narrative of the Kurds' emergence.

Traditionally Newroz has been celebrated across the Middle East on 21st of March as a New Year festival. Its historical or mythological origins are often traced back to the ancient period (Aydın 2005, Aksoy 1998). Kurdish nationalist's attempts to construct the myth of origin around the Newroz festival as a national festival dates back to the early twentieth century (Aydın 2005, pp. 45-7). The construction of the myth of origin went through various stages and by the 1970s the Kurdish national movements in Iran and Iraq had already established an association between the Newroz festival and the Legend of Kawa (ibid., p.71).[1] The myth of *Newroz* as told by the contemporary Kurdish nationalists narrates the overthrow of the Assyrian King Dehak by a popular uprising led by Kawa the Blacksmith (*Kawayi Hesinkar*), who, on 21 March 612 BC led an uprising by the Medes and defeated the Assyrian Empire, killed Dehak and liberated the Medes – the ancestors of Kurds – from long-suffering oppression and tyranny. To inform the people of his victory, Kawa lighted a bonfire on top of a mountain. The practice of lighting a bonfire is re-created during Newroz celebration in the contemporary period.

Although almost all of the Kurdish groups made reference to the myth of Newroz, its importance for the Kurds' national struggle and as a symbol of rebellion against tyranny, there were variations in the meanings attached to it in each group's discourse. The *Rizgari* group described Newroz as a day that symbolised 'independence, freedom, and struggle for a nation refusing oppression and liberation' (Arslan 1976, 16). The PKK emphasised the importance of the Medes' 'heroic' struggle against Assyrian Empire and draw a parallel between Kawa the Blacksmith's struggle for the Medes and the PKK's struggle in the contemporary era. It constructed the Median era as the 'golden age' of the Kurdish nation and used it to conceive of the Kurds' national unity, the recreation of

which was identified as the task of the national liberation struggle (Öcalan 1992, pp. 45-6).[2] In stark contrast, however, Newroz was described in the TKSP's (The Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan) political magazine *Özgürlük Yolu* as a day for 'struggle against racism' (Kılıç 1977, p. 64). Instead of constructing Kurdish difference, and conceive and represent the Kurds' national unity, such a description emphasised the common bonds between the different nations in the Middle East. In addition to the clarity in the representation of Kurdish identity in the PKK's discourse, there were major differences in each group's strategy and political practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which I focus below to account for the PKK's hegemony over Kurdish politics.

2. The Contestation over Strategy and the PKK's Hegemony

As mentioned earlier, from the mid 1970s onwards, the national liberation discourse became the hegemonic discourse articulating Kurdish national demands in Turkey. Hence, in varying degrees, all of the political organisations that came into existence in 1970s were committed to both Kurdish liberation and socialism; however, significant differences remained over strategy. Although the practice of national liberation often involved armed struggle, a clear revolutionary strategy was not articulated from the onset. However, the state's increasing repression from the 1979 onwards created a difficult environment to conduct any sort of legal politics. Violence as a revolutionary strategy was discussed more extensively and systematically by the PKK and it was presented as the only effective means to achieve national liberation in the given conditions (Öcalan 1992, p.196). The PKK's strategy envisaged a protracted 'people's war' to overthrow the regime in military, political and economic terms to unify and reconstruct the Kurdish society (ibid., p.198). 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 the political developments (PKK 1982, p.162). 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 incite a popular rebellion. In the final phase of the insurgency, the people's army supported by the popular uprising of the masses would overthrow the rule of the state and achieve the revolutionary change.

Other groups, such as the *Kawa* and the *Ala Rizgari*, also advocated a similar strategy. However, the discourse of neither group was as condensed as the PKK's. In contrast, the TKSP advocated an open-ended revolutionary strategy. While the party programme stated that should the conditions require an uprising the party will be at the forefront (TKSP 1985, p.19), the main activities that it took part in involved organising the masses and mass action to achieve the revolutionary change. Additionally, the TKSP envisaged a two-stage revolution. While, the construction of a socialist society in Kurdistan was the ultimate aim of the party, given the conditions, what was needed at first instance was a national democratic revolution to overthrow national oppression and destroy the feudal structure to democratise the country (ibid., p.20). More significantly, the party advocated closer cooperation between the Kurdish national movement and Turkish socialist movement under a common 'anti-imperialist' programme (ibid., p.19). This commitment proved ultimately problematic as the Turkish socialist movement throughout the 1970s found it difficult to articulate Kurdish national demands as part of

demands for 'socialism' and 'equality' in Turkey, and in practice the articulation of Kurdish demands as part of numerous other demands represented by the signifier 'anti-imperialism' created difficulties for the TKSP to clearly represent Kurdish demands within a complex political space.

