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Perspectives on Ethno-National Conflict Among Kurdish Families With Members in the PKK

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This article reports the findings of an ethnographic study of families with members involved in the armed struggle for Kurdish nationalism led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews and observations with a theoretical sample of six families in the area of Yüksekova, detailed discussions were held with twelve members of families with children, partners, or siblings involved in the conflict. Ethno-national exceptionalism plays a significant role in determining the motivations of political violence among groups, but with the additional background of the perceptions and realities of systematic racialization, de-territorialization, disenfranchisement, and cultural exclusion that affect certain Kurdish groups. The findings in this article offer critical sociological and anthropological accounts of the localized drivers of ethno-nationalism, and the motivations for and the experiences of conflict among families with members involved in the armed conflict and the "Kurdish question" in Turkey.

Keywords conflict, identity, Kurdish question, nationalism, political violence, Turkey

I am proud of having my son with them [PKK]. In front of all Kurdistan, I am so proud that I have a martyr. . . . We knew that one day we would have his death.

Your Prime Minister says, "Everyone should have three children!" I tell you what; if it was possible, I would have one hundred children. . . . Turks will never be able to eradicate us.

—Selim, father of son Welat, killed in the PKK

Introduction

There is considerable interest in the "Kurdish question" in Turkey, and it is generally presented from the perspective of political science, international relations, and history. However, there tends to be less of a sociological or anthropological focus.

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Part of the problem is because the Kurds have been divided across four countries, namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. There are approximately 40 million Kurds¹ in these four countries, with as many as 20–25 million in Turkey alone, the largest community of Kurds in the Middle East.² This suggests that the Kurdish component is somewhere between 18–25 percent of the population of Turkey as a whole.³ However, through the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, “notions of Turkishness” were restricted to ethnically homogenous groups with heritage in the larger urban zones of the Anatolian region and what eventually became Istanbul. This was closely associated with notions of a secular identity that recognized different religious minority groups, such as Armenian Christians, but did not accept Kurdish groups as ethnically dissimilar.⁴

When the authoritarian system bequeathed by Kemal Ataturk was weakening by the late 1940s, the opening up of multi-party politics provided opportunities for Kurds to vie for recognition and status. Moreover, the grip of Turkish ethno-nationalism was strong and the Turkish state brutally suppressed any notion of separate identities emerging within the region. It forcibly dislocated Kurdish groups to the more industrialized areas in central Anatolia.⁵ Both Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms arose simultaneously, often in direct competition with each other, and, arguably, much later than among many of the European nations.⁶ The vast majority of Kurdish groups in Turkey continue to live on the high mountain plateaus of southeast Turkey. A derogatory term that is often used to describe Kurdish groups is “mountain Turks,” which reflects their geographical conundrum and the ongoing problems of misrecognition that have affected Kurdish groups in Turkey. The fact of their concentration in the more remote territories of southeast Turkey has caused the Kurds to be seen as problematic groups throughout history, helping to construct their own group and cultural identity as separate and unique. There is also a discernible linguistic heritage that is part of the distinctive identity of Kurds.

This article is based on fieldwork carried out in the town of Yüsekova, which is located in the Hakkari district in the southeast region of Turkey, and close to the border of Iran. The research used a case study research approach based on detailed interviews with and observations of six families with members actively involved in the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*—Kurdistan Workers’ Party). The fieldwork was carried out in January 2013, a few short weeks before the assassination of the three Kurdish activists in Paris (they were former PKK guerrillas—Sakine Cansiz was a founding member of the PKK), and approximately three months before the start of the current peace process. This most recent peacebuilding effort began after many months of bloody fighting and a hunger strike by many thousands of Kurdish prisoners. Historically, there have been many peace process attempts, but at the time of writing both sides have honored the existing ceasefire, with much of PKK withdrawing from the affected mountains in Turkey and heading towards the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Certainly, at present, there seem to be definitive efforts to unblock the impasse that has created the so-called “Kurdish question.”⁷ As such, this article is an attempt to provide a more detailed ethnographic insight into the experiences of Kurdish communities, in particular those directly affected by the conflict. First, the historical background on the issues is provided, exploring theoretical and conceptual frames of reference. Second, the methodology is detailed and a summary of the data is presented. Third, the analysis and discussion are organized into four salient themes emerging from the findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn and suggestions for the way ahead are postulated.

The Political and Ideological Emergence of the PKK

In the 1970s, a more organized revivalist Kurdish nationalist movement began to emerge, but the Turkish state suppressed any form of ethnic revivalism or Kurdish nationalism during this time. On August 15, 1984, the PKK launched its first guerrilla attack against Turkish Armed Forces operating within the Kurdish region. It was against Turkish police forces in the area of Şemdinli, which is 25 miles away from Yüksekova. This day is still celebrated as the “awakening of a nation.” In essence, one man, Abdullah Öcalan, established the PKK in 1978. He was a student in Ankara during the coup in 1970, and his aims were to revitalize a lost identity, in particular the language associated with the Kurdish people of Turkey. Originally, the PKK had a Marxist–Leninist leaning; it sought to establish equality and the rights of the Kurdish people, and fight bourgeois groups, even if they were of Kurdish origin. Before 1984, there were no clashes between the PKK and Turkish forces. The PKK were largely focused on internal conflict among privileged Kurdish groups, especially tribal chiefs. The PKK has never been a class movement *per se* as there has been a whole host of different Kurdish interest groups driving its philosophy in practice; however, some of these class interests remained intact, especially in militarily dismantling the institutions of imperialism.⁸

