Introduction

Insurgent movements need a degree of popular support to survive in the medium to long term. It is an insight long acknowledged and put into practice by both rebels and those tasked with defeating them (E. Ahmad 1982, 245; Trinquier 1964, 8). In the case of the Kurdistan Workers Party's (Partîya Karkaren-i Kurdistan, PKK) armed campaign in Turkey, the importance of insurgent popular support has always been understood as a key dimension of the conflict. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan stated 'society's support is crucial for us. If they didn't help us, it would be impossible for PKK to survive, we would be already dead by now' (in Birand 1994, 136; *Serxwebûn* 1984a).[1] Conversely, prominent Turkish army commanders have stated that the key to breaking PKK strength was to inhibit or destroy physical interactions with its supporters (in K. M. Güney 2009, 87; Kurban 2012, 7). A key figure of the Turkish counter-insurgency strategy in the 1990s, General Pamukoğlu acknowledged the extent of reciprocal trust between the PKK and its supporters by stating that the 'public knows where they [PKK militants] are and even where and when they will be at least two days beforehand' (Pamukoğlu 2003, 58). The recognition that the PKK did in fact enjoy widespread popularity has however been politically inopportune and is inevitably accompanied by the qualifier that such support is the result of PKK terror and coercion (Pamukoğlu 2003, 52).

Accordingly, the premise that the PKK has long enjoyed a degree of popular support is uncontroversial, but it does lead to the questions: how should this popular support be conceptually understood? What does supporting an armed group entail? How do armed movements channel and maintain this support? These are questions pertinent to all insurgent groups, as every insurgent movement depends to a greater or lesser extent on their supporters for material resources and symbolic political validation. Making use of the concept of the insurgent constituency (Malthaner 2011), this book not only systematically outlines the relationship between the PKK and its supporters but also analyses its spatial variation, identifying breaks and continuities in its support networks

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[1] This widely circulated interview of Öcalan by the Turkish journalist Mehmet Ali Birand occurred in 1988 but the published version of it cited in this book is from 1994.

from the villages of rural Kurdistan to the rapidly expanding cities in the region and as far as the metropolises in western Turkey. Inspired by Wickham-Crowley's observation that the 'magnetic power of guerrilla movements' is derived from their 'wedding of power to beneficence' (1990, 217), this book largely focuses on the role 'beneficence' played in the PKK maintaining its support networks. This is not to downplay the violence of the PKK – it is an insurgent movement that has killed and had many of its own ranks killed – over the last almost forty years, but the PKK's violence is only part of the explanation of its enduring resilience.

The PKK is a persistent insurgent group[2] defined as 'those that persist for many years or even decades without seizing power, but which maintain significant popular support' (Goodwin 2001, 219). It has dramatically outlasted the average lifespan of an armed group of 10.9 years (Phillips 2015, 69). It has persevered in the grey area between success and failure, co-optation and annihilation for almost forty years, in the course of which it has undergone numerous ideological and political transformations. It was founded as a Marxist movement to liberate the colony of Kurdistan from the yolk of Imperialism, evolved into an autonomist movement limited to only Kurds in Turkey, and has subsequently reinvented itself as a post-nationalist movement inspired by libertarian Municipalism (see Bookchin 1991) traversing Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian state borders; all the while, with the exception of a five-year period from 1999 to 2004, engaging the Turkish army in armed confrontation.[3] It has not only proven resilient in terms of survival but has also generated unprecedented social and political change in the region (Gürses 2018, 3–4). As Romano has argued, 'if there is one thing that every observer of the conflict, be they Turkish generals, Kurdish peasants, or western academics, generally agree on, it is that the PKK succeeded in bringing the Kurdish issue back into the limelight of public discourse in Turkey' (2006, 159).

Central Argument

This book asserts that the primary reason why the PKK has for decades succeeded in resisting the Turkish state is because it has never lost the support of a large portion of the Kurdish people. Indeed, it is precisely this struggle to maintain prolonged popular support through the depredations of guerrilla war and counter-insurgency which will be unravelled in this book. Importantly,

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[2] The term is also used by O'Leary and Silke (2007), but they do not precisely distinguish persistent from other forms of insurgency or conflict.

