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Radical political participation and the internal Kurdish diaspora in Turkey[1]

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Abstract

This article analyses the political mobilisation of the Kurdish internal diaspora outside of the Kurdish region in Turkey. The paper engages with the long held proposition that diasporas tend to support more radical political actors. It discusses the PKK's mobilisation in western Turkey and the manner in which it has contributed to the revival of a broader Kurdish collective identity. The paper considers historic patterns of Kurdish migration before detailing the role of state repression, ethnic alienation and socio-economic marginalisation on recent Kurdish migrants. It concludes by proposing that it was the specific ideological and spatial strategies deployed by the PKK rather than broader contextual factors which permitted the PKK to win mass support among Kurds in western Turkey.

Keywords: Kurdish migration; the PKK; political violence; diaspora; social movements.

Beşdariya siyasî ya radîkal û diyasporaya kurdî ya navxweyî li Tirkiyeyê

Ev nivîsar vekolînek e li ser çalakgeriya siyasî ya diyasporaya navxweyî ya Kurdên li derveyî herêma kurdnişîn a Tirkiyeyê. Ev gotar tevî wê fikr û pê$niyaza kevn dibe ya ku dibêje meyla diyasporayan bêtir li ser bizavên siyasî yên nisbeten tundrewtir e. Nivîsar berê xwe dide çalakgeriya PKKyê li rojavayê Tirkiyeyê û lê dikole ka wê çalakgeriyê bi çi rengî tesîr li vejandina nasnameyeka Kurdî ya cemawerî û berfirehtir kiriye. Di vê xebatê de, pê$iyê şikl û corên koçberiya Kurdan ji nezera tarîxî ve hatine pê$kê$kirin, pa$ê, rola fakterên wek zordestiya dewletê, nebankirina (vederkirina) qewmî û perawêzxistina civakî-aborî ya li ser koçberên heyamên dawî bi hûrgilî hatine nîqa$kirin. Wekî encam, ev xebat pêşniyar dike ku piştgiriya girseyî ku PKK ji Kurdên li rojavayê Tirkiyeyê wergirtiye, ne ew qas ji $ert û mercên gi$tî û çarçoveya berfireh, lê zêdetir bi saya wan stratejiyên taybet yên îdeolojîk û mekanî ne ku PKKyê dane ber xwe.

بەشداری سیاسییانەی رادیکاڵ و تاراوگەی ناوخۆیی کورد لە تورکیا

ئەم گوتارە شیکردنەوەیەکە لە سەر مۆبایلیزە کردنی سیاسییانەی تاراوگەی ناوخۆیی کورد لە دەرەوەی دەڤەرە کوردییەکان لە تورکیا. ئەم لێکۆڵینەوەیە لەو پێشنیازە دەکۆڵێتەوە کە دەڵێت، تاراوگە پشتیوانی لەو ئەکتەرە سیاسییانە دەکات کە زیاتر رادیکاڵن. ئەم گوتارە باس دەکا لە مۆبایلیزە کردن لە لایەن پ.ك.ك وە لە رۆژاوای تورکیا و ئەو شێوانەی کە ئەو رێکخراوەیە بە ڕەچاوکردنیان توانیویەتی ناسنامەیەکی بەرفراوانی کۆمەڵی کوردی ببووژێنێتەوە. ئەم لێکۆڵینەوەیە بەر لەوەی تاوتوێی رۆڵی چەوساندنەوە لە لایەن دەوڵەتەوە بکات و سەرنج بداتە هەڵاواردنی ئینتنیکی و پەراوێز خستنی نابووری-کۆمەڵایەتی لە سەر کۆچبەرە کوردەکانی ئەو ساڵانەی دوایی، شێوازە مێژوویییەکانی کۆچ کردنی کورد ڕاڤە دەکا. لە کۆتاییدا، ئەم گوتارە پێشنیار دەکات کە هۆکاری بە دەستهێنانی ئەو پشتگیریە جەماوەرییەی پ.ك.ك لە ناو کوردی رۆژئاوای تورکیا دەگەڕێتەوە بۆئەو ستراتیژییە تایبەتە فەزایی و ئایدیۆلۆژییانەی کە ئەو رێکخراوەیە پەیڕەوی کردووە، نەك فاکتەرە بەربڵاوە ژینگەییەکان (contextual).