The Turkish government carried out many injustices towards the Kurdish people as a whole, partly in an effort to discourage support for the PKK. This suppression had the effect of further marginalizing Kurdish groups and encouraging additional dissent. However, Kurdish villagers in the Eastern part of Turkey were fearful not just of reprisals by the state of Turkey but also from the PKK. Many were caught between two competing interests. As these conflicts raged on, the socioeconomic conditions of Kurdish groups in the most eastern regions of Anatolia became severe. Some who were on the political left or were more religiously inclined could be persuaded to support the Turkish state, but many of the younger Kurds were encouraged by the more militant activities of the PKK. It was largely a reflection of the ongoing socioeconomic deprivation and political oppression facing Kurdish communities in those regions. As such, it became a particular recruiting ground for the PKK, where young people, disaffected by their lives and the lack of hope, were seen as easy targets. There was talk of a two-state solution as early as 1991 when a federalist solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey was seen as an acceptable way forward by the PKK. In 1992, Prime Minister Halil Turgut Özal argued for the need to accept the role of the PKK in the political process, but such bold moves allegedly ended his reign, effectively forcing him out of office in 1993, possibly due to the “deep state.”⁹

The PKK announced a ceasefire in 1993. But with the new Turkish regime headed by Süleyman Gündoğdu Demirel, scant attention was paid to permanently resolving the “Kurdish question.” The forced migration of the Kurdish people by the Turkish government and the perpetual conflict between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces led to ongoing skirmishes during most of the 1990s. This was a particularly troublesome period for Kurdish groups facing all sorts of hostilities that were locally and nationally characterized. In 1998, the Turkish government placed more than 100,000 troops on the Syrian border, demanding Öcalan be handed to them when he and some of his elite cadre found refuge in Syria. After various attempts to flee, having flown to Moscow, Rome, Athens, and finally Nairobi, he was handed over to the Turkish Special Forces and imprisoned on İmralı Island, where he has endured since 1999. His impending execution, which was the outcome of his trial for crimes against

the state, was provided temporary stay by the EU and other international actors. Even during that time, his role in the future of any peace process was seen as important.¹⁰

Since then the PKK has been in disarray, although there have been skirmishes with Turkish Armed Forces throughout this period, occasionally intensive. Some have argued that the PKK extended their reach among political actors, which then became difficult to manage over time.¹¹ Others argue that they placed too much of a hold on violent conflict as the only solution.¹² Meanwhile, the southeast region of Turkey is underdeveloped, with little or no efforts made to introduce measures to economically and politically incorporate the region into greater Turkey. This has led to ongoing frustrations among younger Kurds who see little or no future; the only hope of flight being the limited education system or the anticipation of eventually finding themselves in the more established towns and cities. According to recent surveys, most Kurds do not want to establish a separate state from Turkey, although approximately one third of Turks think that Kurds seek partition from Turkey. Moreover, approximately half of the population of Turkey agrees that the Turkish state should maintain negotiations with the PKK, with approximately three out of five agreeing with the notion that Abdullah Öcalan absolutely dictates the PKK.¹³ For a greater Turkey to build regional stability and because of the developments in wider Kurdish territories across the Middle East, a peaceful solution could arguably bring an end to the hostilities in Turkey once and for all.¹⁴

Formulating a Sociological and Anthropological Perspective

The search for an identity is analogous to a reawakening consciousness. A Kurdish identity is constrained for Kurds because of the distinct geographical realities facing many communities across four nations,¹⁵ although it is generally accepted that the primary reason for the maintenance of the Kurdish ethnic identity is because of the elimination of modes of multiethnicity and multireligiosity found in the former Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans pursued processes of acculturation and the republican period sought assimilation, but, ironically, the reason for the Turkish state acting in the interests of the Turkish republic was to prevent a process of de-acculturation, which was thought to lead to the search for a specific Kurdish ethnic identity as a distinctively separate motivation.¹⁶

The processes of educational reform in the early phases of the republic created a whole host of Kurdish elites who began a phase of resistance that ultimately gained wider appeal.¹⁷ An articulation of arts, culture, and symbolism as a reference to the “golden age” of the Kurdish *nation without history* was also successfully invoked by the PKK.¹⁸ While the present reality is that the PKK have all but abrogated hopes for regional autonomy and the idea of a federated system is more likely the final outcome, there are groups and communities in the most remote areas in the southeast region of Turkey that continue to be affected by the politicization of the Kurdish question in Turkey. Furthermore, there is limited confidence in the EU integration process to help Kurdish groups in Turkey view the future with positivity. It appears that the only way in which a solution can be derived is from within the existing borders of Turkey. In that respect, the PKK is an icon in the ambitions of the Kurds in Turkey and in spite of the limitations faced by the Kurds both the PKK and Öcalan are powerful symbols.¹⁹