[3] There is an immense secondary literature on the PKK's ideological transformation in the last fifteen years, engaging in depth with Democratic Confederalism and Radical Democracy (Biehl 2015; Hunt 2017; Jongerden and Akkaya 2012; Jongerden and Knapp 2016; Sunca 2020; Yarkin 2015).

PKK support is not something it has simply extracted or coerced from a passive population but rather the outcome of the PKK's mobilisation strategies, civilian responses – both positive and negative – to them and naturally the role of the state and its diffuse counter-insurgency. Incontestably, the PKK has an extremely disciplined professional nucleus of guerrillas, urban cadre and dedicated full-time activists who have varied in number from the thousands to the ten(s) of thousands. However, its real strength is not necessarily derived from the militants at its core but the huge reservoir of supporters and sympathisers on the movement's periphery who have long facilitated its campaign. As Mitchell has discussed regarding the distinction between state and society, 'the distinction must be taken not as the boundary between two discrete entities, but as a line drawn internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained' (1991, 78). Similarly, the boundary between the PKK and its supporters must not be considered as dividing two hermetic entities but rather like a tide, ebbing and flowing over time and space, but remaining ever-present in one form or another. It is precisely this ebb and flow of support that will be analysed in the subsequent chapters: how the PKK harnessed this collective energy and where and against whom it was deployed.

The book's central argument is that the PKK's relationship with its constituency has shaped its mobilisation from its foundation in the mid-1970s until 1999. It argues that the PKK's longevity is rooted in its flexibility in its relations with its constituency. An armed group's constituency has been defined by Malthaner as 'the real social groups in a society, whom the militants address and to whom they refer, with whom they are actually involved in some form of relationship, and who – at least to a certain degree – actually sympathise with and support the militant groups' (2011, 29). This argument is based upon two empirical questions; firstly, how did the PKK develop its constituency? Secondly, how and to what extent was this constituency maintained across space and time? The core objective is not simply to describe the PKK and its support networks per se but rather to analyse their reciprocally formative influences and how it impacted on the PKK's repertoire of contention. Although this relationship between movement and supporters is the principle focus of the project, all social actors are inevitably engaged in multiple and overlapping relationships with a whole host of other actors, be they individuals, institutions – in particular with the state – or other movements. These sets of interactions naturally change over time, demanding a diachronic focus; as Goodwin has noted, 'the conditions that foster strong revolutionary movements by no means guarantee that such movements will actually seize state power' (2001, 210). Thereby, highlighting that structural change over time can facilitate or inhibit revolutionary efforts. To give an example, the PKK's interaction with other Kurdish movements was of huge importance prior to the 1980 coup

but much less so afterwards. As an example of spatial differentiation, the PKK was obliged to interact with other leftist organisations in certain neighbourhoods of Istanbul in the 1990s but was to a large extent, with the exception of the area of Dersim, the sole substantial revolutionary force in the rest of Kurdistan. In addition, PKK sympathisers' engagement with the repressive apparatuses of the state underwent varying periods of intensity according to time and location.

Therefore, the main theoretical focus of the book prioritises the centrality of the spatial environment where the PKK and its constituency interacted, emphasising the constraining and enabling features of the various contexts where the PKK mobilisation occurred. It is relational in approach (E. Y. Alimi, Bosi and Demetriou 2015) as it recognises the 'social construction of their experiential reality by the various actors participating in the social and political conflict' (della Porta 2013, 5). At the outset, it is always worthwhile reflecting on the limitations of any one approach or school of thought. As has been demonstrated in the literature, civilian support alone is no guarantee of insurgent victory (Staniland 2014, 4). Accordingly, the book is not so foolhardy as to make the argument that the strength or weakness of the relational axis between armed groups and their supporters determines conflict outcomes. It rather proposes that insurgent interactions with their constituency are commonly overlooked and that their inclusion would further strengthen existing research on the PKK, making use of more dominant paradigms such as resources and territorial control (A. Aydin and Emrence 2015), political structures (H. Bozarslan 2004), ideology and the role of the party leader (Özcan 2006), the nature of the Turkish state (R. Aras 2014), the political economy of the region (Yadirgi 2017), counter-insurgency literature (Unal 2012a) or even the classic triad of social movement research (resource mobilisation, framing and political opportunity structure) (Romano 2006). Building on this canon which looks at broader macro-structural aspects as well as internal dynamics and movement ideology, this book fills the gap looking at the PKK's immediate social environment. It draws on the insights from this broader literature and configures a relationally informed and spatially disaggregated framework to analyse the PKK's development and maintenance of its supportive constituency. This conceptual innovation is coupled with a rigorous empirical analysis drawing on qualitative interviews with PKK militants and supporters, primary sources from the movement and some of its contemporaries, embedded in the growing secondary literature on the conflict.