Turkey was ruled by a military regime after the *coup d'état* on 12 September 1980 until 6 November 1983 and most of the Kurdish political activists were arrested and incarcerated in numerous prisons. Hence, in the early 1980s prisons, especially the Diyarbakir Prison was the main site of resistance and Kurdish political activism. To protest endemic torture and oppression, and the violation of their basic human rights, the PKK members and sympathisers organised a hunger strike in December 1980. The PKK's resistance in the Diyarbakir Prison continued throughout 1981 and 1982.

Prior to the coup the leading members of the TKSP escaped to Western Europe. While they continued to be active within TKSP's affiliated community organisations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, their activities amongst the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe were not sufficient to revive the movement in Turkey or challenge the PKK's hegemony. A significant number of the PKK members also left Turkey to Syria and Lebanon and established the organisation'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 the Palestinian organisations and established its guerrilla training camps. Furthermore, as discussed in part 3, the resistance in the Diyarbakir Prison during the early 1980s enabled the PKK to re-activate the myth of *Newroz* to construct a contemporary myth of resistance, which was a significant symbolic resource that it used extensively to represent its struggle.

The PKK started its insurgency on 15 August 1984. Overall the insurgency proved very practical and the PKK grew in strength and size in a short space of time. Being the only Kurdish organisation that challenged the state put the PKK in the leading position to hegemonise 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 much more apparent. Consequently, the rival oppositional political organisations in Turkey that the Kurds supported lost their appeal, which created opportunities for the PKK to mobilise a wider section of the Kurdish society. Having a presence in the majority Kurdish regions presented the PKK with the opportunity to reach out to many Kurdish rural populations and through its political work it managed to win the support and cooperation from many villagers. The PKK's popularity increased also because of the state's harsh and heavy handed approach towards the civilian Kurds. The state's antagonistic and oppressive practices allowed the PKK to galvanise public opinion. Consequently, from 1990 onwards the popular expression of Kurdish identity demands and open support for the PKK became much more commonplace in Turkey as the Kurdish political activism evolved into a vocal social movement. This was demonstrated in a number of popular uprisings (*serhildan*) between the years 1990 and 1993, to which large numbers of ordinary Kurds across Kurdish towns participated and who often fought with the police and the gendarmeries.

Starting in the early 1980s the PKK started to build a strong presence also in Europe, mainly Germany, through a network of community organisations. In March 1985, the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (ERNK in Kurdish acronyms) was established to carry out the political development and mobilisation of the masses (PKK 1985, p.10).[3] From the mid 1980s onwards much more effort was placed on developing the ERNK and consequently, its activities as well as the organisational network grew rapidly throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. The ERNK was legally organised through a network of community and cultural centres in Europe. The European activities of the PKK allowed it to draw the support from the 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 organise legally and establish a network of cultural and community organisations to mobilise Kurds in Europe. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, in many cities in Europe, the ERNK organised 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 of its political magazines *Serxwebûn* (1982-present) and *Berxwedan* (1985-1995) were published there and distributed in most European countries. In August 1987, numerous sub-organisations were established within the ERNK to represent women, youth and workers and in 1993, more organisations representative of the religious groups were established to provide representation to the Muslim, *Alevi* and *Yezidi* religious communities. The existence of such representative organisations 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 were comprised of 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 organisation *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* has established itself as the main vehicle for conveying the resistance music and while primarily it organised performances and musical activities in Europe, its cassettes and CDs managed to reach Kurds in Turkey.

