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Violence and nationalist mobilization: the onset of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey

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According to theories of nonviolent resistance, violence is counterproductive and undermines the ability of a movement to achieve mass support. At the same time, studies of ethnic insurgencies suggest that violence is the only available method of mobilization in political systems characterized by entrenched ethnic hierarchies. Engaging with these arguments, this article addresses a historical puzzle: What factors explain the timing and ability of the PKK's (*Partiye Karkerên Kurdistan*) rise as the hegemonic Kurdish nationalist organization in Turkey between the late 1970s and 1990? The article argues that studies that identify Kurdish nationalism as a reaction to repressive policies of the Turkish state without paying attention to prevailing social conditions and oppositional strategies fail to provide a satisfactory response. It argues that the rise of the PKK was primarily a function of its ability to gain support among the peasantry in deeply unequal rural areas through its strategic employment of violence. It also identifies four causal mechanisms of PKK recruitment based on rich archival and field research: credibility, revenge, social mobility, and gender emancipation.

Keywords: nationalist mobilization; violence; ethnic conflict; Turkey; Kurds

The armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgent organization, the PKK (*Partiye Karkerên Kurdistan*), has been one of the longest lasting internal wars in the contemporary world. The PKK, founded in the late 1970s, initiated guerilla warfare against the Turkish state in 1984. It remains an active military force with substantial popular support among the Kurds of Turkey after three decades. The scholarly literature on the Kurdish question often treats the PKK as a natural outcome of the exclusionary and repressive policies of the Turkish state (e.g. Olson 1996; McDowall 2000; Yavuz 2001; Natali 2005). This article argues that this statist perspective, while valuable, is insufficient to understand the dynamics of the emergence and rise of the PKK in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As it does not pay systematic attention to the agency of Kurdish nationalist entrepreneurs who translated widespread grievances into political resistance, it fails to answer two critical questions. Why did the PKK (and not another Kurdish organization) become successful in nationalist mobilization? Moreover, what explains the timing of this PKK-led nationalist mobilization?

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When Abdullah Öcalan and his friends established the PKK in November 1978, there were already close to a dozen Kurdish nationalist organizations. These organizations published journals and newspapers, established youth associations, were influential in unions and professional associations, organized peasants to occupy land, fielded candidates in local and national elections, and even planned to initiate an armed struggle. However, the PKK eclipsed all these more established organizations even before the 1980 coup and became the hegemonic Kurdish nationalist group by 1984. What factors explain this historical puzzle? How did a fringe Kurdish organization with limited resources become a popular insurgency in Turkey between the late 1970s and 1990? What was the role of violence in the formation of the modern Kurdish nationalist struggle in contemporary Turkey?

Two earlier works focusing on the emergence of the PKK in the late 1970s provide some insights. Romano (2006, 73–77) rightly identifies the PKK's armed challenge to exploitative landlords as a primary reason for its ability to establish support among the poor peasants. His analysis is entirely based on secondary sources though. In a more recent work, Gunes (2012) argues that the PKK led a popular project of Kurdish cultural revival and myths of resistance (i.e. reinterpretation of the festival of Newroz), promoting the idea of the Kurds' nationhood. These discursive elements strongly contributed to its success in nationalist mobilization. However, this analysis of symbolic resources does not tell us anything about how ordinary Kurds received these symbols. Overall, these studies neither provide a micro-level perspective about the motivations of individuals who chose to join the PKK rather than any other organization, nor situate the PKK case in the broader scholarly debates on the relationship between violence and popular mobilization.

This article argues that the PKK was a response to the conditions of the Kurdish society as much as to the exclusionary and repressive policies of the Turkish state. It is not possible to understand the dynamics of Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Turkey without a systematic analysis of these conditions. To use Arendt's (1963) terminology, the PKK's focus on the "social question" (i.e. deep socioeconomic inequalities characterizing the Kurdish society) is central to its ability to mobilize Kurdish peasants.

This article offers a micro-level perspective fleshing out the mechanisms through which the PKK gained popularity among the Kurds of Turkey based on extensive archival and field research. It primarily focuses on two periods: (1) the emergence and rise of the PKK in the few years before the 1980 coup, and (2) the years between 1984 and 1990 during which the insurgency mobilized public support. It argues that the rise of the PKK was primarily a function of its ability to gain support among the peasantry through its strategic employment of violence. As the subnational level analysis demonstrates, this strategy gave advantage to the PKK over more established and resourceful Kurdish organizations. PKK membership grew exponentially in the two years preceding the 1980 military intervention. In this period, the article identifies four causal mechanisms that contributed to the appeal of the PKK among ordinary Kurds in Turkey: credibility, revenge, social mobility, and gender emancipation. In the second period, the military intervention completely closed the avenues of nonviolent Kurdish political activism. This aggravated collective Kurdish grievances and vindicated the PKK's violent strategy at the expense of other Kurdish nationalist organizations. Consistent with theoretical perspectives highlighting the notion of feasibility to explain ethnic war onset (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Gurses and Mason 2010), the PKK relocated its forces to the mountainous border region, where the state authority was historically weak, and received external backing (i.e. Syria) in the early 1980s. The Turkish state responded to the PKK's hit-and-run attacks with sweep operations characterized by mass detentions and forceful evacuation of villages. These

operations victimized and radicalized large segments of the displaced Kurdish peasantry who became the core supporters of the insurgency. The spontaneous uprisings in several Kurdish towns in March 1990 certified the transformation of the PKK into a popular movement.

The data for the article come from a rich array of primary sources: (1) biographies of PKK and other Kurdish nationalist organizations' members, (2) oral histories of Kurdish activists obtained through in-depth interviews, (3) publications of the PKK and other Kurdish nationalist organizations, and (4) newspapers and magazines from the period. The next section offers a critical review of the relationship between (non)violence and popular mobilization. Following is a historical overview of the political context from which the PKK emerged in the 1970s. The third and fourth sections provide an in-depth discussion of the PKK strategies in the late 1970s and early 1980s that eventually enabled the militant group to become the predominant Kurdish organization. The conclusion revisits the relationship between violence and nationalist mobilization and offers some general observations.