Scope of the Book

As the PKK has become one of the most important non-state actors in Turkey and the Middle East, through the massive social change it has engendered and

its role in defeating ISIS in Syria (Gürses 2018, 4), it might seem curious to take a significant leap back in time to look at the what appears to be the distant past of the movement. Yet, this is exactly what this book does. Although the field of Kurdish studies has become academically consolidated, through focused conferences, subject-specific journals (*Kurdish Studies*) and an immense array of academic publications, the vast majority of this research does not focus directly on the PKK but rather skirts around it. This is even more pronounced in the case of its earlier decades. Consequently, the early phase of the PKK's mobilisation is comparatively understudied when compared to the range of books on the Irish Republican Army (Óglaigh na hÉireann, IRA) in Ireland, Latin American groups like Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo, FARC) and the better-known Palestinian and Lebanese movements like al-Fatah, Hamas and Hezbollah. Much of the better theoretically informed literature on these conflicts does not attempt to condense years of struggle into single volumes rather focusing on de-limited time periods or emphasising specific aspects of their mobilisation. A longitudinal assessment of the PKK's support networks from the 1970s until 2019 would have required a significant compromise on the level of empirical detail needed to understand the PKK's evolution if it were not to become a volume of unwieldy length. Accordingly, I have focused on the three earliest decades of the PKK in Turkey until 1999, not because its recent transformation since the mid-2000s or the emergence of its sister party in Syria is less interesting but rather to contribute to a richer empirical and theoretical foundation upon which more recent studies of the PKK can build. The year 1999 is a natural ending for such an analysis as it marked the end of the first phase of the PKK's insurgency until it re-erupted in 2004. In 1999, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya and, contrary to international legal norms, transported extrajudicially back to Turkey to stand trial. After a period of violent tumult (van Bruinessen 1999a), Öcalan's renewed call for a ceasefire was ultimately respected by the PKK.

Another feature of the Kurdish movement that has come to international public attention is the prominent role of women in the PKK and its related movements in Syria (Dirik 2014). Two of the PKK's founding members were women – Sakine Cansız and Kesire Yıldırım; its manifesto released on its first attack against the Turkish army in 1984 explicitly called for women to join the movement (*Serxwebûn* 1984b, 2) and the empowerment of women within the movement has filtered through to Kurdish society, resulting in a massive, if albeit ongoing, reconfiguration of gender roles (Gürses 2018, 49–73). The importance of women to the PKK has been reflected in an extensive range of articles and books on the subject (Açık 2013; Begikhani, Hamelink and Weiss 2018; Bengio 2016; Çağlayan 2012; A. B. Çelik 2017; Darden, Henshaw and Szekely 2019; Duzel 2018; Düzgün 2016; Galletti 2001; Haner, Cullen and

Benson 2019; Mojab 2001; Weiss 2010). Although this book is aware of the importance of women to the movement and indeed to the PKK's constituency, it does not have a specific emphasis on gender. Firstly, this is because the interview sample which serves as the primary source of data for the book has a disproportionately low percentage of women interviewees (nine from sixty-four, none of whom were guerrillas). This likely reflects some of the gendered dynamics of field research, wherein as a man, it is simply easier to meet other men, but it can be also attributed to the pernicious gender complacency that is present in much research, across all fields, that does not have a specific focus on gender.