The PKK's organisational growth and network played a significant role in the mass mobilisation of the Kurds by allowing it to reach out and connect with the Kurdish populations; however, the representation of its struggle to its target groups was also

important in its hegemony and generating the mass support and recruitment, to which I turn.

3. The Construction of Exemplarity and the PKK's Contemporary Myth of Resistance

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK re-activated the myth of Newroz to construct a contemporary myth of resistance based on the PKK's resistance. 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 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'.

The resistance by the PKK's leading members in the Diyarbakir Prison has been a mainstay in its contemporary myth. The key events started with to the suicide of Mazlum Doğan on 21 March 1982 to protest systemic torture. The resistance continued with the self-immolations of four other members on 18 May 1982 and culminated in the death fast that started on 14 July 1982 and resulted in the death of four more leading members in September 1982. 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-immolation and an act of resistance (PKK 1983, p.9). 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', and their resistance was described as the beginning of a 'new era' for the struggle and survival of the Kurds as a nation. Their resistance against oppression, the defence of the Kurdish struggle under the harshest conditions, and sacrificing their own lives to defeat the submission imposed on the Kurds was interpreted by the PKK as the 'spirit' of its struggle (PKK 1986, p.24).

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 the centre 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' (See PKK 1994b).

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

(PKK 1994b, 16-19). All of 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' (ibid., p.19). The crucial difference was that, however, in the early 1990s women were the main performers of the self-immolations and acts of 'sacrifice'. Additionally, the 'sacrifices' of PKK's female militants also started to acquire a central stage in the representation of the PKK's struggle. Of these, the death of Gülnaz Karataş (Beritan) on 25 October 1992 – who upon realising that it was impossible to escape the attack by the Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP) peshmerga fighters during the PKK's war with the Iraqi Kurds, threw herself off a mountain cliff to avoid being taken hostage – received sustained coverage in numerous articles published in PKK's magazines throughout the 1990s. In many commemoration articles published in PKK publications and online, Beritan's action has been represented as an act of outmost heroism and dedication to the struggle and was used extensively by the PKK as the embodiment of its 'spirit' of resistance (See PKK 1994c).[4]

Hence, during the early 1990s women started to be the performers of resistance acts and acquire a central 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. Particularly, 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 mobilisation of women as a new political actor and this had a significant impact on the PKK's overall mobilisation. Not only did it significantly increased the PKK's overall support base and fighting force, 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 to engrave the ideas of equality and freedom in society, which were important elements in the PKK's national liberation discourse.

The representation of resistance practices in the PKK's discourse constitutes its members who carried out the numerous acts of resistance as 'exemplars'. Drawing on Conant's discussion of exemplars in the work of Nietzsche, Norval (2007) argues that 'the role of the exemplar is to "unsettle us"' and create an impersonal feeling of shame' (p.194). 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' (Norval 2007, p.179, emphasis in original). 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 the Diyarbakir 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 the *Serhildan* in the urban centres of the region in which many ordinary Kurds took part (PKK 1994c). Although it is highly unlikely that a strong casual connection, as emphasised 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 mobilisation 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 constituted as the exemplars.

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 the *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 a standard practice to display pictures of the PKK's leading figures in the Kurdish community centres across Europe, especially that of Mazlum Doğan, the performers of resistance practices in Diyarbakir prison and Mahsun 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 appear in its publications. Remembrance ceremonies were organised in the Kurdish community centres run by the ERNK. These commemoration practices, especially the obituaries and life stories of the PKK militants, romanticised the guerrilla life and were used to disseminate the contemporary myth of resistance.

The representation of resistance practices was not confined to only political discourse but other artistic forms, such as music, was also used. The stories of resistance practices were narrated in the music of *Koma Berxwedan* from the early 1980s onwards, and in the other groups later on during the 1990s.[5] In fact the contemporary myth of resistance constituted the centre of Kurdish cultural revival as the PKK's resistance was the main theme that the resistance music by *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.[6] 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 Diyarbakir 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 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 re-created popular folk melodies that many Kurdish people were familiar with and were 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 mobilisation process and the images of the performers of the PKK's resistance practices, including the pictures of its women fighters, were widely used in the PKK publications. The importance of the contemporary myth of resistance for the PKK's mobilisation of the Kurds was that it added *force* to the PKK's discourse and enhancing its widespread credibility among the Kurds. The guerrilla insurgency and the popular resistance the PKK organised meant that resistance was something that occurred on a daily basis and convinced many that the PKK was capable of achieving Kurdish independence and in doing so 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 the reality, which in turn played a key role in its mobilisation of the Kurds.[7]

