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# Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey: Hegemony, Myth and Violence

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the PKK's (Kurdistan Workers' Party) nationalist mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey in the past 30 years. By drawing on the concepts of 'hegemony' and 'myth', it examines the constitution of Kurdish political subjectivity and the representation of Kurdish identity and difference in political discourse. It reflects on the ideological and political debates over strategy and the contestation over identity that numerous Kurdish political organizations took part in during the 1970s. It then examines the PKK's subsequent hegemony over Kurdish politics in Turkey from the 1980s onwards by highlighting the factors that have enhanced its appeal among the Kurdish communities. This is done first through tracing the growth of the PKK's organizational network, and second, analysing the representation of its struggle in political discourse and artistic form to its target groups.

## Introduction

The current wave of Kurdish political activism in Turkey is generally traced back to the early 1960s. Kurdish political activists were initially active within Turkey's socialist movement; however, from the late 1960s onwards, many began to call for the establishment of separate Kurdish political organizations. In the 1970s, this led to the emergence of numerous Kurdish political organizations, and the articulation of Kurdish identity and demands within the Marxist discourse, which resulted in the constitution of the Kurdish national liberation discourse in the mid-1970s. Since then, with increasing vigour, the Kurdish national movement has started to challenge Kemalism—the Turkish state nationalism and the country's official ideology—and the set of relations of identity and difference instituted by it. The political and ideological debates that took place within the Kurdish movement and between Kurdish organizations and Turkish socialist organizations during the 1970s and early 1980s led to the ideological condensation of the national liberation discourse. It characterized the Kurds as a colonized people, their country—Kurdistan—was seen as an international and interstate colony, and the proposal was put forward that their national unification could be achieved only under the leadership of a revolutionary movement led by the Kurdish working class. This framing of the Kurdish question gained widespread acceptance among the activists and political

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organizations who, in order to challenge the state's hegemonic discourse depicting the Kurds as essentially Turkish, began to put forward an alternative conception of identity that emphasized the antiquity of the Kurdish nation and its rich culture. The political practices that the national liberation discourse fostered sought to end the Kurds' national oppression by the states that ruled Kurdish populations as well as the prevalent economic oppression and exploitation of the Kurdish masses by the Kurdish feudal elites.

Whereas Kurdish politics in Turkey during the 1970s was characterized by organizational disunity and internal conflict, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the hegemony of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK)) and its guerrilla insurgency. Initially during the late 1970s, the PKK's use of violence was sporadic and against the Kurdish tribal leaders and some rival Kurdish organization. From 1984 onwards, however, the nature of the campaign changed significantly, with the Turkish army and the state's security forces becoming its main targets. The better trained, equipped and organized militants started to fight the army and security forces in coordinated attacks predominantly in the rural areas. These military practices had, in the long run, the aim of inciting a popular national rebellion that would lead to the overthrow of the Turkish rule in majority Kurdish regions in Turkey. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the scope and depth of the insurgency increased significantly, and through its widespread political consequences, the PKK mobilized a large number of the Kurds in Turkey. Through its media and information network, it was able to reach out to many Kurds and evolve into a mass movement, with supporters and sympathizers numbering several millions. This period represents the peak of the PKK's insurgency and is characterized by the heightening of antagonistic relations between the Kurds and Turkey. By the early 1990s, the PKK had evolved into a transnational mass movement that organized political and cultural activities in Turkey as well as many European countries. Its insurgency had major social, political and economic consequences, including significant loss of life.[1]

The sudden success the PKK had in mobilizing large numbers of Kurds and the broader political challenge by the Kurdish national movement in Turkey has led, in the past 15 years, to an increase in academic studies on the rise of Kurdish nationalism and the conflict in Turkey. Histories of the early manifestations of Kurdish nationalism, such as those by Van Bruinessen (1992) and Olson (1989), have been supplemented by conflict analysis and political history accounts that have a narrower focus on the re-emergence and evolution of Kurdish nationalism from the 1960s onwards and the conflict during the 1980s and 1990s (Olson, 1996; Kirisci & Winrow, 1997; Barkey & Fuller, 1998; Van Bruinessen, 1998; McDowall, 2000; White, 2000; Bozarslan, 2003, 2008; Natali, 2005; Taspinar, 2005; Romano, 2006; Özcan, 2006). These provide a causal explanation that highlights the significant role that socio-economic factors (increased urbanization, spread of education, the economic backwardness of the majority Kurdish regions, etc.) have played in the re-emergence of the Kurdish national movement and the growth of nationalism since the 1960s. It is argued that socio-economic transformation contributed to the growth of nationalism by making available new forms of consciousness and creating new opportunities for the Kurds to form links and associations with other progressive forces (Van Bruinessen, 1998, p. 41; McDowall, 2000, pp. 404–405; Taspinar, 2005, pp. 88–92). However, the more specific questions concerning the ideological and political debates over strategy that took place within the Kurdish movement during the 1970s, the subsequent hegemony of the PKK over Kurdish politics in Turkey and its mass mobilization of the Kurds remain somewhat underexplored.

The state's excessive and often indiscriminate use of force and repression, which was most acute during the military rule between 1980 and 1983 and included the use of indiscriminate violence against ordinary people and widespread torture against activists, is cited by Taspinar (2005, p. 97) as the reason behind the PKK's success in mobilizing large numbers and its strong appeal among the Kurds. Barkey & Fuller (1998, p. 30) attribute the PKK's dominance to its ability to fight the Turkish military and survive against the efforts to eradicate it. The PKK's nationalist mobilization also features significantly in Romano's (2006) case study of the Kurdish nationalist movement, which draws our attention to the effectiveness of the strategies, tactics and resource mobilization that the PKK deployed. Romano (2006, pp. 73–74) argues that by using the already existing networks and exploiting the conflicts between the landlords and peasants—by fighting against landlords in defence of peasants rights—the PKK's early cadres enhanced the movement's base and operations and managed to win the sympathy of the peasants. In fact, the PKK's strategy to manipulate local politics to its advantage is identified by Romano as the key factor for its success: '[w]hat seems to differentiate the PKK from its local competitors is a strategy which would appeal to people who initially cared little for its Marxist–Leninist ideology or a politicised Kurdish ethnic nationalism' (Romano, 2006, p. 73).