(Non)violence and popular mobilization

A long scholarly tradition identifies a negative relationship between power and violence. According to Arendt (1970, 52), while power "springs up whenever people get together and act in concert," violence is a destructive instrument to accomplish political goals. Writing in an epoch characterized by the worldwide rise of guerilla movements, Arendt emphatically argues that violence can destroy power, but it cannot produce power, as it cannot make people voluntarily act together. In fact, "rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost" (53). "When violence is no longer backed and restrained by power," (as in Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany), it destroys all power (i.e. the capacity of people to act collectively for common goals) (54).

Her distinction between violence and power has informed the theories of civil resistance that conceptualize mass citizen disobedience as the main dynamic of progressive political change (Carter 2009). A key insight of these theories is that nonviolent disobedience campaigns attract greater number of participants than violent struggles that typically involve greater risks (Zunes 1994; Schock 2005, 40; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). They are also more likely to trigger elite divisions, generate more domestic and international sympathy, involve participants with diverse political, social, and cultural backgrounds, and isolate the ruling regime (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). Furthermore, security forces are also more likely to defect if the protestors remain nonviolent (Nepstad 2011, 128–131). Popular uprisings that brought the downfall of ruling elites in countries as diverse as Iran, the Philippines, Chile, East Germany, South Africa, Indonesia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Tunisia, and Egypt since the late 1970s give empirical support to these theories (e.g. Slater 2009; Bunce and Wolchik 2010; Nepstad 2013). Studies of social movements also suggest that violence and power have a negative relationship as marginal groups opt for violence after the decline in nonviolent mass protests (Della Porta 1995, 53; Sánchez-Cueno and Aguilar 2009).

These arguments about the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance to achieve popular mobilization are not directly applicable to all settings. Three counterarguments are particularly relevant. First, a prominent line of scholarship suggests that violent resistance becomes popular primarily because the ruling regime denies peaceful means of political protest (Hutchinson 1972). Violent nationalist organizations eclipse nonviolent ones during decolonization struggles against intransigent colonial authorities as the trajectory of the Front de

Libération Nationale in Algeria and the IRA in Northern Ireland demonstrate (Horne 1977, 70–73; English 2004). Moreover, guerilla movements capitalize on popular grievances by confronting exclusionary regimes lacking strong capacity (Eckstein 1965, 145; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Tilly 2003, 71–75). Indiscriminate state violence actually swells the insurgent ranks as ordinary people escape from state terror to the relative safety of insurgencies (Mason and Krane 1989; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). Such was the situation in Cuba in the 1950s, Nicaragua in the 1970s, and El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s (Goodwin 2001; Wood 2003; Grandin 2010). Most recently, the militarization of opposition in the face of violent state repression in post-Arab uprisings in Libya and Syria indicates a similar pattern.

Next, another line of scholarship identifies patterns of ethnic exclusion associated with the formation of new nation-states as one of the primary causes of political violence in the modern world (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Wimmer 2013). These states generate entrenched ethnic inequalities and discriminate against minority groups (i.e. mobility opportunities tied to group identity) (Horowitz 2000, 22). Minority groups challenging the control of the state by a majority group would have a harder time in achieving their goals through nonviolence regardless of the regime type (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010, 113). They are less able to establish broader coalitions with groups that benefit from ethnic inequalities and trigger defections from the security forces as long as social distance between ethnic groups remains high.

Finally, nonviolent opposition strategies in rural settings with deep inequalities do not entail fewer risks than armed resistance. For instance, the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917 was a relatively swift and bloodless affair compared to the sheer violence characterizing the Russian Civil War during which the quest for land was the main issue (Figes 1998). In these settings, large landowners control peasant participation in competitive elections, act as exclusive sources of services, and repress any attempt by outside groups to mobilize the peasantry (Joshi and Mason 2011). Furthermore, nonviolent struggles in rural settings are unlikely to attract significant media and international attention. Under these conditions, an armed campaign may be the only feasible strategy to overcome the power of the rural elites and attract peasant support. Stathis Kalyvas' discussion of the dynamics of civilian behavior in rural areas during civil wars supports this perspective. He writes,

> [m]ilitary resources generally trump the population's prewar political and social preferences in spawning control. [This perspective puts] a premium on the effective use of violence as a key instrument for establishing and maintaining control – and thus generating collaboration and deterring defection. (2006, 111)

Contra Arendt and in implicit agreement with Mao's oft-cited dictum that "power grows out of the barrel of gun," he explicitly claims that ordinary people typically obey the group that controls the means of violence to survive regardless of their actual preferences (124).

In the light of these theoretical insights, the next two sections discuss the role of violence and social conditions in the rise of Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Turkey.

Kurdish nationalist activism in the 1960s and 1970s

The Kurds form an ethnic majority in southeastern areas of Turkey and adjacent border zones in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The post-WWI settlements left the Kurds without a state of their own and subject to various forms of discrimination and repression. The Turkish state denied the existence of the Kurds as an ethnic group for many years and its policies were a primary factor in the radicalization of Kurdish nationalism (e.g. Yeğen 1996;

Bozarslan 2008; Tezcür 2009; Yalcin Mousseau 2012). Similar to ethnic conflicts in countries such as the Philippines and Thailand, regional economic underdevelopment fueled ethnic resentments (McKenna 1998). Different from these conflicts where Muslim minorities faced states controlled by non-Muslim majorities, but similar to the Aceh conflict in Indonesia (Aspinall 2009, 193–217), Kurds and Turks are both Muslims.

After the state violently repressed rural Kurdish revolts in the 1920s and 1930s, publicly visible forms of Kurdish nationalist activism in Turkey entered into a period of dormancy. The reemergence of Kurdish nationalist activism under the leadership of a younger and more educated generation in the 1960s is discussed in detail elsewhere (Bozarslan 2007; Jongerden and Akkaya 2011; Gunes 2012). Here it is sufficient to note that Kurdish youth became active in the leading leftist organizations in this era such as the TİP (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi* – Turkish Workers Party, established 1961) and in the FKF (*Fikir Kulüpleri Federasyonu*). DDKO (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları*),[1] an umbrella organization formed by Kurdish university students in 1969 who split from the FKF, became the genesis of most Kurdish nationalist organizations that would emerge in the 1970s.