This rise in Kurdish nationalism has also resurfaced in the light of globalization. Through the nature of the Turkish experience, repression has actually strengthened

resilience over the years.²⁰ This Kurdish nationalism raises a crucial problem of regional stability, but also questions about Turkish national identity.²¹ As there is no single notion of a Kurdish ethnic identity that captures the variation of diversity found across the four regions, Kurdish nationalism is in a state of evolution as much as is Turkish national identity. There is therefore room for a negotiated space that is in the interests of both ethnic majorities and minorities in Turkey.²² Thus, to move forward from a consistent theme that has run throughout historical paradigms in the formation of the Turkish Republic and its constituent parts, which is the notion that Kurds are “future-Turks,” is imperative,²³ but because of ongoing socioeconomic marginalization, the Kurds of Turkey are disaffected, if not also somewhat suspicious of the Turkish state.²⁴ These concerns are maintained in light of the status quo, which continues to galvanize a form of Kurdish nationalism in response to marginalization, exclusion, and disenfranchisement.²⁵ And in many instances it affects Kurdish women in far more significant ways.²⁶

Methodology and Research Process

The present study is an attempt to explain the nature of Kurdish resistance through an understanding of the perspectives and perceptions of families who have members involved in the PKK. That these Kurdish groups maintain a negative view of the Turkish state and that young Kurdish people continue to be affected by forces of exclusion is hypothesized. Additionally, while there is attention paid to Kurdish groups in the smaller towns and cities, and on the questions of integration and coexistence, in the case of Yüsekova in the region of Hakkari, some of the worst cases of marginalization can be found. It potentially confirms the notion that socio-economic inequalities, including ongoing patterns of racism, vilification, and discrimination, as well as Turkish state repression, continue to motivate especially younger people in their desire to join the PKK. This theoretical perspective, combined with an understanding of the processes and drivers, is explored in this study.

The study utilized ethnographic and observational methodologies to provide a grounded theoretical perspective on resistance identity politics among Kurdish groups in the town of Yüsekova, in the region of Hakkari, which is in the southeast corner of Anatolia. Grounded theory is the process by which data gleaned from interview respondents is used to generate a theoretical perspective,²⁷ which then helps to determine a hypothetical-deductive perspective on the research findings.²⁸ Using various methods of snowball sampling and a trusted “fixer,” access was provided to six families who had different members engaged with the PKK in the mountainous regions of southeast Turkey. To conduct the actual fieldwork, two visits were made to Yüsekova—the first in June 2012 and then in January 2013. Planning and access took many months of negotiation and discussion in order to ensure confidentiality and trust. The interviews were carried out in the local dialect of Kurdish and transcribed into English. The benefit of an international research collaboration ensured that a European-trained sociologist was able to work closely with a native Kurdish sociologist to ensure the matching of various skill sets and opportunity fields. Table 1 below profiles the nature of the sample.

Some of the interviews involved the discussion of highly sensitive and personal information, and in many cases the respondents found it incredibly difficult to talk about their young children involved in the PKK. In talking to mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters, many different issues were addressed. In effect, the study aimed

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Interviewees	Family members actively involved in the PKK, age at which they joined and for how long (where known)	Alive or deceased
Ayşe (mother, wife)	Sedat: husband (37, 8 years in the PKK)	Both alive
Harun (son)	Rojda: daughter (15, 4 years in the PKK)	Deceased
Rohat (uncle)	Gewero: nephew (14, 16 years in the PKK)	
Zeliha (mother)	Aynur: daughter (13, 4 years in the PKK)	Alive
İsmail (father)		
Zeynep (sister)		
Selim (father)	Welat: son (13, in PKK five years, deceased 2011)	Deceased
Sara (mother)	Saniye: daughter (18, joined in 1997, came back after 2 years)	Alive
Rojhat (brother)	Zana and Selahattin: brothers (20, joined in 1997, died in 2009; 18, joined in 2010, died in 2011)	Both deceased
Rojin (brother-in-law)		
Songül (mother)	Ali: son (joined at the age of 16)	Alive
Fatma (mother)	Rojda: daughter (joined at the age of 17)	Alive

to analyse the following: first, the issues of forced migration to help contextualize the existential realities facing particular Kurdish groups in the southeast region of Turkey; second, the ways in which the Turkish state seemingly represses Kurdish groups, elaborating on the role of the police and the security services in alienating and radicalizing Kurdish groups; third, the impact upon families of their children or siblings who felt compelled to go to the mountains and join the PKK; finally, there is an attempt to understand how respondents regarded the nature of ethno-national conflict at the heart of wide-ranging problems facing Kurdish groups in the southeast corner of Turkey and what might lie ahead.

The study of violence within the field of sociology has become more prominent in recent periods. It has permitted the intersection of history, politics, conflict, ideology, and the nature of the relations between minorities and majorities.²⁹ But when discussing marginalized groups, often the question asked is “whose side are we on?”³⁰ As with much sociological thinking on dispossessed groups, the motivations are often to convey the story of oppressed minorities so as to better understand the workings of wider societies, not necessarily because one has taken a side *per se*. In narrating the stories of marginalized groups associated with armed conflict against a mighty foe that has spent the better part of twenty-five years and billions of dollars on a civil war in all but name (that until recently has seen no signs of abating), the present study aims to precisely present that contribution.

The Paths Towards Violent Conflict

Forced Migration and Its Impacts

Over the years, many Kurdish families were displaced from their homes due to various political pressures placed upon them. These communities left behind their

possessions, their livestock, and their land, generally receiving little or no compensation from the Turkish state. They were often forced eastwards towards towns such as Yüksekova and adjoining areas, but primarily to the western parts of Turkey. Stories of how communities were forcibly migrated were told and retold within households. Invariably, they affected the ways in which children understood their realities and the wider political paradigms encompassing them. It appears that these narratives touched a deep politicization among young people. Compounded by the fact of limited education or employment opportunities in Yüksekova, these stories may well have had a role in encouraging young people to make the step to join the PKK. What is also evident from the narratives is that in the local area there were many demonstrations and political rallies organized by the PKK and related groups, and some young people actively took part in them.