While the explanations provided in conflict analysis and political history accounts do well to draw attention to the conditions that made antagonism between the Kurds and the Turkish state possible, they do not provide sufficient focus on how the Kurds' experience of *oppression* was interpreted by the Kurdish national movement. Despite being victims of state violence, especially during political crises and military rule, some Kurds chose assimilation instead of resistance and yet some chose to support Turkish left or Islamist groups. Hence, there were other avenues that were used to channel Kurdish discontent, and what made the Kurdish nationalist movement's interpretation and challenge *more appealing* than its alternatives needs to be explained. While Romano's account correctly highlights the impact of the PKK's strategy in its credibility with the Kurdish population, more thorough analysis of the PKK's discourse and the representation of its struggle in its political discourse and through artistic forms are needed to explore the reasons behind its appeal to the Kurds and its hegemony over Kurdish politics in Turkey. We need such an analysis to show how the PKK managed to gain the credibility of the Kurdish population.[2]

The main claim this article advances is that a comprehensive analysis of the PKK's discourse is needed to offer a more informed assessment of its mass mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey. In the next section, I first offer a brief overview of the re-emergence of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey and the political activism it has brought about since the 1960s. Second, by drawing on Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory and the theoretical concepts of 'discourse', 'articulation', 'hegemony' and 'myth', I elucidate the approach I take in my analysis of Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Turkey. The discourse theory and analysis framework is used to provide an account of the constitution of Kurdish political subjectivity, the representation of Kurdish identity and difference in the past 30 years, and to enquire into why such a representation has been *affective* and *resonated* with the Kurdish population. In the third section, I reflect on the political debates that took place among numerous Kurdish political organizations to highlight the contestation over strategy and Kurdish identity during the late 1970s and to search for 'clues' to the PKK's subsequent hegemony from the early 1980s onwards. In the fourth section, I analyse the PKK's construction of its contemporary myth of resistance, which

was used extensively to represent its struggle to the Kurdish masses and in the mobilization process. The discussion offered in the third and fourth sections examines extensive primary sources, including the contents of party political programmes, political magazines, pamphlets and resistance music, which were the main outlets used by Kurdish organizations to disseminate their discourse to the wider Kurdish civil society. However, my aim is not to provide a description of the discourse, but rather an interpretative account of the PKK's hegemony over the Kurdish national movement in Turkey, and draw insights about why and how it managed to mobilize successfully a significant number of the Kurds during the 1980s and 1990s.

From the mid-1970s onwards, political organizations and groups became the main producers of discourse and primarily their discourse was disseminated to the wider Kurdish society through the magazines that they published. Hence, naturally my focus centres on the discourses of the political groups and parties disseminated in their magazines in the period. There are not any statistical records concerning the spread and distribution of these magazines as many were prohibited and their publication and distribution were done secretly, which makes it very difficult for anybody to state precisely or obtain verification figures about how many of these magazines were in circulation, what their exact geographic distribution was and the nature of their readership. However, it is highly likely that their primary readership consisted of the members and sympathizers of each group. The importance of these publications is that they made a significant contribution to the public discussion of the Kurdish question in Turkey and offer us insights into the issues that dominated the agendas of the political groups and parties that were active during the 1970s. Both of the PKK's magazines, *Serxwebûn* (Independence, 1982–present) and *Berxwedan* (Resistance, 1982–1995), were widely distributed in Europe and clandestinely in Turkey, but statistical information on their geographic spread is also not available. The PKK's political discourse was likely to have been disseminated orally during numerous public meetings, demonstrations, speeches and commemoration practices that it organized in Europe. Moreover, it is highly likely that the articles published in *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan* and that conveyed the PKK's contemporary resistance myth were reproduced in Turkey by the pro-Kurdish magazines during the 1990s. Hence, a significant number of sympathizers and supporters in Turkey would have had access to the PKK's discourse that I analyse in the fourth section.



## The Re-emergence of the Kurdish National Movement

Gradually from the 1960s onwards, Kurdish nationalism has established itself as antagonistic to Turkish 'state' nationalism, actively challenging the state's hegemonic discourse depicting Kurds as essentially Turkish. Turkey sought to level out Kurds' difference through oppression and assimilation. To counter these efforts, Kurdish intellectuals and political organizations formulated an oppositional discourse putting forward an alternative conception that emphasized the antiquity of the Kurdish nation and its rich culture, and generated their own interpretations of backwardness, discrimination, underdevelopment and oppression. In the 1960s, the Kurds began to appropriate a socialist discourse stressing national oppression and economic exploitation of the Kurdish peasant masses, gradually culminating in the conception of Kurdistan as a 'colony' and Kurds as a colonized people. This framing of the Kurdish issue gained widespread acceptance among Kurdish activists from the 1970s onwards.

Various factors have combined to generate this outcome. The transition to multiparty democracy in Turkey, the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq (especially the return of Mullah Mustafa Barzani in 1958 to Iraqi Kurdistan and the subsequent reinvigoration of the Kurdish resistance) and the emergence of a new generation of politically active Kurds influenced the politicization of the Kurds in Turkey and led to the re-emergence of the Kurdish national movement (Bozarslan, 2008, pp. 343–345). The limited freedoms allowed by the democratic regime instituted with the 1960 constitution created room for oppressed voices to be heard and political opposition to harness its struggle. The Kurds were able to express some of their demands and concerns. Consequently, the 1960s witnessed the proliferation of Kurdish cultural activities, leading to an increase in discussion of the Kurdish question. This in fact started earlier, during the late 1950s when Kurdish students and 'organic intellectuals' attending the universities in Ankara and Istanbul began to organize and promote Kurdish cultural activities.[3]

A series of events in Turkey during the late 1950s and early 1960s brought the Kurdish question back into the political arena and highlighted the oppression that the Kurds faced. In particular, the arrest and trial of Kurdish students and activists in December 1959 for organizing a protest meeting against Turkish nationalist politician Asım Eren, who openly advocated revenge attacks on Kurds in Turkey as retaliation for attacks on Turkomans in Kirkuk, Iraq, was an important event because the protracted prosecution and media coverage of the case rekindled public interest in the Kurdish question. The activists were prosecuted on charges of 'Taking part, with the aid of foreign states, in activities to weaken the unity of the state and separate parts of its territory' and 'Taking part in activities to weaken the unity of the nation' (Kutlay, 1994, pp. 7, 11).