The militarization of the Turkish left by the early 1970s also had a huge impact on these Kurdish activists. The three primary militant groups were the THKO (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu*), which adopted Che Guevara and Debray's (1967) foco theory of guerilla warfare; the THKP-C (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi*), influenced by the urban guerilla theories of Carlos Marighella and Douglas Bravo; and the TKP-ML/TİKKO (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi-Marksist-Leninist/Türkiye İşçi Köylü Kurtuluş Ordusu*), inspired by Mao Zedong's notion of protracted people's war (Kürkçü 2007). While the security forces decapitated these three organizations by 1972, the PKK would successfully imitate the THKP-C's strategy of rural mobilization a decade later. Besides, the onset of the Kurdish revolt led by Mustafa Barzani in Iraq in the early 1960s had a strong demonstration effect on the Kurdish intelligentsia in Turkey (Burkay 2002).[2]

The first Kurdish political party in modern Turkey was the clandestine TKDP (*Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi*), established in 1965, that split into two in 1968.[3] With the advent of the 1970s, the Kurdish intelligentsia came under the influence of Marxist perspectives on nationalism.[4] The underlying theme of this nationalism was that Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria colonized Kurdistan.[5] A nationalist revolution would end the rule of these colonial powers and establish independent Kurdistan; a socialist revolution would destroy the power of feudal and capitalist classes.[6] The leftist revolutionaries in Turkey and the Soviet Union would be the natural allies of the Kurdish national liberation struggle that would result in the formation of a federation between the Kurdish and Turkish nations.[7] Since the Turkish leftists generally did not support the Kurdish demand for self-determination, the Kurdish activists started to organize autonomously.[8]

Figure 1 visualizes the evolution of the Kurdish nationalist organizations in the 1960s and 1970s.[9] Their ideological differences concerned issues such as the rift between the Soviet Union and China, the support for the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq, the nature of class alliances, and the goal and method of struggle. These organizations pursued a variety of strategies including electoral participation, publishing magazines, associational and union activism, and street demonstrations. Their competition occasionally resulted in deadly violence. A group of Kurdish activists and intellectuals established a publishing house (*Komal*) and a bilingual monthly (*Rizgarî*) that became the leading outlets for debates on the Kurdish question by the mid-1970s. This group envisioned the establishment of an independent Kurdistan through armed struggle.[10] While it achieved some popular support in several Kurdish cities, it failed to reach out to Kurdish workers and peasants and split into two in 1977. Another influential organization was the TKSP (*Türkiye Kürdistanı Sosyalist*

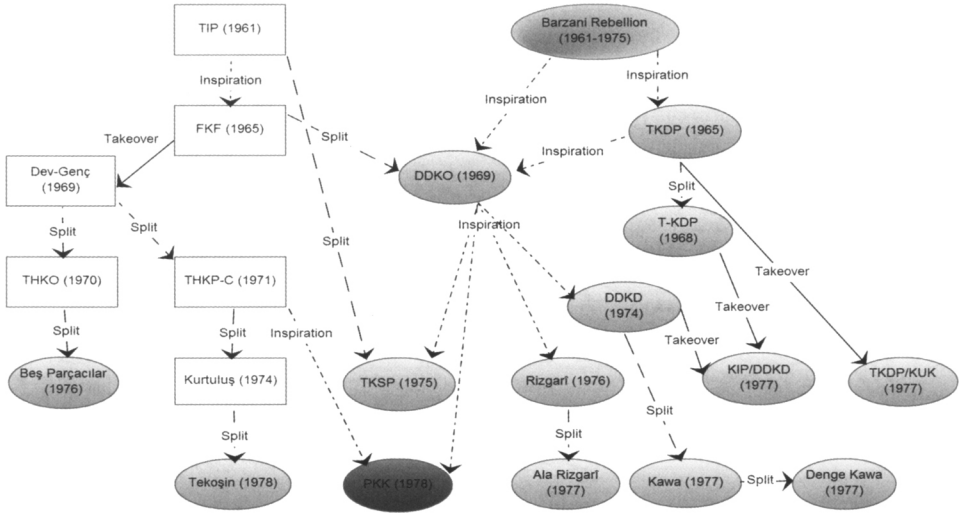

Figure 1. The evolution of Kurdish nationalist organizations (1960–1980).
Notes: Turkish leftist organizations are rectangles; Kurdish nationalist organizations are ellipses. The Barzani rebellion took place in northern Iraq.

Partisi) established in 1975. It lacked an armed wing, but published a popular magazine and enjoyed support among professionals, students, and workers.[11] The TKSP-backed candidates won the municipal elections in Diyarbakır in 1977 and Ağrı in 1979 and several union elections (Doronsoro and Watts 2009; Burkay 2010, 109–111, 153). In contrast to the TKSP, the T-KDP (known as KİP/DDKD after 1977) argued that the liberation of the Kurdish people would be achieved by armed struggle.[12] It also published various magazines, engaged in associational activities, and mobilized some support among shopkeepers (Büyükkaya 1992, 71–72). Nonetheless, none of these organizations initiated armed struggle or made deep inroads among the peasantry who made up the overwhelming majority of Kurdish society. The only organization that was comparable to the PKK in terms of social composition of its members was the KUK (*Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluşçuları*), which had an active armed wing. The KUK solicited support from Kurdish tribes just across the Iraqi and Syrian borders with close ties to the Barzani movement and did not actively challenge landlords and tribal leaders. The PKK and KUK engaged in violent clashes in the pre-1980 period. The KUK's appeal was strongest among the peasants and students in the border provinces (e.g. Mardin and Şırnak, see Figure 2), the two demographic groups that were also central to the PKK recruitment.[13] However, the KUK did not survive the 1980 coup to become an alternative path of Kurdish nationalist mobilization.