Conclusion

In comparison to 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 PKK's political and military activities throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s led to the mobilisation of a large number of the Kurds in Turkey. From the early 1990s onwards this started to acquire the characteristics of a mass mobilisation with popularly attended demonstrations, protests, and uprisings taking place frequently. The organisational network that the PKK established in Europe enabled it to draw the support of the Kurds in Europe, who played an important role by providing financial support. The existence in Europe of Kurdish cultural and community institutions played a key role in Kurdish cultural renewal and widespread dissemination to make culture a part of people's daily life and accessible to a wide section of the Kurdish society.

The PKK reactivated the *Newroz* myth to construct a contemporary myth of resistance. The deployment of the myth of Newroz in the PKK's discourse, especially the construction of the Median Empire as the 'golden age' of the Kurdish nation was significant for conceiving of 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. It was used extensively in the PKK's political discourse as well as other artistic forms, to represent its struggle to the wider Kurdish society as the *embodiment* of Kurdish national struggle, which added *affect* and *force* to its national liberation discourse. Initially, the myth was constructed around the performers of the PKK's early resistance practices in the Diyarbakir Prison. Many of the 'heroic' acts of resistance were committed on 21 March – the *Newroz* festival – and during the early 1990s, organising mass gatherings during the *Newroz* festivals and other important days in Kurdish political calendar in many Kurdish cities and towns, especially in Diyarbakir created *Newroz* as the symbol of Kurdish popular resistance.

Notes

[1] Aydın offers an extended account 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 (p.60). 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 national character in Iran and strongly associated with the Persian legend of Jamshid (pp. 66-68).

[2] Gündoğan (2007) also points out the importance of the construction of the Median Era as the 'golden age' of the Kurdish nation in the PKK's discourse (268-9).

[3] The aims and objectives of the ERNK were formalised in the early 1980s and appeared as a key publication in 1982 (PKK 1994a).

[4] Commemoration articles and obituaries of the performers of resistance practices such as Gülnaz Karataş, Mazlum Doğan and Zekiye Alkan appeared frequently in the PKK's magazines *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan* throughout the 1980s and 1990s (See PKK 2008; PKK 1986; and, PKK 1994b). In fact, a significant amount of space continues to be reserved for such articles in PKK publications.

[5] In addition to Koma Berxwedan numerous independent musicians such as Şivan Perwer, Ciwan Haco, Nizammettin Arıç, Hozan Dilgeş and Aram Tigran have also been producing Kurdish resistance, popular and folk music. In 1991, after the easing of restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language in public in Turkey, the Mesopotamian Cultural Centre (*Navenda Çanda Mezopatamya*) was established in Istanbul to promote Kurdish cultural development. Other branches were established in the 1990s in other major cities in Turkey. The following music groups *Koma Çiya, Koma Azad, Koma Mizgîn, Koma Asman, Koma Amed, Agirê Jiyan, Koma Rewşen, Koma Şirvan* and *Koma Rojhilat* were active within these centres and the songs and music these groups produced featured similar themes of resistance that were used in the music of *Koma Berxwedan*. (See Koma Berxwedan – Dilan (1985), Botan (1987), Newroz (1989), and Amed (1991) as an example of Kurdish resistance music albums).

[6] *Dilan* can also refer a call for struggle, with struggle seen as a joyful activity.

[7] The practice of the institution of hegemony is explained in Laclau's theorisation by a discussion of the process of sedimentation: "Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a 'forgetting of the origins' tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence. This is the moment of sedimentation" (Laclau 1990, p.34).