Political repression of Kurds continued with the arbitrary arrest and detention, after the *coup d'état* in May 1960, of 485 Kurdish tribal leaders and other high-profile personalities and the subsequent exile of 55 of them to southern and western Turkey. This was followed by the arrest and detention of 23 Kurdish activists in September 1963. The 1960s also witnessed a significant increase in Kurdish cultural activities, primarily the publication of cultural magazines and their dissemination to a wider public. The following magazines were published: *İleri Yurt* (1958–1959), *Dicle-Fırat* (1962–1963), *Deng* (1963), *Reya Rast*, *Roja Newe* (1963) and *Yeni Akış* (1966). In addition, a Kurdish grammar book was published in 1965 and the epic *Mem û Zîn* was translated into Turkish in 1967 and made available to the reading public as well (Nezan, 1992, pp. 66–68). Invariably, such activities revived Kurdish culture and created a space where Kurdish rights came to be discussed.

During the 1960s, Kurds increased their involvement in Turkish left-wing organizations and political parties, such as the Workers' Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi (TİP)). Left-wing student organizations gave them an institutional base to voice their grievances. The TİP offered Kurds a platform where demands could be discussed. In fact, pressure from Kurdish members participating in the TİP's Fourth Party Congress in 1970 brought open acknowledgement of the Kurds in eastern Turkey (Kirisci & Winrow, 1997, p. 109). Through involvement in the left-wing organizations Kurds began to develop and disseminate an alternative interpretation of social reality, challenging Turkey's official ideology. Debate, especially within the left-wing parties and organizations, gradually led to the re-conceptualization of Kurdish identity. It was originally conceptualized in the context of underdevelopment of the Kurdish region, then as a national problem and finally as an issue of colonialism, the real tormenter being the 'Policemen of global imperialism [who] dominated an oppressed nation with the aid of local

collaborators' (Bozarslan, 1992, p. 101). In addition to the left-wing Kurdish movement, a separate conservative-leaning movement formed with the establishment of the Kurdistan Democrat Party of Turkey (TKDP) in 1965, which served to bring various sectors of Kurdish society together, including urban notables, craftsmen and students, marking 'a new stage in the autonomisation of the Kurdish movement in terms of the worker and student movements' (Bozarslan, 1992, pp. 98–99; see also Gündoğan, 2011, p. 391).

The nascent Kurdish movement started to attract mass support, as was evident at the 'meetings of the East' (*Doğu Mitingleri*) organized in the main Kurdish towns and cities between 1967 and 1969, and during which Kurdish demands were publicly expressed (Bozarslan, 1992, p. 99). Such activities led in 1969 to the emergence and growth of the Revolutionary Cultural Centres of the East (DDKO) movement, which formulated its programme on popular issues, such as underdevelopment and the lack of state investment in the Kurdish 'eastern' regions. The DDKO offered class-based analyses of Kurdish society, and economic and social backwardness in the majority Kurdish regions, and challenged the validity of Kemalist policies and questioned the legitimacy of its ideology. The military coup in 1971 intensified political oppression, closing down the DDKO and prosecuting its leaders and members. During the DDKO trial and the TKDP trials in 1971, Kurdish activists openly challenged the state's official discourse by defending the existence of a separate Kurdish nation and highlighting the cultural and political oppression to which the Kurds were subjected in the republican era.

During the 1970s, numerous Kurdish left-wing groups or parties sprouted: the Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan (TKSP) in 1974, the PKK in 1978 (but had existed as a nucleus political group since 1973), Rizgarî (1976), the Kurdistan National Liberationists (KUK, 1978), Kawa (1978), Ala Rizgarî (1979) and Tekoşin (1979). From the outset it seems that there were more similarities than difference among these organizations. In varying degrees, all were committed to the Kurdish struggle and to socialism. The PKK and KUK advocated independence for Kurdistan, violent resistance against the Turkish state and rejected any form of compromise (Bozarslan, 2008, p. 349). However, owing to its conflict with the PKK and the oppression that followed the military coup in 1980, the KUK never managed to evolve and continue. The TKSP never engaged in violence against the Turkish state and articulated Kurdish rights on the basis of autonomy and federalism. These groups engaged in different levels of activity: the Rizgarî, Ala Rizgarî, Tekoşin and Kawa were able to exist only as small groups publishing pamphlets and magazines, while others such as the TKSP proved to be more durable.[4] Some of these organizations still exist, but none has achieved the level of support or activism that the PKK managed during the 1980s and 1990s.

### *'Myth' and 'Hegemony': Accounting for the Re-emergence of Kurdish Political Subjectivity*

The theoretical framework I deploy in this study of Kurdish nationalist mobilization focuses on the study of nationalism as a discourse and seeks to highlight its specificity and particularity by emphasizing its ideological nature and the elements that it articulates. Finlayson (1998, p. 99) stresses that 'individual nationalisms always contain a very particular "content" that aims to define the general culture and values of the "national" people and which, in turn, is related to the construction and deployment of such values within political ideological discourse'. The ideological nature of nationalism is also

stressed in Freeden (1998), which assesses the claim of whether nationalism can be seen as a distinct ideology or not. Freeden (1998, p. 751) argues that nationalism's 'conceptual structure is incapable of providing on its own a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources and conflict management which mainstream ideologies address'. Instead, he characterizes nationalism as oscillating between a 'thin-centred ideology'—defined as an ideology that 'severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by deliberate removal and replacement of concepts'—and a component of other ideologies, such as liberalism and conservatism (Freeden, 1998, p. 751).