This brief overview suggests that the Kurdish nationalist organizations reached ideological and strategic maturity and were viable political actors in the relatively open political atmosphere of the second half of the 1970s. At the same time, there was no consensus among the Kurdish nationalists about the desirability, timing, and type of armed struggle. Rival Kurdish organizations charged the PKK with taking unnecessary risks when the conditions were not ripe for revolution. Several Kurdish leaders cited Lenin when they diagnosed the PKK with "infantile disorder."[14] In response, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, argued that the nature of the Turkish state made armed resistance indispensable for revolution. Öcalan not only argued that a revolutionary situation existed in Kurdish areas of Turkey, but also actively worked to create the revolutionary conditions in the

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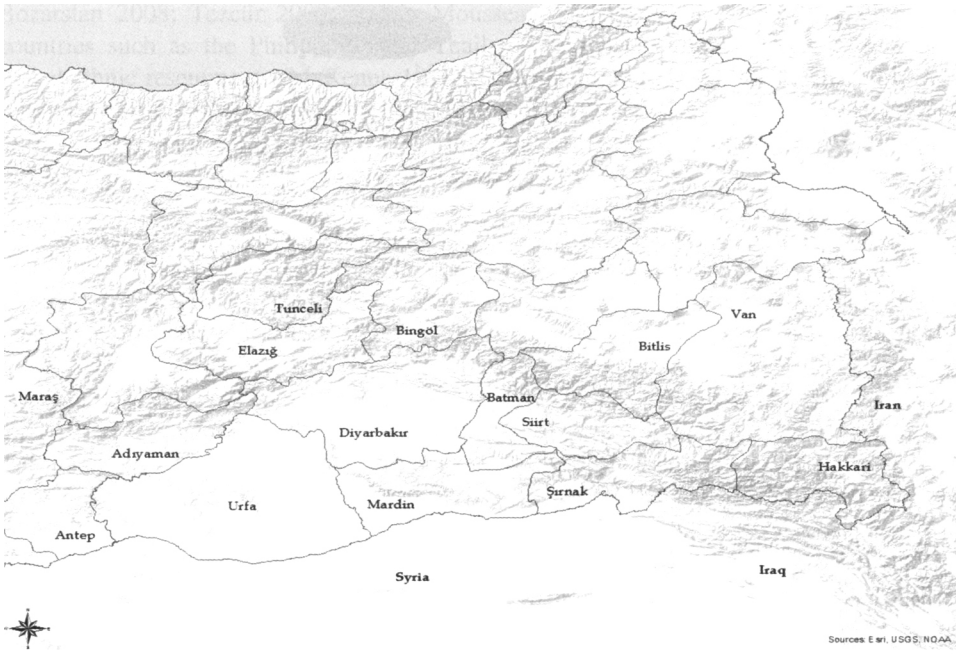

Figure 2. Eastern Turkey and mountainous terrain.

countryside. (PKK 1982a, 22, 1983, 283, 288, 290–292). Echoing Frantz Fanon, he suggested that "revolutionary violence" would not only liberate Kurdistan from the yoke of "imperialists and feudalists," but would also emancipate the Kurdish individual from his "enslaved soul" (1983, 275).[15] Öcalan's diagnosis turned out to be accurate as the PKK managed to achieve considerable support through its strategic pursuit of violence in a short time period.

Violent nationalist mobilization

The PKK made national headlines for the first time when it tried to assassinate Mehmet Celal Bucak, a powerful landlord and parliamentarian from the province of Urfa, on 31 July 1979. This attack came after the PKK's success in subduing another powerful landlord family in another Urfa district (Karayılan 2011, 100–105). The brazenness of the attack was unprecedented and generated a vicious cycle of violence between the Bucak clan and the PKK cadres in the Siverek district of Urfa.[16]

Kurdish political activism in the 1970s was mostly an urban phenomenon. Yet a majority of ethnic Kurds lived in villages. Only the PKK, and to a more limited extent the KUK, gained significant inroads among the Kurdish peasantry who lived under the thumb of the landlords and tribal leaders. Figure 3 shows two indicators of land inequality on the basis of official data from 1981. First, the ratio of landless peasants in the Kurdish provinces (darker dots in the figure) was significantly higher than the national average of 28.7%. Second, especially in southeastern Kurdish provinces with fertile lands, a small number of families controlled vast estates. The total size of large estates (larger than 247 acres) in Turkey was around 1.287 million acres. Of these 1.287 million acres, around 589 thousand acres (approximately 47%) are found only in two Kurdish provinces,

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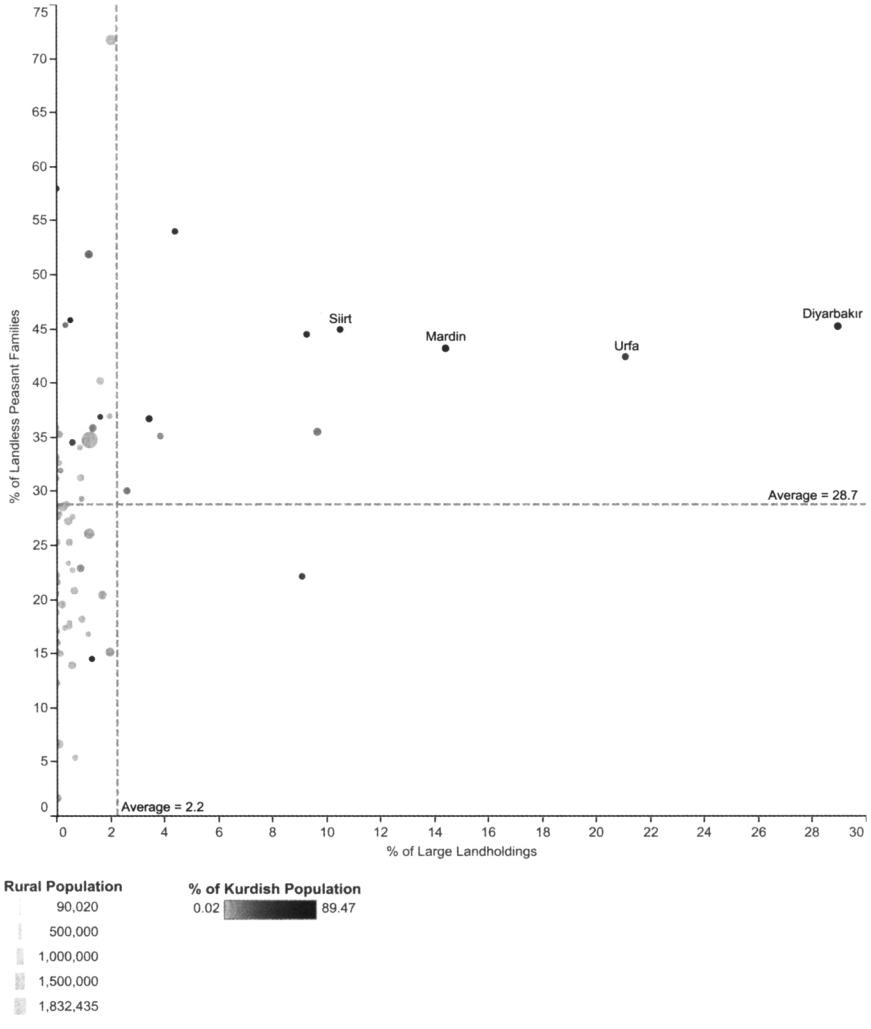

Figure 3. Land inequality in Turkey.
Note: Each dot represents a province.
Source: Tarım, Orman ve Köyişleri Bakanlığı (1985, 56–59).