Many respondents talked about their migration experience. The comment below is from Rojhat, whose two brothers joined the PKK at a young age. In this comment, there is an allusion to notions of exile, which characterizes the memory of the migration experience, and which sustains the feeling of ongoing state repression. Rojhat said,

We were exiled from our village. They [the state] burned down our village, and then we came here. It was 1989. The state gave us two options; either you will be a part of the Village Guard³¹ system or you will be exiled. We did not accept becoming village guards. . . . The state [Turkish soldiers] gave us an ultimatum, which was ten days to get ready for migration. However, we could not sell all our livestock and it was not possible to be ready within ten days. Then they came and burned down our houses. We brought our sheep and came here, to Yüksekova. At that time we had nothing here. No house, no job, nothing. I tell you it was really hard leaving a place, going somewhere else and becoming exiled.

In the same vein, Ismail, a 62-year-old retired butcher, shared his migration story. He also talked about the ways in which the Turkish military regime placed considerable pressure on him and his family to leave their homes. Ismail and his family were not given sufficient time to prepare for their exit, and his resentment towards the state is palpable. He said,

We were in our village, which was called Zere, in the Oramar region. We migrated from the village to Yüksekova in 1995 because we were forced by the state. . . . The military accused us of helping the PKK. "You are giving bread to the PKK," they said. "Either you will evacuate your village or we will burn down your houses with you inside them." Of course, if there is killing, or the burning of our village, we had no choice but to go. We had kids and families that we had to take care of.

Zeliha, mother of Senem, who has eight other children, talked about the experience of being forced out of her village. The story is remarkably similar to the ways in which the Turkish military regime tended to give little or no time for families to prepare their *hegira* from their places of birth. Considerable suspicion was placed on these families who were left with no choice but to move. The experience left a particular mark on Zeliha and her family, who had to face the reality of starting over, but

with practically nothing at their disposal, losing all their property, capital, and livelihood in the process. She said,

The fields were planted and the corn had matured. Yes, it was the time of harvest. All the gardens were ready for the following year. We left all the produce that we worked on in the fields. . . . They did not let us prepare anything. We evacuated the village in one day. We came to another village, which is in Oramar too. We were desperate on the way there with our kids until my husband brought a car from Yüksekova. . . . We sold everything for half the price. We could not sell any of the livestock. We had to rent our home. We really had no choice at that time. Some of us became porters or runners. What can I say; it was a nightmare for us. . . . We did not get any help or support at that time from the state, not even one lira.

Ayşe, mother of Rojda, explained her situation. She recalled a time in which her husband, before she married him, had been forced to leave his place of birth. She said, “I heard from my husband that the state burned his village and then left them there in 1993. We had not married yet. I came here [Yüksekova] from another village.”

All of the six families in this study reported that they had been forcibly migrated by the state, and during the early to mid-1990s in the main. The stories of being forced from their places of birth were often told and retold in determining the narrative of oppression by the Turkish state. Many of the young people in the families listening to these stories were invariably affected, not just by the experience, but also by the memories associated with it. It was a topic much mythologized and lionized by families, and among the wider communities in which they now found themselves.

Forms of Turkish State Repression

Once communities were forced to their new homes, the Turkish state maintained a certain degree of authority over them, and in many cases this moved towards active forms of repression mediated through institutionalized policing and security activities. Many stories were told of raids on homes and of various forms of police brutality. These became routine practices in some instances, with certain individuals targeted on a systematic basis, leaving some, as they saw it, with no option but to join the PKK as a way out of localized experiences of state terrorism. Selim, father of Welat, explained how he was captured and tortured by the security services. He said,

Let me tell you. I am a member of the party [PKK]. I am active in the politics as well. I have been tortured many times because of this issue. However I did not want him [his son] to go there [to the PKK]. He was my heart. My son saw the tortured scars on my body with his own eyes. Especially in 1997 the police forces were capturing me and torturing me a lot. For instance, they seized me, and we went to the Terror Point of the city. There was a guy, Huseyin Commander, he tortured me for 13 days. All my family knew that. I was involved with the party politics of the PKK, and that is why the police forces captured me many times.

During a lengthy monologue about his brother, Rohat talked about the reasons why Selahattin went to the mountains. Kurdish families are affected by Turkish state repression in many different ways, but it is also apparent how one family member can change the history of the others. This particular narration provides an interpretation of events that led to Selahattin seemingly having no choice but to join the PKK as a way out of his localized experiences. Facing the possibility of arrest and torture at the hands of the security services, Selahattin took the only option he felt he had left. Rohat recalled the events:

My nephew, Şehit Gever, his friends, Şehit Zerdest and Şehit Heyder, came to Yüksekova. They came and stayed for a year. . . . It was a cease-fire period at that time. The police forces made a complaint about Şehit Zerdest and Şehit Heyder. The wealthy people of Yüksekova, from the Doski tribe, they gave information to police forces and now both are dead because of them.

There were 28 people at the funeral procession of Şehit Zerdest. The police got all the names of those attending that funeral procession. Selahattin [Rohat's brother] was at that funeral too. I can say that after that funeral the police forces got their hooks into him. . . . [Later] the police forces swooped our house. There were special experts who came all the way from Hakkari and Ankara. If they had caught him [Selahattin] that morning they would have executed him. They came, and even brought some computers to the house. They were looking to find ammunitions hidden underground, including bombs and C4. They could not find anything.