A final limitation of the book's scope is that it neither includes the PKK's mobilisation in the international diaspora nor the movement's presence in the other constituent parts of Kurdistan. Firstly, the European diaspora has been critical to the PKK's development: the Kurdish diaspora has enhanced the international profile of the conflict through extensive lobbying and awareness-raising campaigns. And it has also served as a source of financial support and as a reservoir of recruits. This area of PKK mobilisation is arguably the most developed field of research on the PKK dating back to the early 1990s. Numerous authors have provided excellent research on Europe as a site of Kurdish identity revival (Alinia and Eliassi 2014; Eliassi 2016; Leggewie 1996), focused on tensions with both other Kurdish revolutionary movements and Turkish adversaries (Baser 2015a; 2015b) and the PKK's repertoire of contention in Europe (Eccarius-Kelly 2002; Lyon and Uçarer 2001). Secondly, although the PKK had its headquarters in Syria and Lebanon and later in the Qandil Mountains in the Kurdish region of Iraq, the overwhelming majority of its mobilisation in the timeframe of this book was centred on the insurgency in Turkey. It did not begin to comprehensively mobilise locals in Kurdish areas in Syria, Iran and Iraq until the mid-2000s (see Akbarzadeh et al. 2019; Černy 2014; Kaya and Lowe 2017), therefore it is beyond the timeframe of this project. Accordingly, the scope of this book is limited to the PKK's mobilisation from the mid-1970s until 1999 in Turkey. This is not to downplay the importance of developments in broader Kurdistan to the PKK; indeed, they are discussed throughout the text, but the objective of this book is to supplement and engage in dialogue with these subject matters which have been extensively studied.

Note on Terminology

The practises of naming and labelling in the social sciences are often controversial, especially in cases of long-running armed conflict (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, 125). The two most glaring examples in the case of the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state are the terms Kurdistan (see Pérouse

1999) and terrorism.[4] These terms are not merely descriptive but are often used in efforts to identify their users' political sympathies or, in this case, possible academic biases. Kurdistan is not usually found on standard maps because it is, in simple terms, not an internationally recognised state. It lingers in the category of stateless nations alongside Kabylie, Azawad and the nations of the indigenous populations of the Americas and Australia. As noted elsewhere, 'all maps are abstractions of reality' (O'Shea 1994, 179), visual representations that reflect prevailing power relations.

In Ottoman times, Kurdistan was regularly used to refer to areas that correspond to the modern day, east and south-east of Turkey. It was the formal name of the province around Diyarbakir between 1847 and 1867 (Klein 2012, 172). As part of the wider opposition in the late Ottoman Empire, Kurdish aristocrats published a newspaper titled *Kürdistan* (Bajalan 2016, 148). Its use declined after the founding of the Republic and the region populated by Kurds began to be referred to as the 'East' (Gündoğan 2011) and latterly as the South East following the 1980 coup (Jongerden 2007, 29). Such appellations only make sense according to the territorial confines marked out by the Turkish state. The state borders which have divided the Kurdish nation between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey did not heed the everyday confines of the Kurdish people. Although Kurds in the border areas were obliged to encounter the material realities of such boundaries in their daily lives, it has not necessarily led to a comprehensive internalisation of their legitimacy. Trading patterns which crossed the borders – now classified as smuggling – have continued and the border did not completely alter their collective political imagination as Kurds. As Ahmet Akkaya outlined, Kurds living along the border between Syria and Turkey do not refer to it as such, commonly describing themselves as being from either *serxet* or *binxet* (i.e. as above or below the line) and not as citizens of one state or the other (Interview 37, 2013). To give a concrete example, the city of Ceylanpınar (Serêkaniyê in Kurdish) is simply referred to by residents of the other half of the urban conglomeration that lies across the border in Syria, as *Serêkaniyê Serxet*. As Jongerden explained, those of a Kurdish nationalist inclination would not view themselves as being in the South East of Turkey but rather in the North or North West of Kurdistan (2007, 30). As this book focuses on the PKK and its supporters who were for the most part focused in Turkey, the term Kurdistan will, unless otherwise clarified, refer to the area of Kurdistan within Turkey's borders.