Diyarbakır and Urfa. The commercialization and mechanization of agriculture since the 1950s transformed sharecroppers into a rural or urban proletariat who would form the backbone of the PKK cadres.

State capacity was also low in these rural lands characterized by deep inequalities. In Urfa, the literacy rate was well below the national average, health services were underdeveloped, a minority of the population spoke Turkish, and only a few villages had electricity.[17] The security forces were sparse and underequipped.[18] As Kalyvas' theory of control would suggest, an official report stated that people were hedging their bets to see whether the state or PKK was more fearsome.[19] While the PKK ultimately failed to defeat the Bucak clan in Urfa,[20] its reputation as a formidable force grew in the region.[21] According to a PKK sympathizer,

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> I was in Ergani [a district of Diyarbakır] by that time. Initially, the *Apocular* [PKK] had no presence in the region. Their influence increased after the events of Siverek-Hilvan. My brother was among the first group they formed in Ergani. After their emergence, the other groups started to lose influence. If you say something, you have to do something. The others remained passive and found excuses not to act. The Siverek incident made the PKK popular.[22]

Soon after the PKK attacked powerful landowning families in the Mardin countryside and engaged in street battles with other Kurdish organizations.[23] It achieved considerable support in the oil town of Batman, fought against Turkish leftist organizations in the province of Tunceli, and established a foothold in the industrial city of Antep. In the words of a resident of Batman with a long history of political activism, "The *Apocular* emerged in 1977–1978. It fought against all other organizations here. As it grew, other groups were marginalized and disappeared in a few years."[24]

In this historical context, the PKK violence was not a natural reflection of its radical ideology as all Kurdish nationalist organizations perceived the Turkish state as a "colonizer" and Kurdistan as a "colony." The PKK violence was a strategic decision on the part of its leadership to compete effectively against other Kurdish organizations. Being a late comer, the PKK employed violence to develop a niche. The PKK deliberately decided not to establish a regular publication like other organizations until 1982. Instead, it sought to achieve influence primarily through violent means. Consequently, in less than two years, the PKK emerged as the leading Kurdish nationalist organization in Turkey. PKK activists made up three-fourths of all people accused of Kurdish "secessionist" activities during the post-1980 coup trials. The PKK also had the second highest number of activists on trial after the THKP-C among all organizations in Turkey. Around 3300 PKK suspects were on trial by early September 1982 (Anonymous 1982, 72).

A detailed analysis of the PKK members in this period provides a unique perspective about the expansion of its popular support in those years. Table 1 summarizes biographical information of 142 PKK members killed before the 12 September 1980 coup. Consistent with the previous discussion, a large plurality of them came from poor families and was killed in clashes with the landlords in the provinces of Urfa and Mardin. Most of them were young peasants, laborers, or students. The average age of death was 24 years. They had a variety of educational backgrounds and a plurality of them had high-school education.[25] Twenty-two of them had formerly been affiliated with either the Turkish left or the Kurdish nationalist organizations, suggesting the increasing credibility of the PKK

Table 1. PKK members killed before the 1980 coup.

Birth province		Education		Family		Profession		Cause of death		Former affiliation	
Urfa	44	None	6	Poor	64	Peasant	33	Landlords	51	Kurdish nat.	12
Mardin	32	Elementary	15	Middle	25	Worker	31	Kurdish nat.	27	Turkish left	10
Batman	18	Middle	6	Well-off	9	Student	25	State forces	26		
Tunceli	8	High	38	NA	44	Teacher	5	Turkish nat.	17		
Diyarbakır	7	University	14			Other	6	Turkish left	12		
Adıyaman	6					NA	6	Accident	6		
Maraş	5							Other	3		
Elazığ	5										
Total 142											

Source: *Serxwebûn* magazine published by the PKK and PKK (n.d.).

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vis-à-vis other organizations. These statistics indicate that the PKK's appeal was particularly strong among poor and young Kurds with some access to education.

The PKK's strategic employment of violence was crucial to its ability to attract fighters and supporters. On the basis of available information, it is possible to identify four causal mechanisms explaining the PKK's appeal. These mechanisms involve both self-interest-based motivations and emotions such as fear and revenge (Elster 1985). A nonviolent movement would be unlikely to generate these mechanisms given the socioeconomic and political context. The first mechanism is *credibility*. Peasants would be more receptive to a revolutionary ideology if they personalize the source of their poverty and injustice in the figure of powerful landlords with whom they daily interact (Scott 1985, 347). Yet a movement would obtain active support only if it is able to overcome fear-inhibiting collective action against powerful elites. An armed movement has a better chance than a nonviolent movement to sustain itself in the countryside in the face of attacks from local elite allied with the state. Armed action makes the idea of open challenge against the power holders not only plausible but also feasible.[26] Peasants would be unlikely to risk their lives for a movement that does not offer them a realistic action plan (Ahmad 1971, 158; Race 1972, 174–181). In the words of a villager from the Kızıltepe district of Mardin who became a PKK sympathizer in the late 1970s, "Poor people joined the PKK. Because they use a language understood by people. When the agha oppresses people, *Apocular* intervened. They were the only ones resisting oppression. If a girl was kidnapped, they also intervened."[27] An individual from Batman who also became a supporter of the PKK in the late 1970s expressed a similar view; "[t]here were many factions. *Apocular* were very modest and did what they preached. They valued people. They taught me what it means to be a Kurd."[28]

While most Kurdish organizations were highly critical of land inequality, only the PKK directly confronted the powerful landlords. When members of a powerful local family murdered a leading PKK member in Hilvan, a district of Urfa, in May 1978, local people were too intimidated by the family to attend his funeral. The failure to retaliate in kind would undermine the PKK's standing among the peasantry. Other Kurdish organizations (e.g. *Kawa*) that tried to establish presence in the region were subdued when the landowning family's henchmen attacked and physically harassed their members (Yüce 1999, 77–80). According to former PKK members, the PKK's willingness to match its words with action gave its message a clarity and credence lacked by other organizations (Marcus 2007, 36, 39–40). When another PKK member was killed in the same town less than a year after, his funeral, which was guarded by armed PKK members, attracted large crowds. By that time, the local population had overcome its fear of the family as the PKK had already killed many members of the landowning family, therefore displacing its authority.