Of course, after that event, my brother, Selahattin, came and then went to the mountains. He said to us, "Either the state will execute me, or they will want me to be a betrayer, or they will torture me. Soon, they will kill me or let me live under their control." There was no other option for him. He asked us, "What should I do? The only way is to go to the mountains." We said, if you wish then go.

Zeliha, mother of Aynur, talked about their forced migration experience. She was asked whether Aynur, who had gone to the mountains as a young teenager, knew of all the stories that were told in the home. Not only was there a migration history, there were ongoing problems of persecution by the Turkish security services that directly affected Zeliha's brother Seyfettin. She explained,

She knew all the stories. We were talking about those days, not only with her but also with all our children. We were telling them that the state made this and that oppression on us. For instance, at that time soldiers were coming to our village and took four people with them to stand guard. My big brother was taken with them, sometimes for a week he was with those soldiers standing guard. In those days, someone hung a photograph of Abdullah Öcalan on Aslan Hotel's wall. Someone from Yüksekova came to the village and told us "someone did that in Yüksekova, and that's why nobody dared to come to the city centre." My brother was with those soldiers at that time. Now, listen to me what I am about to tell you.

The police forces arrested someone and tortured him. He was afraid and they took advantage of him. This person told those police officers that he hung the photograph of Abdullah Öcalan, with Seyfettin, my big brother. Seyfettin was there with soldiers standing guard. They found my brother and gave him electric shocks for 25 days. After 25 days he came back to the village. When he came back, you could not say that he was the same person. He was totally changed in 25 days. He lost his balance. When he lost his balance, we could not do anything, so we took him to Elaziğ [for hospital treatment], for three months but it did not help. I took him to Van, Erzurum. Nothing changed.

In exploring some of the experiential dynamics affecting young people, Selim, father of Welat and Saniye, talked about his son Welat. Welat felt that the security services would eventually create problems for him irrespective of whether he was directly or indirectly associated with any delinquent activities. Welat was fearful of his future, but he felt greater security, extraordinarily, in going to the mountains and joining the PKK. Selim said,

The head of his school hit him once, and then he [Welat] went to Party [PKK] and told them that he had been hit because of his politics at the school. He was always so aware of his rights. He was asking for Kurdish language in the school. He was saying that, “We don’t want Turkish rules here. They catch us, kill us, and torture us. We don’t accept this in our country.” He told us that, “I will go, as there is no other way!”

These narratives highlight how the subjugation by the Turkish state was significant in alienating a body of people already feeling the pressures of isolation and disenfranchisement. Cases of family members tortured by the Turkish security services, combined with episodes of persecution and repression, negatively impacted Kurdish groups in Yüksekova, encouraging some to actively join the PKK.

Going to the Mountains

Although it has been vital to provide a background on the factors contributing to the motivations of people joining the PKK, it is necessary to explore how it has worked in practice. The experiences of surveillance, securitization, and police brutality created the conditions for some to join the PKK. For others, it was hopelessness that led to forms of romanticism or heroism as a way out of local problems. For others still, it was distinctly political ideology. Many different reasons were provided on why young people went to the mountains.

Zeliha, mother of Aynur, emphasized that her daughter was merely a young teenager at the time of her decision to go to the mountains and that she had romanticized her life in the PKK to such an extent that she had taken a bag containing make-up and jewelry, which was later returned by a visitor who knew of the family. Zeliha said,

When he [Ersin, a cousin] went to the mountains, he gave a picture of himself to my daughter, who is in the PKK now. My daughter was young and he was on her mind. One day, we saw him on the Kurdish TV channel that he was guarding Murat Karayilan [After Abdullah Öcalan head of PKK]. At that time, so many journalists had been to the mountains. It was kind

of a live broadcast. We all screamed “Here is Ersin, on the television.” We all saw him there. At that time, my daughter’s mind turned and she started to think about him. . . . When she was thinking to go to the mountains she told her sister. Then she went later that year.

Do you know how she went there? She had that big [which she showed] accessory bag with herself. She took so many accessories with her to the mountains. . . . She thought she would wear those accessories there, even put on make-up. She thought that she would have fun there. She had no idea about life there. She was so young. When she took that bag with her to the mountains, one of her cousins visited her. She said to us, “I was so sorry for her when I saw that bag with her there. My heart was really broken for Aynur.”

Some young people had romanticized notions of a conflict that was about adventure and a form of pride associated with a just cause. Some of the mothers felt a certain degree of comfort in their daughters being at a place which did not necessarily put them in danger. While there was a certain acceptance that her daughter had indeed joined the PKK, having rationalized her role in a narrow sense, Ayşe, her mother, was sure that she was better placed among the PKK rather than at home. Ayşe explained,

I don’t want my daughter to come back here. It is better for her to be there. When I compare her with being here with me and her being in the PKK I can say that she is better in the PKK. She has more knowledge than here. In all cases she is better off there than here.