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and discourse analysis framework is chosen as it allows me to focus on Kurdish nationalism as a discourse and to explore the issues of hegemony and mass mobilization in greater detail. Discourse theory 'investigates the way social practices systematically form the identities of subjects and objects by articulating together a series of contingent signifying elements available in a discursive field' (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 7). Laclau and Mouffe define articulation as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' and the 'structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice' is defined as discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). In a more narrow sense, discourse can be seen as 'social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify' (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, pp. 3–4).

The concept of hegemony plays a central role in a discourse theoretical explanation and it is drawn from the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. To counter the political power of the bourgeoisie, Gramsci argued that the working class needed to institute its own hegemony and achieve internal control over the social classes and the nation. For a class to become hegemonic and achieve power it needed, in addition to dominating or coercing other classes or groups, to provide ideological leadership and struggle, with ideology seen as the means through which one group dominates the others in civil society (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 12, 57–58). Crucially, however, Laclau and Mouffe untangle the association between a hegemonic force and a fundamental class that Gramsci and other Marxist theorists maintained. As highlighted by Norval (2007, p. 46), in this theorization, hegemony 'becomes a form of social relations in which the unity of a political force is constituted through a process of articulation of elements with no necessary class belonging'.

The concept of myth plays a crucial role in the institution of hegemony. Laclau defined myth as a 'space of representation which bears no relation of continuity with the dominant "structural objectivity"' and stated that myth fulfils an important function by providing a 'surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed' (Laclau, 1990, p. 64). Dislocations—which 'refers to the process by which the contingency of discursive structures is made visible' (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 13)—create the conditions for the emergence of new political subjectivities, and their significance is that the *myth* of an alternative social objectivity emerges and challenges the existing social objectivity. In any given time, however, an individual chooses to identify with a particular subject position out of various others or emphasize hers/his identification with one subject position more than the others. In order to investigate issues concerning how individuals identify with a particular subject position or why they mobilize as a subject, discourse theory utilizes the concept of *political subjectivity*. Generally, thorough contextual analyses are needed to determine the emergence of new political subjectivities and their challenge of the existing order. In the context of nationalism, the framework used here seeks to

uncover the 'force' and 'grip' of nationalist discourse and identify why a nationalist mobilization is able to generate *affect* among the target populations (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 107; Stavrakakis, 2007, pp. 190–196).

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

> We thus have a set of new possibilities for historical action which are the direct result of structural dislocation. The world is less given and must be increasingly constructed. But this is not just a construction of the world, but of social agents who transform themselves and forge new identities as a result. (Laclau, 1990, p. 40)

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

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

Traditionally, Newroz has been celebrated across the Middle East on 21 March as a spring festival. Its historical or mythological origins are often traced back to the ancient period (Aksoy, 1998; Aydın, 2005). Kurdish nationalist's attempts to construct the myth of origin around the Newroz festival as a national festival dates back to the early twentieth century (Aydın, 2005, pp. 45–47). The construction of the myth of origin went through various stages and by the 1970s the Kurdish national movements in Iran and Iraq had already established an association between the Newroz festival and the Legend of Kawa (Aydın, 2005, p. 71).[5] The myth of Newroz as told by the contemporary Kurdish nationalists narrates the overthrow of the Assyrian King Dehak by a popular uprising led by Kawa the Blacksmith (Kawayi Hesinkar), who, on 21 March 612 BC led an uprising by the Medes and defeated the Assyrian Empire, killed Dehak and liberated the Medes—the ancestors of Kurds—from long-suffering oppression and tyranny. To inform the people of his victory, Kawa lighted a bonfire on top of a mountain. The practice of lighting a bonfire is recreated during Newroz celebrations in the contemporary period.

Although almost all of the Kurdish groups made reference to the myth of Newroz, its importance for the Kurds' national struggle and as a symbol of rebellion against

tyranny, there were variations in the meanings attached to it in each group's discourse. The Rizgarî group described Newroz as a day that symbolized 'independence, freedom, and struggle for a nation refusing oppression and liberation' (*Rizgarî* (Liberation), 21 March 1976, p. 16). The PKK emphasized the importance of the Medes' 'heroic' struggle against Assyrian Empire and drew a parallel between Kawa the Blacksmith's struggle for the Medes and the PKK's struggle in the contemporary era. It constructed the Median era as the 'golden age' of the Kurdish nation and used it to conceive of the Kurds' national unity, the recreation of which was identified as the task of the national liberation struggle (Öcalan, 1992, pp. 45–46).[6] In stark contrast, however, Newroz was described in the TKSP's political magazine *Özgürlük Yolu* (The Path of Freedom) as a day for 'struggle against racism' (*Özgürlük Yolu*, April 1977, p. 64). Instead of constructing Kurdish difference, and conceiving and representing the Kurds' national unity, such a description emphasized the common bonds between the different nations in the Middle East. In addition to the clarity in the representation of Kurdish identity in the PKK's discourse, there were major differences in each group's strategy and political practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which I focus on below to account for the PKK's hegemony over Kurdish politics.



## The Contestation over Strategy and the PKK's Hegemony

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

Other groups, such as the Kawa and the Ala Rizgarî, also advocated a similar strategy; however, the discourse of neither group was as condensed as the PKK's. By contrast, the TKSP advocated an open-ended revolutionary strategy. While the party programme stated that should the conditions require an uprising the party would be at the forefront (TKSP, 1985, p. 19), the main activities that it took part in involved organizing the masses and mass action to achieve the revolutionary change. Additionally, the TKSP envisaged a two-stage revolution. While the construction of a socialist society in Kurdistan was the

ultimate aim of the party, given the conditions, what was needed in the first instance was a national democratic revolution to overthrow national oppression and destroy the feudal structure to democratize the country (TKSP, 1985, p. 20). More significantly, the party advocated closer cooperation between the Kurdish national movement and Turkish socialist movement under a common 'anti-imperialist' programme (TKSP, 1985, p. 19). This commitment proved ultimately problematic as the Turkish socialist movement throughout the 1970s found it difficult to articulate Kurdish national demands as part of demands for 'socialism' and 'equality' in Turkey, and in practice the articulation of Kurdish demands as part of numerous other demands represented by the signifier 'anti-imperialism' created difficulties for the TKSP to represent clearly Kurdish demands within a complex political space.