The mechanism of *credibility* also explains the PKK's widespread support among the Alevi Kurds from the Maraş province. Riots resulted in the deaths of more than a hundred civilians, mostly Alevi Kurds, in the Maraş city center in late December 1978 (Yüce 1999, 99–102). The state forces were unable and unwilling to prevent the sectarian violence. Many young Alevi Kurds sought protection by joining the PKK. In a high-risk environment, a movement that provides guns to its supporters reduces their sense of vulnerability and facilitates collective action (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001). Armed PKK members were able to defend themselves from sectarian violence and stage counterattacks.

A second mechanism is *revenge*. In cultures characterized by blood feud, the death of a tribe member in the hands of a member of another tribe can generate a vicious cycle of killings until an intervention by a powerful third force (Elster 1990). The PKK exploited local norms of blood feud in Urfa as it strategically recruited members from tribes opposing the

tribe of the ruling family (İmset 1992, 18–20; Marcus 2007, 46).[29] This strategy ensured a steady supply of fighters as relatives of the killed PKK members joined the organization to take revenge. The cost for the PKK is its increasing involvement in local and petty disputes (Karayılan 2011, 104).

Social mobility and *gender emancipation* are two other mechanisms. The PKK provided the only means of social advancement for the poor peasants with dim life prospects. Similar to the Peruvian Shining Path's initial appeal among the peasants of Ayacucho (Degregori 1998), the PKK offered a previously unavailable channel of social mobility to the poor peasants. A young illiterate shepherd with physical endurance, strong military skills, and good knowledge of local geography could quickly rise in the ranks and become a powerful PKK commander.[30] Finally, the PKK offered the only way out for many peasant girls in a highly patriarchal society. In this regard, the PKK was the most "modernist" Kurdish organization given its determination to confront the traditional Kurdish society. Similar to the processes in El Salvador, Peru, and Sri Lanka, the PKK's mobilization of young women challenged the patriarchal social hierarchies and transformed gender relations (Wood 2008). Many women fighters associated joining the insurgency with the opportunity to leave oppressive conditions (Anonymous 2004; Buldan 2004; Çağlayan 2007). They did not want to be forced into marriages at an early age and become like their mothers and aunts whose powerlessness in family and social relations they observed with despair.[31] Armed female PKK fighters visiting villages left a lasting effect on many peasant girls who admired their self-confidence and aura of power.[32] Many peasants sought to free themselves from patriarchy and joined the insurgency whose discourse of national liberation struggle effectively countered the discourse of honor sustaining male dominance (Çağlayan 2007, 196–197). This gender dynamic became more pronounced by the end of the 1980s when the number of women fighters in the PKK increased substantially.[33]

The rise of a popular insurgency

With simultaneous attacks against army units in two remote towns on 15 August 1984, the PKK initiated its guerilla warfare.[34] In the aftermath of the coup, this brazen attack served as a catalyst that challenged the Turkish state's image as an omnipotent entity.[35] The PKK's conduct of protracted warfare has notable similarities to contemporaneous insurgency movements in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru. These insurgencies represented a third generation of leftist militant activism influenced by the Chinese and Vietnamese examples and took lessons from the failures of both *foco* theory and urban guerilla strategy in the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution (Ellenbogen 1991). For these movements, the critical choice was not between nonviolent or violent action, but among different modes of armed struggle. Similarly, the PKK learned from the failures of Turkish leftist armed movements of the 1970s and decided on a long-term people's war to achieve its political goals. Its systematic preparation for armed struggle aimed to imitate the Vietnamese and Chinese successes[36] and was inspired by the Nicaraguan and El Salvadorian guerilla movements (PKK 1982c, 103).

The ability of the PKK to lead sustainable guerilla warfare was a combination of several factors well identified in the civil war literature. First, indiscriminate state violence, especially in the aftermath of the 1980 coup, victimized large segments of the Kurdish society. The coup did not only destroy the avenues of Kurdish nonviolent and legal political activism, but also fueled widespread grievances among ordinary Kurds. Systematic torture politicized the families of the detainees and further undermined the legitimacy of the Turkish state in the eyes of Kurdish people.[37] The coup also vindicated the PKK's argument

about the futility of electoral and legal politics (PKK 1982d, 33–35). The PKK was well prepared to pursue armed struggle that was the only feasible method for Kurdish nationalists in the post-1980 period.

More than any other Kurdish group, imprisoned PKK members organized collective resistance including hunger strikes and self-immolations. Their defiance strongly contributed to the image of the PKK as a self-sacrificing organization confronting a profoundly unjust regime (Maraşlı 2010b).[38] State repression fueled emotions of insecurity, anger, and revenge that translated into higher levels of recruitment into the PKK that remained the only organization that was ready to counter state violence with its "revolutionary violence." Meanwhile, Öcalan also had no qualms with the use of violence to crush internal opposition, and eliminate defectors (Marcus 2007). While other Kurdish organizations suffered from fragmentation and splits, Öcalan moved to Syria before the coup and gradually established a base in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

At the same time, popular Kurdish grievances by themselves in the aftermath of the coup do not explain the emergence of the PKK insurgency whose feasibility was a function of several structural and geopolitical factors.[39] Rough terrain and logistical support from external forces such as Syria, Palestinian guerillas, and the Kurdish Iraqi leader Masoud Barzani were also crucial for the PKK's success. The PKK also received strong financial and logistical support from the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe (Van Bruinessen 1998). Without these favorable conditions and years of careful planning, the PKK would not be able to sustain its guerilla activities in the face of the overwhelming force of the Turkish state. The region chosen for the initial guerilla activity was the mountainous area bordering Iraq where the state authority has historically been weak. To use Scott's terminology, this zone has historically been a "state-resistant space" (2009, 169). As the Turkish Army gradually evacuated the small and vulnerable outposts, the mobile PKK units roamed the mountainous countryside (Özcan 1999, 96–128).