If the external delineation of Kurdistan in this book is relatively clear, the borders of Kurdistan within Turkey are much more ambiguous. Many maps

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[4] To give an impression of how seriously the Turkish state took any supposed questioning of Turkey's territorial integrity, in the early 1980s the US Embassy and the Lufthansa headquarters in Istanbul were ordered to remove atlases which contained the names Armenia, Kurdistan and Pontus (Hassanpour 1998, 59).

'depict a wish-fulfilment of extreme Kurdish Nationalism' (O'Shea 1994, 180), while the Turkish state has obviously never delineated a territory whose very existence it has long denied. Furthermore, territorial delineation is a fraught process at the best of times and notwithstanding projections of immutability, borders are always in a constant process of slow evolution. As the peoples who inhabit Kurdistan have been heretofore denied the possibility to agree upon its precise political extent, it remains best understood as a homeland. Homeland as a concept is 'a blend of political discourses and individual wishes, conceptions, longings and experiences' (Alinia 2004, 219). It therefore drifts between the individual and the collective level. Some residents of cities such as Maraş and or Antep would define their place of origin as Kurdistan while others might not. Drawing on Agnew, Kaya (2020, 6) explains:

> [T]he use of the concept of Kurdistan, therefore, does not imply that the region was historically defined as Kurdistan, or its inhabitants were all Kurdish, or the area had clearly demarcated borders/or its extent was clear. The concept of Kurdistan does not refer to ahistorical and ontologically permanent locations or territories but to the geographical context upon which social, economic and political interactions take place and in return, to a territory or geography shaped by these interactions.

In terms of a practical guide, when Kurdistan is mentioned in this thesis, it refers roughly to the eastern and south-eastern corner of the Turkish state, ranging from Kars in the north-east passing westwards through Erzurum, towards Sivas before turning south passing by Malatya and Antep.

Importantly, the cartographic contestation is not simply limited to Kurdish versus Turkish interpretations. Many Armenians would view parts of the territory understood as Kurdistan as part of western Armenia, and it was largely populated by Armenians before the 1915 genocide. From an Armenian perspective, the city currently known as Diyarbakir could be referred to by its Armenian name of Dikranagerd or Elâzığ as Harput (Toumani 2015). Similarly, the Syriac people of Tur Abdin (roughly corresponding to the contemporary area around Mardin and Nusaybin), who suffered a parallel genocide to the better-known Armenian one (Gaunt 2015), would have an entirely different understanding of the area's geography. One interviewee highlighted that the recent revival of the name Amed for the city of Diyarbakir, commonly described as the Kurdish name of the city when it is in fact originally a Syriac word, is an example of efforts by the Kurdish majority in the region to 'Kurdify' the area, just as the Turks had tried to 'Turkify' the region previously (Interview 53, 2018). Accordingly, the map here should only be viewed as a geographical guideline to help orientate readers less familiar with the region.