References
AKSOY, GURDAL (1998) *Bir Söylence Bir Tarih: Newroz* (Ankara: Yurt Yayınları).
ARSLAN, RUŞEN 1976 'Newroz', *Rizgari*, 21 March
AYDIN, DELAL 2005 'Mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey: Newroz as a Myth', Masters diss., Middle East Technical University
BARKEY, HENRI J. and FULLER, GRAHAM E. 1998 *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers
Bozarslan, H. (2003) Some Remarks on the Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980), in: A. Vali (ed) *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, pp. 14-39 (California: Mazda Publishers).
Finlayson, A. (1998) 'Ideology, Discourse and Nationalism', *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 3(1), pp. 99-119.

FREEDEN, MICHAEL 1998 'Is Nationalism a distinct Ideology?', *Political Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp.748-765

GLYNOS, JASON and HOWARTH, DAVID 2007 *Logics of Critical Explanations in Social and Political Theory*, London and New York: Routledge

GRAMSCI, ANTONIO 1971 *Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart

GÜNDOĞAN, CEMIL 2007 *Kawa Davası Savunması ve Kürtlerde Siyasi Savunma Geleneği*, Istanbul: Vate Yayınları

HOWARTH, DAVID and STAVRAKAKIS, YANNIS 2000 'Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis', in David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakkakis (eds) *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies, and Social Change*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

KILIÇ, HAZIM 1977 '21 Mart Irkçılık İle Mücadele Günü', *Özgürlük Yolu,* 15 April

KIRISCI, KEMAL and WINROW, GARETH 1997 *The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An example of Trans-state Ethnic Conflict*, London: Frank Cass.

LACLAU, ERNESTO and MOUFFE, CHANTAL 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso

LACLAU, ERNESTO 1990 *The New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso

MCDOWALL, DAVID 2000 *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 2nd edn, London: I.B.Tauris

NATALI, DENISE 2005 *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran,* New York: Syracuse University Press

NORVAL, ALETTA J. 2007 *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

OLSON, ROBERT 1989 *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, Austin: University of Texas Press

OLSON, ROBERT (ed) 1996 *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press

ÖCALAN, ABDULLAH 1992 *Kürdistan Devriminin Yolu (Manifesto)*, Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn [first published in 1978]

-- 1991 *Kürdistan'da Halk Savaşı ve Gerrilla*, Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn

ÖZCAN, ALI KEMAL 2006 *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*, London and New York: Routledge

PARTÎYA KARKERÊN KURDISTAN (PKK) 1982 *Politik Rapor: Merkez Komitesi Tarafından PKK 1. Konferansına Sunulmuştur*, Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn

-- 1983 'Mazlum Doğan'ın Anısına', *Serxwebûn*, 1March

-- 1985 'Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluş Cephesi', *Berxwedan*, 15 April

-- 1986 '6.Yıldönümünde Mazlum, Kemal ve Hayri Yoldaşların Önderliğindeki Diyarbakır Zindan Direnişinin Büyük Anlamını İyi Kavrayalım', *Serxwebûn*, 1 September

-- 1994a *Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluş Problemi ve Çözüm Yolu: Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluş Cephesi Program Taslağı*, Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn [first published in 1982]

-- 1994b 'Newroz Kahramanlık Şehitlerimiz Bahar Hamlemize Önderlik Ediyor', *Serxwebûn*, 15 April

-- 1994c 'Ronahi ve Berivan Yoldaşların Kahramanca Eylemi', *Berxwedan*, 31 March

--   2008   'Cennet   Ülkesinde   Melek   Olmak',   *HPG   Online*, http://www.hezenparastin.net/tr/ekim_sehitleri/1.html

ROMANO, DAVID 2006 *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilisation and Identity,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

STAVRAKAKIS, YANNIS 2007 *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

TASPINAR, OMER 2005 *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition*, London: Routledge

TÜRKİYE KÜRDİSTANI SOSYALİST PARTİSİ (TKSP) 1985 *Program*, Place of publication not stated: TKSP Yayınları

VAN BRUINESSEN, MARTIN 1998 'Shifting National and Ethnic Identities: The Kurds in Turkey and the European Diaspora', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 18, No.1, pp. 39-52

-- 1992 *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, London: Zed Books

WHITE, PAUL 2000 *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers? The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, London: Zed Books