The PKK survived the first five years of the guerilla warfare despite the relentless security operations that had trouble identifying and finding the militants (Bila 2007, 121–124). "Enemy-centric" counterinsurgency tactics entailing large-scale sweep operations and indiscriminate violence further alienated the local population (Kilcullen 2009, 128–130, 146; Pecency and Stanley 2010). The PKK violence was more selective and primarily targeted security forces, collaborators (e.g. village heads), and dissenters. Consistent with the argument that selective violence is more effective than indiscriminate violence in generating support, the insurgent social base significantly expanded with the advent of the 1990s. Mass uprisings erupted in the border towns of Nusaybin, Cizre, Kızıltepe, İdil, and Silopi in March 1990. The participants in these uprisings were primarily displaced peasants whose villages were burnt down by the security forces (Karayılan 2011, 181). The state lost control of the countryside and its hold over the cities became tenuous. The Gulf War in 1991 helped the PKK to expand its camps in northern Iraq, acquire a significant amount of weapons, and increase its number of recruits. The PKK reached the zenith of its power in 1992 before gradually losing the initiative to the Turkish Army that mobilized its much superior resources and pursued a relentless campaign of counterinsurgency.

The recruitment patterns of the PKK also support the argument that violence was an effective tool for the recruitment of the peasantry. Table 2 compares the birth locations of the deceased PKK militants recruited during the pre-guerilla warfare period and the initial guerilla warfare period (1984–1989). It also shows the locations of PKK casualties in these two periods. Not surprisingly, a large plurality of PKK militants (39%) came from and lost their lives in Urfa and Mardin where the PKK was most active in the first period. Before 1980, the PKK recruitment in the mountainous border region (i.e. Şırnak,

Table 2. The comparison of PKK militants in two periods.

Pre-guerilla period (1976–1984)				Initial guerilla period (1984–1989)			
Birth locations		Death locations		Birth locations		Death locations	
Urfa	97	Urfa	48	Şırnak	296	Şırnak	87
Mardin	83	Mardin	48	Syria	86	Mardin	59
Batman	45	Diyarbakır	36[a]	Mardin	61	Hakkari	45
Diyarbakır	40	Tunceli	18	Siirt	48	Siirt	44
Tunceli	35	Antep	13	Van	32	Batman	22
Elazığ	24	Şırnak	13	Hakkari	27	Bingöl	16
Maraş	21	Lebanon	11	Diyarbakır	22	Diyarbakır	15
Bingöl	18	Maraş	6	Elazığ	15	Iraq	12
Adıyaman	12	Elazığ	5	Urfa	14	Adıyaman	10
Siirt	10	Bingöl	5	Maraş	14	Bitlis	9
Unknown	10				33		39
Total	465		255		767		392

Source: The Kurdish Insurgency Militants (KIM) Data set v.1. This data set includes biographical information about 8217 militants killed from 1976 to 2012. For more information about the data set, see Tezcür (2013).
[a]This number includes 25 PKK members who died in the infamous Diyarbakır prison.

see Figure 2) was negligible. As the PKK shifted the locus of its military activities to this region after 1980, the geographical composition of its recruits changed. Şırnak, a small province, became the major recruitment ground for the PKK militants as almost 40% of all militants recruited during the initial guerilla period came from this province. Many poor peasants from the province joined the insurgency during this period.[40] The number of recruits from other provinces significantly decreased as the PKK no longer maintained a viable presence in these provinces. As the plains of Urfa were not conducive to guerilla warfare, recruits from this province sharply declined. Furthermore, as the PKK moved its headquarters to Syria, it managed to recruit a large number of Kurds from this country. This strong spatial correlation between violent insurgent activity and recruitment indicates that an insurgent organization attracts new recruits as long as it could prove its viability as a fighting force. The PKK's relocation to the mountains also made it a resilient insurgent force surviving more than three decades of armed clashes with the Turkish state.

Conclusion

From a moral perspective, nonviolent resistance is particularly appealing because it seems to avoid what Walzer (1973) calls "the problem of dirty hands" in politics. Ordinary people participating in nonviolent struggles may achieve progressive political change without harming innocent people and doing moral wrong. This article adopts a less optimistic view and studies a case where an ethnic insurgency achieved nationalist mobilization through its strategic use of violence. Armed action may play a crucial role even in social movements perceived as the epitome of successful nonviolent resistance.[41]

This article provides the first systematic study of the origins of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey based on an archival work and individual level data. It complements macro-level studies that identify ethnic exclusion characterizing the formation of new nation-states as a primary cause of war in the modern world (Wimmer 2013). Furthermore, it argues that studies that identify Kurdish nationalism as a reaction to repressive policies of the

Turkish state without paying attention to prevailing social conditions within Kurdish society and oppositional strategies fail to explain the nature and timing of the rise of Kurdish mobilization. While the PKK emerged later than other Kurdish nationalist organizations, it employed violence to mobilize effectively large numbers of peasants whose participation in the nationalist struggle was crucial for its sustainability. After more than 30 years, the PKK still commands substantial support among the Kurdish population. The Turkish state now seems to recognize the PKK's popularity. It initiated a series of negotiations in 2008 with the PKK leadership that ultimately resulted in a truce in early 2013.

It is important to note that the factors that facilitate popular mobilization may be different from the factors that contribute to its ultimate success. Even if the PKK achieved nationalist mobilization, it has demonstrated far more limited success in achieving its political goals. The socioeconomic and political conditions have dramatically changed since the late 1970s. A majority of Kurdish people now live in the cities, the power of the landlord and tribal leaders have been greatly reduced, the state capacity has substantially increased, the major Turkish actors no longer espouse exclusive military solutions to the Kurdish question, and the avenues for nonviolent contentious action have proliferated. Even if armed struggle has been successful in mobilizing broad support from the ethnic Kurds, it has failed to gain much sympathy from either the broader Turkish society or the international community. At the same time, as the interactions between the Turkish state and the insurgents demonstrate, the PKK now emerges as *the* representative of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. Kurdish political parties and civil society organizations have a subordinate position vis-à-vis the insurgent leadership. This is a significant achievement for a violent organization that was established by a group of college dropouts with no significant resources several decades ago. Does the evolution of the PKK also demonstrate that violent struggle is not only critical for nationalist mobilization but also for ethnic empowerment in an electoral democracy such as Turkey? As the negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK evolve, scholars will be better positioned to address this interesting but unsettling question about the relationship between violence and political change.