When conversing with Harun, whose father and sister had joined the PKK, and the possibilities of him experiencing the same end himself, he initially stated that he did not have any educational ambitions, “No, I don’t have any. I will not study anymore. I don’t want to study anymore.” The question was then asked if he would join the PKK. He replied, “If my father allows me I will join the PKK as well.” As Harun was the only son in the family, his mother placed considerable restrictions on his movements, including limiting his visits to the mountains. Ayşe regularly visited her husband and her daughter, seeing them on a frequent basis, but she was keen to emphasize that the PKK were not actively encouraging her or her other daughters to join, rather, in the extract below, Ayşe emphasized that her daughter was discouraged from joining so that she could concentrate on education. She said,

When we were visiting my husband there with my son and daughter the guerrillas told my daughter that, “Do not come here to join us, you should study.” My daughter was coming to the mountains with us of course. We all went to visit my husband there.

Ayşe continued further that women were indeed respected among the PKK and their status was recognized as equals among men. Women in the PKK were not bound by the shackles of materialism or individualism, nor were they contained by the forces of patriarchy, she argued.³² Ayşe added,

The *hewals* give respect to me and also to anyone else there, especially women. They have more value for women than men. There is no value for us in the cities, but in the PKK, we are so valuable for them.

Harun, Ayşe's teenage son, added that the PKK provided forms of empowerment and emancipation, rather than curtailment of freedoms or values of various kinds. It appears that not only were there certain push factors which created the conditions that especially encouraged young people to join the PKK but the PKK itself was seen as a form of liberation from the malaise they faced. Harun said,

They act so differently. They open your heart and mind. They are taking your soul out. It is not like here, in the cities. Here, you are just ordered to do something. However, there is freedom for anyone there. You become a free person. I feel like my father is freer than being here. [It is] same for my sister too.

Joining the PKK was seen as a venerable move, which did not always lead to engagement with violence, and certainly among young people. The PKK commanded respect and status among many, and for families with their closest members actively involved in the campaign. Joining the PKK was not seen as terrorism *per se*, but as ways in which to engage actively in a community of those faithful to a just political and cultural cause regarded as urgent in the milieu of dislocation and disempowerment.

Experiencing the Conflict

When speaking with families about what they regarded as the essence of the conflict and what helps them to better appreciate its nuances, the role of the media was regularly mentioned, as were the actual physical manifestations of political protests and rallies that tended to occur on a regular basis. The dedicated nature of the rallies, combined with the oppressive practices of the state in response to them, created tension and alarm but it also further galvanized support for the PKK. These demonstrations were also important in "spotting" people, young or older, who were vulnerable or otherwise at the margins of society and therefore perhaps amenable to the idea of joining the PKK. Zeliha, mother of Aynur, said,

We spoke about politics at home more than perhaps we should have, while at times we did not speak about it at all. Our home at one time was in the centre of town. Whenever there was a clash, or gunfire, we witnessed all of these things in front of our home. There was always something going on in front of our home. There was always a panzer [armour-plated police vehicle] there; police forces beat up kids and people, and so on. She [Aynur] saw all these things. I was attending demonstrations or funeral processions, but she never did that. . . . She was only interested in her studies. It was summer time. . . . In that summer some people talked to her. We think that someone talked to her.

Participants in the study were asked to elaborate on the role of the Kurdish media within the home. This included not only a focus on television and satellite but also the use of DVDs and the Internet.³³ Selim elaborated on having Kurdish broadcast TV at home and then talked about the issue of demonstrations and political protest as another pattern affecting the views of many young people in Yüksekova. Selim talked further about his son's activities in the town. Selim said,

For sure! From the first day Kurdish broadcast was established I had it all at home. It is always open in my house and it will remain so. . . . Certainly, he [Welat] was at the demonstrations. We could never keep him at home. He felt he had to be there.

Selim added that Welat's involvement was not restricted to merely attending these demonstrations. It appeared that Welat was involved in other activities too. Selim stated,

Yes, he was reading some documents about the PKK. And he was also singing the national song of the PKK. He was going always go to the Party. In the last two years he was coming from school and then he was going to join his friends in the Party. He was covering his face with his friends, and then threw stones at the police vehicles. Once he came and told me, and sorry for saying this, "We fucked the Turkish police car. We turned it over." However, his face was burned [became recognized by the Turkish police forces] because of the demonstrations. He was always at the heart of the demonstrations, especially in the summer times, and after the closing of the schools. He was going to the village and then going to the mountains. He was always talking with guerrillas. I hit him two or three times because he was hanging around with guerrillas. However, he didn't listen to me, and went to the mountains and talked to them whenever he found a chance.

Families were hopeful that this conflict would one day end. This is in spite of the fact that until very recently there has historically existed political discord between the main political actors in the Turkish and Kurdish political contexts.³⁴ Ayşe talked about her daughter Rojda. She said,

I am praying all the time to Great Allah. . . . My daughters and I sat in the kitchen and cried every night after she went. We could not go to the room where she slept for seven nights. We were sitting on carpets in the kitchen and crying and crying until morning. My eyes were always checking the door. I was telling myself that she will come back, she will come back. Anyway, she is gone. God willing, and with the help of Allah, she will be fine. . . . To be honest, it is hurting a lot, it is so painful. I haven't seen any pain like that. I have lost my children before. But, if you have a child on the mountain, I am not only saying this for myself but for all mothers, this is just such an unthinkable thing. I have lost three children before, when they were [still] born, but I cannot compare those loses with the loss of Rojda! It is hurting. People can be sick, be blind, or any other bad thing. But this is something else, believe me, this is something else.