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

Prior to the coup the leading members of the TKSP escaped to Western Europe. Although they continued to be active within TKSP's affiliated community organizations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, their activities among the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe were not sufficient to revive the movement in Turkey or challenge the PKK's hegemony. A significant number of the PKK members also left Turkey for Syria and Lebanon and established the organization's bases there in 1979 and 1980. Its relocation to Lebanon presented the PKK with an opportunity during the early 1980s to form close links with the Palestinian organizations and establish its guerrilla training camps and prepare for an insurgency. Furthermore, as discussed in the fourth section, the resistance in the Diyarbakir Prison during the early 1980s enabled the PKK to reactivate the myth of Newroz to construct a contemporary myth of resistance, which was a significant symbolic resource that it used extensively to represent its struggle.

### *Conflict and Escalation of Violence*

The PKK started its insurgency on 15 August 1984 and its guerrillas started to fight the army and security forces in coordinated attacks predominantly in the rural areas. Initially the PKK's armed forces were organized within the Kurdistan's Liberation Forces (HRG). However, during 1985 and 1986 the PKK found it difficult to sustain the initial hype generated by its attacks in 1984. As well as the lack of experience on its part, this difficulty was caused by the actions that the state took to prevent the development of the PKK's guerrilla campaign. Consequently, the development of its military capacity was the main point of discussion in the PKK's Third Congress held in October 1986, during which a number of significant decisions were taken. One of these was the reorganization of the HRG into the Kurdistan People's Liberation Army (ARGK). The numbers of ARGK guerrillas together with the resources that the PKK had at its disposal were significantly short of achieving the movement's ambitious objectives. Thus, it resorted to radical measures in order to increase its recruitment, and to this end the Third Congress also recommended a conscription law that made joining the ARGK compulsory (Öcalan, 1993, pp. 143–144).

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

Throughout 1987 the number of attacks carried out by the ARGK increased significantly. Although the number of casualties in the conflict quoted by the PKK and the state differed significantly—with a tendency on each side to show the other's losses higher—the reports from both sides of the conflict show clearly the increase in the attacks as well as the intensity of the conflict during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The PKK's political magazines provided regular updates on the evolving conflict. For example, according to the statistics provided in *Berxwedan*, in March 1987 the ARGK raids and ambushes in numerous locations in Eruh, Uludere, Eğil, Ceylanpınar, Nusaybin, Cizre and Doğubeyazıt resulted in the death of more than 40 security forces and village guards (*Berxwedan*, March 1987, pp. 2–4). Similarly, in April 1987, according to *Berxwedan*, the *Milli* Gendarme Station in Şırnak was completely destroyed by an ARGK attack (*Berxwedan*, April 1987, p. 2). Also, some of the attacks were large-scale and, as reported in May 1987 in *Berxwedan*, on 24 April 1987 the guerrillas ambushed a commando unit, which resulted in the deaths of 63 security force personnel, including one Major and two First Lieutenants. On May 1987 a military vehicle was blown-up by a mine, resulting in the death of 20 soldiers (*Berxwedan*, May 1987, p. 3).

From 1987 onwards the ARGK raids on towns also increased significantly. Raids on Tunceli, Karakoçan, Uludere and Hozat were reported in *Berxwedan* to have taken place during July and August 1987. The towns were kept under the control of the guerrillas for up to 3 or 4 hours, during which PKK propaganda was carried out (*Berxwedan*, August 1987, p. 2). Therefore, as a result of the higher numbers recruited and the development of the guerrilla war, the PKK's guerrilla activities increased significantly during the late 1980s. According to the *Berxwedan*, from August 1989 to August 1990 the ARGK was involved in 314 incidents (including raids, skirmishes and sabotage). These incidents resulted in the death of nearly 1,500 security personnel, including the village guards (*Berxwedan*, 15 August 1990, p. 5).

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

carried out also became widespread. The guerrillas were organized extensively in many Kurdish majority regions, though the main conflict zones were the border areas primarily comprising the provinces of Hakkari, Şırnak and Siirt (the mountainous areas that Kurds popularly refer to as 'Botan'). During the mid-1990s, PKK activities expanded to a wider area extending towards southern Turkey to Hatay and Antakya and towards the Black Sea region in north-east Turkey (Öcalan, 1991, pp. 301–322). Turkey found it very difficult to eliminate the PKK presence in the region despite its numerous military campaigns and large-scale operations. From 1992 onwards every year during autumn the Turkish army carried out cross-border operations supported by air strikes against the PKK.

Owing to the early success the PKK had in mobilizing the Kurds, in its Fourth Congress held in 1990 it hinted at the establishment of a popular government, the creation of 'liberated zones' and developing the people's army to take the war to a higher level (*Serxwebûn*, September 1991, pp. 1–2). In Europe elections were held in November 1992 for the Kurdistan National Assembly. The elected delegates met in the areas under the control of the PKK guerrillas in Iraqi Kurdistan during the spring of 1993 to engage in meetings and draft laws for a future Kurdish state. The sudden success the PKK enjoyed in the conflict and mobilizing the Kurds meant that the conflict was both to deepen and widen, and that the PKK was not only to wage a hit-and-run war but also to engage in the defence of the liberated zones, which created problems for the PKK as its guerrilla army was neither equipped nor trained to fight a regular war.