In addition to the macro-debate regarding whether to use the term Kurdistan or not, there is the further issue of whether to use the Turkish or
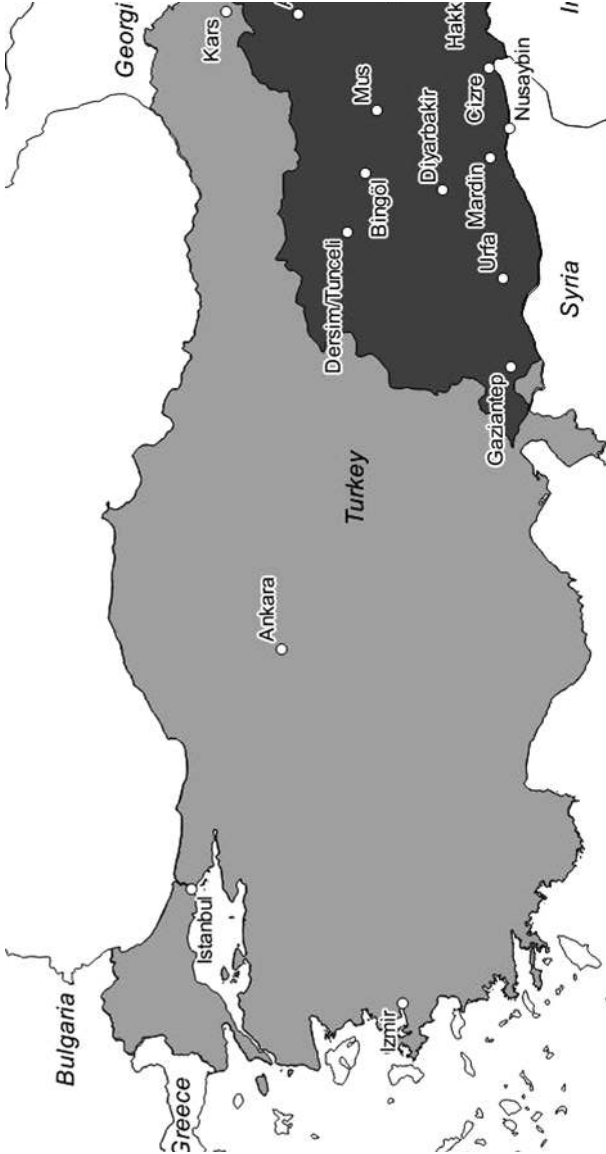
I.1 Kurdistan map

Kurdish names of cities, towns and villages. As well as large-scale demographic engineering in the early decades of the Republic, the Turkish state launched an extensive campaign of 'toponymical engineering' (Öktem 2008, 8). In a campaign of symbolic violence, thousands of places with non-Turkish names were assigned Turkish-sounding ones (Öktem 2008, 9). This has led to confusion amongst some Kurds, whereby the names of villages outside of one's immediate environs are known only in Turkish or, especially among the elderly, only in Kurdish, generating geographical disorientation (Interview 2, 2012). In general, this project will use the place names most widely used for reasons of clarity. It will refer to cities which have been renamed like Urfa (to Şanlıurfa), Maraş (to Kahramanmaraş) and Dersim (to Tunceli) by their original names, as that is how they are commonly recognisable to Kurds. It will mention both the Kurdish and Turkish names of smaller villages and towns – when possible – to limit any ambiguity

As a subfield within the wider discipline of political violence, the study of terrorism has inordinately flourished in the wake of the September 11 attacks in 2001. There are well-grounded concerns that much counterterrorism research is ahistorical, decontextualised, insufficiently critical and overly reliant on one-sided data provided by state agencies (Beck and Schoon 2017; della Porta 2013, 11; Goodwin 2006; Gunning 2009). Furthermore, the concept itself has proved elusive to define; already in the 1980s, Schmid and Jongman (1988) had gathered 109 differing definitions. In practice, the use of the term terrorism always reflects power relations and disparities and most often serves as a tool of obfuscation and, as Tilly (2003, 19) pithily stated, 'terror always refers to someone else's behaviour'. It also bears mentioning that the charge of terrorism is most often levelled at non-state actors and is rarely used in the context of state violence (R. Aras 2014, 23–26; Aretxaga 2000; Asad 2007; Sluka 2010). Its strategic deployment 'is part and parcel of the war of ideas and language that accompanies overt hostilities; "terrorism" is simply the current vogue for discrediting one's opponents before the risky business of inquiry into their complaints can even begin' (Kapitan 2003, 52).

Therefore, to avoid ambiguity, I shall avoid using the term to describe any of the warring parties. I will refer to the relevant actors as they call themselves, be that guerrilla or Village Guard, and I will avoid politically loaded definitions such as terrorist or freedom fighter. I will describe the relevant PKK members variously as militia, militants, fighters, guerrillas and insurgents. Those fighting on the part of the Turkish state will be additionally described as members of the security forces, Village Guards or paramilitaries. Nonetheless, due to the pervasive presence of terms such as terror, terrorism and so forth in much of the literature, they will on occasion appear in direct quotations in the text, but its use in such cases will reflect the choice of the original author.