Though there was a real sense that children joining the PKK would not necessarily engage in actual combat, it was also apparent that there was a profound concern about their welfare. The emotional cost of losing their child weighed heavy on the minds of parents who continued to be deeply worried at all times. In these cases a post-hoc rationalization may have added to their pride at the thought that their own children were prepared to sacrifice their lives for a greater cause, but it was

conflated by notions of a lack of choice in the matter, because of the local conditions and the ongoing political persecution and vilification that they faced at the hands of the Turkish state. Selim explained,

I said to my son that, “My son, maybe you will regret the step that you are doing when you go to the mountains.” . . . I can tell you that no one wants their children joining the PKK. This is suicide, it is obvious. But, we have to accept that, we are under control of [the Turkish government]. We are not free, but we want to be free. Even now, if I get an order [from Abdullah Öcalan], I will kill myself.

In the eyes of some the central figure in how a solution to the ongoing conflict would emerge, which is civil war in all but name, is Abdullah Öcalan. The international community, in particular the EU, has regarded the life of Öcalan important in any process that involves negotiations with the PKK, as was demonstrated in the stay of his execution, which had been ordered by the Turkish courts after his capture in 1999. The post-March 2013 efforts for peace were unknown at the time of this research fieldwork, which was carried out in January 2013. All the same, there is considerable ambivalence and mistrust among local Kurdish communities in any efforts towards peace made by the Turkish state. The comment by Selim below suitably captures the essence of the sentiment held by many of the participants. He said,

There is no other way. There should be a process because even our infants wake up with the name of Abdullah Öcalan in their eyes. Certainly, we will win this war. Either we will be killed or we will take our rights from them. We will all burn or kill ourselves. We have to. We don't want any land of the Turks, we don't want their Idol [referring to Atatürk], we don't want their rules and regulations, and we want our rights. We want our land. This is our land. This Kurdistan is ours. We want to stay in our land, and have no other government rules and oppression. This process cannot be contemplated without him [Öcalan]. There is no way it is happening without him. Without him there will be no resolution. Whatever he says it will be that [outcome].

Loyalty to Öcalan was consistent among those active in local community politics and having to live with the terror of what is regarded as the misrecognition of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. However, this was very much a male domain, with heroism a noticeable pattern, but for women, and in trying to understand their perspectives in a traditionally patriarchal society, a feeling of deep loss permeated the conversations. Young women who joined the PKK were thought to have done so out of some romantic notion, rather than one borne out of ideology or politics *per se*. Ultimately, mothers and fathers, and with respect to both their sons and daughters, rationalized that their children, in going to the mountains and in joining the PKK, were involved in a just cause. Some parents were proud that their children had died fighting, which only further hardened their political resolve. Beyond romanticism or heroism, it was argued that the greater good was being achieved.

Four crucial areas of analysis were seen as imperative in the narratives on processes of joining the PKK, and the ways in which political memory and social context played major roles in understanding the wider experiences. The importance

of forced migration and the role of the Turkish state in ongoing patterns of repression towards Kurdish groups had a significant impact on how people joined the PKK, on the family members through visitations, and ultimately on how these Kurds rationalized the conflict and its ramifications. There tended to be consistency among most of the respondents in presenting views on repression, marginalization, alienation, and disenfranchisement. Young people joining the PKK in the mountains can have a devastating impact on families, but it then becomes a cyclical process as these young people are placed on a pedestal and idolized as heroes or martyrs in a wider political and ideological struggle for recognition. The political outcomes presently look favourable for the “Kurdish question,” but there is a long way to go in spite of the cessation of violence. In the meantime, families continue to exist in isolation. The general focus of attention is on those Kurdish groups directly associated with the PKK and the conflict rather than their socio-economic conditions or the challenges they face to attain social mobility. In thinking of a post-resolution south-east Turkey, foremost are concerns about the well-being of families and communities in otherwise marginalized areas of the country, and especially among Kurdish women, who tend to be even more excluded and marginalized than Kurdish men, from within and without. Without a doubt Kurdish civilians have faced most of the consequences of the conflict.³⁵ Some of the stories and the narratives outlined in this article have illustrated exactly how.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

As a result of the widening use of communication technologies and the importance of globalization, Kurdish ethnic nationalism in the Turkish context is likely to be of significant importance. The developments in Iraq Kurdistan and in what is likely to emerge in the potential breakup of Syria provides other precedents that focus Kurds in Turkey in relation to separatist nationalist ethno-cultural movements. The existing literature on the Kurdish question has made inconsistent assertions as to the forces of ethnic mobilization drawing on social movement theories,³⁶ the nationalism literature,³⁷ or the formation of social capital.³⁸ This study has demonstrated that there are specific local area grievances combined with historical patterns of persecution and contemporary policing, intelligence, and surveillance that focus attention on the ongoing role of the Turkish state in fermenting the seeds of Kurdish opposition to it. The radicalization of Kurdish groups in the southeast area of Turkey is a function of both grievances at the hands of the Turkish state and opportunities driven by the PKK and all of its political and military arms. There is an interdependent multi-faceted cyclical dynamic that continues to polarize groups in the search for a peaceful solution to competing ethnic nationalisms.