### *Political Mobilization*

Overall, the insurgency proved very practical and the PKK grew in strength and size in a short space of time. Being the only Kurdish organization that challenged the state put the PKK in the leading position to hegemonize Kurdish politics in Turkey. Unlike the other Kurdish political groups—who either ceased to exist or relocated to Europe—the PKK managed to maintain its forces in the region and increased its recruitment throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Its Turkish socialist rivals, who also drew considerable support, especially from the Alevi Kurds, also began to experience major difficulties during the late 1980s once the signs of the difficulties in the Soviet Union became much more apparent. Consequently, the rival oppositional political organizations in Turkey that the Kurds supported lost their appeal, which created opportunities for the PKK to mobilize a wider section of Kurdish society. Having a presence in the majority Kurdish regions presented the PKK with an opportunity to reach out to many Kurdish rural populations, and through its political work it managed to win the support and cooperation of many villagers. The PKK's popularity also increased because of the state's harsh and heavy-handed approach towards the civilian Kurds. The state's antagonistic and oppressive practices allowed the PKK to galvanize public opinion. Consequently, from 1990 onwards the popular expression of Kurdish identity demands and open support for the PKK became much more commonplace in Turkey as Kurdish political activism evolved into a vocal social movement. This was demonstrated in a number of popular uprisings (*serhildan*) between 1990 and 1993, in which large numbers of ordinary Kurds across Kurdish towns participated and who often fought with the police and the gendarmeries.

Starting in the early 1980s, the PKK started to build a strong presence in Europe, mainly Germany, through a network of community organizations. In March 1985, the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (ERNK) was established to carry out the political

development and mobilization of the masses (*Berxwedan*, 15 April 1985, p. 10).[7] From the mid-1980s onwards much more effort was placed in developing the ERNK and, consequently, its activities as well as the organizational network grew rapidly throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. The ERNK was legally organized through a network of community and cultural centres in Europe. The European activities of the PKK allowed it to draw support from Kurdish communities in Europe, and the funding it collected enabled it to finance and expand its insurgency and political activities. The absence of legal restrictions placed on Kurdish identity and culture in Europe enabled the PKK to organize legally and establish a network of cultural and community organizations to mobilize Kurds in Europe. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, in many cities in Europe the ERNK organized numerous events such as rallies and demonstrations, meetings, protests, hunger strikes, music festivals, cultural activities, the Newroz celebrations and commemoration events. Such activities attracted large crowds, built the PKK's support base and helped raise public awareness of the Kurds' struggle.

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

The PKK's organizational growth and network played a significant role in the mass mobilization of the Kurds by allowing it to reach out and connect with Kurdish populations; however, the representation of its struggle to its target groups was also important in its hegemony and for generating the mass support and recruitment, to which I now turn.

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

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK reactivated the myth of Newroz to construct a contemporary myth of resistance based on the PKK's resistance. The Newroz festival became

the most significant day in Kurdish political activism in Turkey and during the 1990s large crowds were attracted to celebrate and protest on 21 March. The public celebrations and mass protest enhanced Newroz as the day of national resistance, with many individual acts of resistance and self-sacrifice by PKK members taking place on 21 March. The reference to Newroz enabled the PKK to situate its struggle within a historical narrative and represent it as the embodiment of the Kurds' national struggle, which it used in its challenge of the state's hegemonic representation of the insurgency as 'separatism' and 'terrorism'.

The resistance by the PKK's leading members in Diyarbakir Prison has been a mainstay in its contemporary myth. The key events started with the suicide of the leading PKK member Mazlum Doğan on 21 March 1982 to protest about systemic torture. The resistance continued with the self-immolations of four other members (Eşref Anyık, Ferhad Kutay, Necmi Öner and Mahmut Zengin) on 18 May 1982 and culminated in the hunger strike that started on 14 July 1982 and resulted in the death of four more leading members in September 1982 (Kemal Pir on 7 September, Mehmet Hayri Durmuş on 12 September, Akif Yılmaz on 15 September and Ali Çiçek on 17 September). Initially the main emphasis was on torture and oppression of political prisoners, and Doğan's death was described in *Serxwebûn* as part of a concerted effort by the Kemalist regime to annihilate all Kurdish political prisoners (*Serxwebûn*, June 1982, pp. 10–11).[8] However, the statement commemorating the first anniversary of Doğan's death, distributed on 21 March 1983, described him as the 'Contemporary Kawa' and his suicide as self-immolation and an act of resistance (*Serxwebûn*, March 1983, p. 9). In articles published to commemorate the resistance, the significance of the actions of the leading members became the focal point and their resistance was described as a 'conscious political action':

> Since entering the conscious stage of their life, they have taken part at a leadership level in our people's national and social liberation struggle. The prison resistance was conscious political action by people who, if needed, were prepared to consciously sacrifice their life for the sake of developing our struggle. Their actions have created the true measures of our people's national and social liberation struggle under the leadership of the proletariat, and have become the spirit of our struggle. It is its steering and sheltering force and it has left an ineradicable effect that will pull our people into continuous action and organise them. (*Serxwebûn*, December 1982, p. 4)

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

> To attain an honourable status, human decency, stand on our feet and say a few words or a few sentences in that period of history, we needed to resist. On behalf of a nation and for a section of humanity they said the most significant few words. However, these were such words that if not spoken then our party and our nation would have perished. It would have not made much sense to talk about the other values. (*Berxwedan*, special issue, June 1994, p. 4)

The significance of the resistance lay in the fact that the PKK inmates did not accept the authority of the state despite continuous unimaginable torture and attempts at subjugation.

Their resistance against oppression, the defence of the Kurdish struggle under the harshest conditions and sacrificing their own lives to defeat the submission imposed on the Kurds were interpreted by the PKK as the 'spirit' of its struggle (*Serxwebûn*, March 1986, p. 24). In numerous articles and books published to commemorate the resistance, the significance of the actions of the leading members became the focal point and their resistance was described as 'conscious political action', and their resistance was described as the beginning of a 'new era' for the struggle and survival of the Kurds as a nation.

With the start of the guerrilla insurgency on 15 August 1984 the PKK's resistance took a new dimension and the insurgency started to take centre stage in its contemporary myth of resistance. The start of the guerrilla insurgency was described as the 'leap of 15 August' (15 Ağustos Atılımı) and the PKK's activities from 1984 onwards provided ample material that can be used in the construction of its contemporary myth of resistance. The PKK militants who lost their lives in the insurgency were described as 'heroes and martyrs of national resistance' and extensive obituaries were published throughout the 1980s and 1990s in each issue of the PKK's magazines detailing their 'bravery' and 'heroism' (see, e.g. *Serxwebûn*, 15 April 1994).