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Notes

1. For the nine DDKO bulletins, see Kotan (2003, 466–493).
2. The Barzani movement also received logistical and financial help from the peasants in the border zone (Erdost 1992, 223–228, 251; Bilgin 1993, 41).
3. Kırmızıtoprak (1997), who left the TKDP and established the T-KDP, was influenced by the revolutionary struggles in China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Congo. Inspired by Mao Zedong, he envisioned a long-term popular war, but engaged in infighting and was killed on the orders of Mustafa Barzani.

4. The key translations include Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* in 1967 and Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-determination* in 1969 (Maraşlı 2010a, 85).
5. The Iranian Kurdish political leader Ghassemlou (1965) is one of the earliest articulators of this idea. The first signs of the idea in Turkey appeared during the TKDP trial of 1968 (Gündoğan 2007, 172).
6. The works of Beşikçi had a major influence on the popularization of these ideas among the Kurdish intelligentsia (1969, 282–284).
7. Kemal Burkay writing under a pseudonym was the first Kurdish intellectual to systematically express these ideas (Murat 1973, 22–25, 35, 194, 199).
8. Among the Turkish leftist groups, only *Türkiye İhtilalci İşçi Köylü Partisi* (TİİKP) (1974, 430–432) and *Kurtuluş* embraced the colonialism thesis regarding the Kurdish question. A group of Kurdish activists in *Kurtuluş* split and established an autonomous Kurdish nationalist organization called *Tekoşin*.
9. For more information, see Anonymous (1988, 2309, 2312–2323).
10. For instance, see *Rizgarî* 3 (May 1977), 107–124; Güçlü (2010); and Maraşlı (2010a, 88–89).
11. For instance, see Yalçın Doğan's articles in Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, 21–22 September 1979, 7; Burkay (2010, 12–16, 71–77).
12. A group left T-KDP and established the pro-Chinese *Kawa* in 1976. *Kawa* also split into two in 1977 (Gündoğan 2007, 25–33).
13. Detailed information about KUK members is available at KUK (1995).
14. Lenin used this term when he criticized ultra-left tendencies that only accept radical violent measures as legitimate methods of struggle. See www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/index.htm, accessed 1 May 2014. For the criticisms of PKK along these lines, see Büyükkaya (1992, 71) and Burkay (1983, 204–208).
15. While there is no evidence suggesting that Öcalan actually read Frantz Fanon, his ideas about the emancipatory role of violence are very similar to Fanon's (2005) analysis of colonialism. For the PKK's portrayal of the attacks of 15 August 1984, from a Fanonist perspective, see www.hezenparastin.com/tr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=177:k-kuran-hpgye&catid=34:hpg&Itemid=298, accessed 1 May 2014.
16. See Turkish newspaper *Milliyet*, 19 August 1979, 8; 20–22 August, 9; 23 August, 9; 2 September, 5; 3 September, 1, 5. Because of this violent conflict, the population of the Siverek town dropped from around 40,000 in 1975 to less than 30,000 in 1980.
17. *Milliyet*, 17 July 1981, 7.
18. Most of the state positions were unfilled. *Milliyet*, 3 September 1979, 5 and 9 August 1980, 6. Also see Akar and Dündar (2008, 268–269).
19. Ibid., 274–276.
20. For PKK's self-criticism, see PKK (1982b, 118) and Bayık (n.d., 63–65).
21. Kalkan (n.d., 12); Yalçın Doğan, *Cumhuriyet*, 25 September 1979, 7.
22. Personal communication, İstanbul, 15 November 2012. In its early years, the PKK was known as *Apocular*, literally the followers of Apo, the nickname of Abdullah Öcalan.
23. For a summary of the PKK strategy in Mardin region, see Gülmüş (2009).
24. Personal communication, Batman, 3 December 2012.
25. In contrast, the PKK leadership was primarily composed of individuals with some university education.
26. For how few revolutionaries may change preferences of a large population, see Weingast (2005).
27. Personal communication, Kızıltepe, 6 October 2012.
28. Personal communication, Diyarbakır, 8 October 2012.
29. Also, see *Milliyet*, 4 September 1979, 1, 12. For the complicated relationship between the state, Kurdish nationalists, and tribes, see Belge (2011).
30. The life story of Vahap Geçmez, an illiterate teenager who joined the PKK and became one of its leaders, is illustrative in this regard (PKK 1998, 85–87).
31. Adife Sakık, an illiterate peasant girl born in 1964, joined the PKK in 1981, and was killed in a firefight in 1985, is an early example of young women joining an armed movement to escape from their patriarchial family (Çelik 2000, 116; *Berxwedan*, 30 June 1989, 2, 22). She is the half-sister of prominent Kurdish parliamentarian Sırrı Sakık.
32. Çağlayan, *Analar*, *Yoldaşlar*, *Tanrıçalar*, 178, 206–207; *Aklın Ötesindeler*, 124.
33. The story of Hanım Yelikaya, an illiterate peasant girl who joined the PKK at the age of 14 in the late 1970s is one of the earliest examples. See *Berxwedan*, 30 June 1988, 2, 9.

34. Ala Rizgarî also made an aborted attempt to initiate guerilla warfare (Ballı 1991, 83–84, 90–91).
35. For a similar effect among the Palestinians, see Sayigh (1997, 91).
36. Central references were Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap. PKK (1982b, 102, 1983, 255–262, 277).
37. The life story of Leyla Zana, one of the most famous Kurdish nationalists, is illuminating in this regard. Zana was an illiterate teenager when her husband Mehdi Zana, the mayor of Diyarbakır, was arrested in 1980. She developed a strong political consciousness and was elected to the Turkish Parliament in 1991. She was imprisoned from 1994 to 2004 (Bildirici 2008).
38. In this regard, the similarities with the IRA's hunger strike in 1981 and armed struggle are striking. See Feldman (1991, Chap. 6) and O'Heam (2009).
39. There is a vast literature on factors making an insurgency feasible (e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner 2009).
40. For instance, see the story of Ahmet Kutan, a poor shepherd who join the insurgency after a group of militants visited his village (*Serxwebûn*, December 1986, 7), and Ramazan Gezginci, an illiterate poor peasant, who joined the PKK while working in construction in Lebanon (*Serxwebûn*, December 1987, 27).
41. For the role of violence in South Africa, see Seidman (2001).

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