Since the end of the Cold War, contemporary nationalisms have provided the conditions for conflict because of the primacy afforded to ethnicity as the dominant paradigm in the creation of national identity. Such a set of conditions is also of great consequence in understanding the “Kurdish question” within the Turkish context, although race-based class conflict analysis also applies in this case. Some have argued that this particular form of nationalism is more ideological than a question of socioeconomic inequalities,³⁹ while others have argued that the racialization of the ethnic category itself has created the problem. This racialization is argued to be a function of Turkish national political dogma that is resistant to ethnicity claims by Kurdish groups.⁴⁰ But today some Kurdish elites do not consider ethnicity an

obstacle in a peaceful solution to the existing conflict.⁴¹ Perhaps there is an alternative to boundary changes or assimilation as a way in which to resolve ethnic conflict between groups within states,⁴² where identity claims are based on adhering to a mode of national citizenship that is inclusive and cohesive.⁴³ However, the essential question is whether Turkey is ready to move on from its past and embrace a new future,⁴⁴ where there are still distinct processes of “othering” the “other,” and where the popular vernacular is to equate Kurdish identity politics with “terrorism.”⁴⁵ All the same, the idea that marginalization and disadvantage explain all the reasons why anyone would join the PKK is too simplistic, as such a state of affairs affects practically all Kurds in Yüksekova. Moreover, although these Kurds are Muslims and they are engaged in armed conflict with Turkish majority groups who are also Muslims, no mention was made of religion as a motivator. This wider situation is a specific function of the Turkish republican context, in that religion has been subsumed by secular authoritarian nationalism. In other studies on the motivations of people joining deviant groups, namely in Colombia, religion was also not seen as a significant factor, although Islamic symbolism was evoked in this study, i.e., in being a *Shaheed* (martyr).⁴⁶

In the current period there is considerable discussion as to whether there is a Leftist Kurdish struggle on the one hand or an Islamist Right (in the form of the AKP) and its policies and practices on the other. In reality, where there may well be a more urban elite–rural poor division and where the periphery has moved to the center in terms of political power (the AKP). Both sets of interests have more common levels of convergence,⁴⁷ and, arguably, it is one of the primary reasons why there has been a general improvement in the political climate on the question of a permanent solution to the conflict. The threat of violence is a deterrent, not the solution in this regard.⁴⁸ Aside from developments in the cessation of violence and ongoing reconciliation talks, a range of multifaceted programmes of action are needed to ensure an effective long-term solution, including the role of economic development and the importance of outside political intervention to ensure domestic success.⁴⁹ In certain large urban areas, Kurdish groups are becoming an observable minority community, including in parts of Istanbul and other large cities such as Izmir. There needs to be a move away from regarding such groups as the “permanent Turkish other” and to instead mobilize towards a greater appreciation of attempts at integration and coexistence made by these groups. The urban spaces of large towns and cities to the west of Anatolia are important sites in the discussion of what it means to be Kurdish in Turkey today.⁵⁰

There are ongoing transformations in both Kurdish and Turkish ethnic nationalism and therefore some notion of convergence and divergence needs to be understood within these wider frames of reference. First, there is the issue of spatiality and geography that are imperative to consider in the location of Yüksekova, which is potentially a significant site for the PKK, and has been so over the years. Yüksekova itself is a tremendously political place, well known for its struggles and demonstrations. From his prison cell on Imralı Island, Abdullah Öcalan has sent his greetings to the people of Yüksekova on a number of occasions. Approximate 3–4 million people were forcibly migrated from their villages over the period of Turkey’s repression of the Kurdish people. Many ended up in Yüksekova. Second, the motivations of young people who join the PKK need to be examined in detail. In the case of young women there may be questions of romanticism and for young boys there is a form of heroism. Both of these issues need to be understood in context.

Finally, a significant concern is the understanding of cross-cultural comparative perspectives on indigenous resistance within nation-states, which historically have had wider cultural, ethnic, and racialized borders. Specific cases include Palestine, Latin America, and Mali, where, in the very basic sense, there is concern around the formation of domestic capital in order to achieve a form of domestic representation. People want fundamental rights, they want recognition of their culture and heritage, including language and education, and this is a common concern among many resistance groups across the world.

Invariably, the Kurds of Yüksekova do not exist in isolation as the ethnic category of Kurd has wide-reaching resonance across a huge local geography and at an international level. As such, foremost is the need to consider the impact of the development of Iraqi Kurdistan on Kurdish nationalism and the Turkish response to it. There is a wider Kurdish milieu in the countries where there are significant Kurdish populations, namely Iraq, Syria, and Iran. All have Kurdish nationalist movements of various sorts. There are also the Yezedi Kurds in Armenia, numbering no more than 150,000, but they are also of interest in understanding localized forms of Kurdish resistance. Thus, while there may be some “imagined community” of a nation of Kurds, a *nation without history*, there is undeniably a wider factionalism that affects all groups in all of these locations. Finally, the role of the Kurdish diaspora that might motivate processes locally, or not, as the case may be, is also important to consider.⁵¹ The Kurdish diaspora has provided the conflict a more global exposure, and with the ongoing developments in Turkey’s foreign policy, this new landscape has arguably provided the PKK with greater opportunity.⁵² Considerable effort is likely to be required in order to build trust in the domestic political process,⁵³ ensuring that the outcomes are sustainable and equitable, and where there is a focus on the politics of tolerance rather than of competing ethnic identities.⁵⁴

Further research in this area could potentially explore the ways in which media could be used as a tool by the Turkish state to help build bridges, and how this could be a way in which to help to deradicalize groups. Other areas of research could focus on Kurdish women in the southeast region in order to discover the ways in which their empowerment would help to build resilience among groups of both men and women. Ultimately, there needs to be more focus on families and communities rather than explicitly concentrating on the violence and the political and ideological conditions surrounding it. Not only do the political paradigms require development, the realm of social research in this field remains asymmetrical.

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