In addition, numerous acts of self-immolation that took place in the early 1990s have also received sustained attention in the PKK's contemporary myth of resistance. They started with Zekiye Alkan—who was a medical student from Diyarbakir—setting herself alight on the city walls on 21 March 1990. Similarly, Rahşan Demirel set herself alight in Izmir in 1992; and 'Berivan' and 'Ronahi', pseudonyms used by Nilgün Yıldırım and Bedriye Taş, respectively, repeated the same practice in Germany in 1994 (*Serxwebûn*, 15 April 1994, pp. 16–19). All of the above-mentioned self-immolations occurred on the day of Newroz and were described in numerous articles published in the PKK's magazines as 'sacred acts of resistance' and 'sacrifice for the sake of the nation's freedom' (*Serxwebûn*, April 1994, p. 19). The crucial difference, however, was that in the early 1990s women were the main performers of the self-immolations and acts of 'sacrifice'. Additionally, the 'sacrifices' of PKK's female militants also started to acquire central stage in the representation of the PKK's struggle. Of these, the death of Gülnaz Karataş (Beritan) on 25 October 1992—who, on realizing that it was impossible to escape the attack by the Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP) peshmerga fighters during the PKK's war with the Iraqi Kurds, threw herself off a mountain cliff to avoid being taken hostage—received sustained coverage in numerous articles published in the PKK's magazines throughout the 1990s. In many commemorative articles published in *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan*, Beritan's action has been represented as an act of utmost heroism and dedication to the struggle and was used extensively by the PKK as the embodiment of its 'spirit' of resistance (*Berxwedan*, special issue, March 1994).[9]

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

as male domination in society, and helped to engrave the ideas of equality and freedom in society, which were important elements in the PKK's national liberation discourse.

The representation of resistance practices in the PKK's discourse constitutes its members who carried out the numerous acts of resistance as 'exemplars'. Drawing on Conant's discussion of exemplars in the work of Nietzsche, Norval (2007, p. 194) argues that 'the role of the exemplar is to "unsettle us" and create an impersonal feeling of shame'. The importance of exemplars for politics is that their presence 'acts as a *call*, as a reminder of another self, and another state of things, capturing ... the possibility of another self, another way of doing things' (Norval, 2007, p. 179, emphasis in original). In the commemoration events of the practices of resistance and the statements published on their anniversary, these individual acts of resistance and sacrifice are described by the PKK as the catalyst of a prolonged period of active resistance. For example, the suicide of Mazlum Doğan has been described as the event that activated the resistance in Diyarbakir Prison and the PKK's guerrilla war. Similarly, the self-immolation by Zekiye Alkan is described by the PKK as the catalyst of a prolonged period of active resistance and the *serhildan* in the urban centres of the region in which many ordinary Kurds took part (*Berxwedan*, 31 March 1994, pp. 15–16). Although it is highly unlikely that a strong casual connection, as emphasized in the PKK's discourse, was present, the importance of such a claim is that the individuals and their resistance practices are constructed as 'exemplary' of the PKK's resistance and their actions are used to motivate others to take part in resistance. Given the mobilization of a significant number of women by the PKK and their participation in politics, it is unsurprising that they became performers of resistance practices from the early 1990s onwards and increasingly began to be constituted as the exemplars.

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

The representation of resistance practices was not confined only to political discourse, but other artistic forms, such as music, were also used. The stories of resistance practices were narrated in the music of Koma Berxwedan from the early 1980s onwards, and in the music of other groups later on during the 1990s.[10] In fact, the contemporary myth of resistance constituted the centre of Kurdish cultural revival as the PKK's resistance was the

main theme that the resistance music by Koma Berxwedan and many other groups and musicians narrated. In the early years the resistance was depicted as a celebration or *Dilan* in many popular songs.[11] Songs commemorating specific events, such as the PKK's establishment on 27 November 1978, the start of its war on 15 August 1984, the resistance in Diyarbakir Prison in the early 1980s, songs glorifying the guerrilla insurgency, the popular uprisings, and those that commemorated the resistance and sacrifices of the PKK's members, featured frequently. Through music the story of the PKK's struggle and resistance was narrated and made accessible to many people, and such a representation enabled the PKK to reach out to wider Kurdish communities. The resistance music used and recreated popular folk melodies that many Kurdish people were familiar with, and were used in folk dancing, which added a performative aspect to the commemoration practices.

The PKK's contemporary myth of resistance was used extensively in the mobilization process and the images of the performers of the PKK's resistance practices, including the pictures of its women fighters, were widely used in PKK publications. The importance of the contemporary myth of resistance for the PKK's mobilization of the Kurds was that it added *force* to the PKK's discourse, enhancing its widespread credibility among the Kurds. The guerrilla insurgency and the popular resistance the PKK organized meant that resistance was something that occurred on a daily basis and convinced many that the PKK was capable of achieving Kurdish independence and in doing so added *force* to the PKK's discourse. By representing and interpreting its activities in light of the contemporary resistance myth, the PKK was able to define its struggle as the *embodiment* of the Kurds' struggle for freedom. Such a representation enabled the sedimentation of the PKK's national liberation discourse in practice and enhanced the PKK's hegemonic appeal by bringing the myth of resistance into reality, which in turn played a key role in its mobilization of the Kurds.[12]

## Conclusion

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

The PKK's political and military activities throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s led to the mobilization of a large number of Kurds in Turkey. From the early 1990s onwards this started to acquire the characteristics of a mass mobilization, with popularly attended demonstrations, protests and uprisings taking place frequently. The PKK established a

well-organized network of community organizations and cultural centres in Europe. The Kurds in Europe played an important role by providing financial support for the PKK and establishing the information and organizational network that forged links with the socialist and human rights groups and harnessed diplomatic support.

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

My explanation of the PKK's hegemony over the Kurdish national movement in Turkey and its mass mobilization of the Kurds during the 1980s and 1990s has paid attention to the PKK's reactivation of the myth of Newroz to construct and deploy a contemporary myth of resistance that centres on the resistance practices of its leading members in Diyarbakir Prison and its struggle in general. The PKK's contemporary myth of resistance constituted the performers of resistance practices as 'exemplars', and initially the myth was constructed around the performers of the PKK's early resistance practices in Diyarbakir Prison. The significance of the construction of Newroz as a contemporary myth of resistance lied in that it enabled the sedimentation of the PKK's discourse in practice by constructing it as representative of Kurdish struggle in Turkey. Later on, exemplars were broadened and included women. The mobilization of women by the PKK and its effect on the sedimentation of the PKK's discourse were discussed. It was argued that women's mobilization helped to embed the notions of 'freedom' and 'equality' in practice and brought about an aspect change, which in turn reduced the grip of traditional identities and religion and fore-grounded the liberation and Kurdish struggle for freedom.

It was argued that the contemporary myth played a significant role in the mobilization process and the sedimentation of the PKK's national liberation discourse in practice. It added *affect* and *force* to its discourse and enabled it to construct and represent its struggle as the *embodiment* of the Kurd's long struggle for freedom and independence. Additionally, the analysis presented in this article is able to draw inferences concerning the nationalist interpellation of the national subjects and why such an interpellation is affective and successful in mobilizing the masses. In fact, the analysis of the PKK's construction of a contemporary myth of resistance highlights an interesting dimension of the nationalist discourse and shows the importance of the symbolic resources, such as myths, that the nationalist movement uses in its interpellation of the national subject. My analysis has also highlighted the importance of the PKK's reinvigoration of Kurdish culture and music, which also played a significant role in the sedimentation of its national liberation discourse in practice. The analysis of culture and music reveals the complexities involved in a political movement's mobilization of the masses, including the processes involved in the sedimentation of a discourse in practice, and provides an interesting dimension to how political movements in general and nationalist movements in particular represent their struggle to their target groups.

## Notes

1. It is estimated that a total of 40,000 people lost their lives in the conflict. In addition, as part of the state's counter-insurgency measures, an estimated 2–3 million Kurds were forced by the state to evacuate their villages and hamlets in rural areas. For a general discussion on internal displacement, see Çelik (2005), Ayata & Yükseker (2005) and Jongerden (2001).
2. Although I briefly reflect on the existing literature on the rise of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, the aim is to situate my research in relation to existing accounts. While I highlight their insufficient analysis of the PKK's discourse and the representation of its struggle to its target group, my objective in this article is not to provide a critical literature review. For a detailed and critical assessment of the existing literature on Kurdish nationalism, see Gunes (2009, 2012, pp. 8–24).
3. Antonio Gramsci uses the term to describe intellectuals of rural and traditional backgrounds who still maintain a strong link with the countryside or the peasant masses: 'Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 4).
4. Since the military coup in September 1980 most of the TKSP's activities have been taking place mainly in Europe, where it managed to institute a widespread political network under the umbrella organization of KOMKAR covering numerous European countries. In 1992, during its Third Congress, the TKSP changed its name to Partiya Sosyalista Kurdistan (The Socialist Party of Kurdistan (PSK)).
5. Aydın (2005) offers an extended account of the construction of Newroz as a myth of origin. She draws attention to the various discussions in the Kurdish journal *Jîn* during 1918–1919, which highlighted the lack of a national holiday for Kurds, and it was within this framework that the legend of Kawa was constructed as a Kurdish national figure (Aydın, 2005, p. 60). However, initially the celebration of a national holiday was proposed for 31 August as opposed to 21 March. Further attempts were made in the 1930s to construct the legend of Kawa as the myth of origin by the leader of the Ararat Rebellion, Ihsan Nuri. Nuri associated the legend of Kawa with the festival of Tolhildan rather than Newroz because Newroz had already acquired national character in Iran and strongly associated with the Persian legend of Jamshid (Aydın 2005, pp. 66–68).
6. Gündoğan (2007, pp. 268–269) also points out the importance of the construction of the Median Era as the 'golden age' of the Kurdish nation in the PKK's discourse.
7. The aims and objectives of the ERNK were formalized in the early 1980s and appeared as a key publication in 1982 (PKK, 1994).
8. The headline 'Diyarbakir Cezaevinde Katliam' (Massacre in Diyarbakir Prison) was used by *Serxwebûn* to announce the death of Mazlum Dogan in June 1982 (*Serxwebûn*, June 1982, pp. 10–11).
9. Commemoration articles and obituaries of the performers of resistance practices such as Gülnaz Karataş, Mazlum Doğan and Zekiye Alkan appeared frequently in the PKK's magazines *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan* throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, a significant amount of space continues to be reserved for such articles in PKK publications.
10. In addition to Koma Berxwedan, numerous independent musicians such as Şivan Perwer, Ciwan Haco, Nizammettin Arıç, Hozan Dilgeş and Aram Tigran have also been producing Kurdish resistance, popular and folk music. In 1991, after the easing of restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language in public in Turkey, the Mesopotamian Cultural Centre (Navenda Çanda Mezopatamya) was established in Istanbul to promote Kurdish cultural development. Other branches were established in the 1990s in other major cities in Turkey. The music groups Koma Çiya, Koma Azad, Koma Mizgîn, Koma Asman, Koma Amed, Agirê Jiyan, Koma Rewşen, Koma Şirvan and Koma Rojhilat were active within these centres and the songs and music these groups produced featured similar themes of resistance that were used in the music of Koma Berxwedan (see Koma Berxwedan, Dilan (1985), Botan (1987), Newroz (1989) and Amed (1991), as examples of Kurdish resistance music albums).
11. *Dilan* can also refer to a call for struggle, with struggle seen as a joyful activity.
12. The practice of the institution of hegemony is explained in Laclau's theorization by a discussion of the process of sedimentation: 'Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a "forgetting of the origins" tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence. This is the moment of sedimentation' (Laclau, 1990, p. 34).

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