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Introduction

This article questions the reputed proclivity of diaspora groups to engage in radical politics, often times supporting more extreme groups than their ethnic counterparts resident in the homeland of origin. This supposition is premised on the notion that diaspora communities are somewhat ill informed of the realities of the political developments in the homeland and lesser exposed to consequences of their political behaviour. Although, cognisant of the dangers of "concept stretching" (Sartori, 1970) and Brubaker's fears that if "everybody is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so" (2005: 3), this paper puts forth the argument that there is a Kurdish 'internal diaspora' in western Turkey. It does not argue that all Kurds outside of Kurdistan should be considered as part of the diaspora but rather supports the conceptual distinction between passive categories of transnational migrant communities or trans-regional ones in this instance, and active diaspora communities. It will discuss how the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), a left-wing Kurdish insurgent movement created an organisational network which managed to obtain the support and engagement of significant parts of the migrant Kurdish community in western Turkey, thus playing a crucial role in forging an internal diaspora. The paper concludes that the emergence of an internal diaspora can be attributed to the initial "movement agency" (Jasper, 2004) of the PKK which fostered a politicised Kurdish political consciousness that subsequently facilitated a broader Kurdish political and cultural revival that encompasses Kurdish movements unrelated to the PKK. This article will focus on the PKK's mobilisation because it was the first and most significant effort to politically organise Kurdish migrant communities resident in western Turkey as Kurds, in contrast to the more fragmented and localised *hemşehri* (hometown)[2] associations. However, it acknowledges that Kurdish migrant political involvement was and remains a broad and complex array of movements and parties which extends beyond the PKK and overlaps with various political initiatives that traverse ethnic divisions.

Modern Kurdish political mobilisation has been sufficiently discussed elsewhere to dispense with a summary of its historical evolution. This article instead exclusively focuses on how the Kurdish population outside of the Kurdish homeland but within Turkey has been politically organised. It argues that this "internal diaspora" distinguishes the Kurds from the other multiple instances of ethnic migration in Turkey. The notion that Kurds in western Turkey constitute a form of diaspora has already been tentatively put forth by a number of academics (Ahmetbeyzade, 2007; Gunter, 2010: 84; Houston, 2005). It has also begun to be utilised to an extent by some Kurds who self-identify as part of a diaspora within Turkish state borders. This article will be temporally limited to the late 1980s and 1990s because it was the period when

[2] *Hemşehri* networks were associations based on hometown or regional provenance amongst immigrants found throughout Turkey.

the PKK first established a systematic presence in western Turkey. It will not focus on the parallel foundation of the parliamentary Kurdish parties because their presence outside of Kurdistan was of relatively limited import until more recent times. In addition, at a theoretical level this paper does not attempt to analyse the entirety of the spectrum of diaspora political engagement but questions the view that diasporas tend to support radical projects. Accordingly, it concentrates exclusively on the support for the most militant Kurdish political actor, the PKK. It draws on a series of over fifty qualitative interviews with PKK militants, supporters and other Kurdish activists conducted for the author's PhD between 2011 and 2014 (see O'Connor, 2014), in conjunction with a wide variety of primary and secondary sources.

Minority political mobilisation in Turkey

Notwithstanding state efforts to create a homogenous citizen body by forcibly assimilating linguistic and ethnic minorities, Turkey remains a highly diverse country. All of Turkey's minorities have suffered to various extents in the forging of the Turkish nation-state, from massacres and internal exile to the suppression of their distinct linguistic and religious practises. In terms of political representation, only twenty four non-Muslims have ever taken seats in the parliament since the founding of the Turkish Republic (Taştekin, 2015). Individual politicians from ethnic minority backgrounds have enjoyed a consistent political presence in parliament and in Turkish political parties but only upon renouncing their specific ethnic identities. However, with a number of exceptions these diverse ethno-religious identities have not coalesced into political communities or expressed collective communal political demands. The Alevi population has long been associated with left-wing politics (Jongerden, 2003; Shankland, 2003) but other than a short-lived Alevi party[3] formed in the 1960s, it has tended to avoid forming overtly political organisations. Other Alevi cultural associations such as the *Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği* and the *Hacı Bektaş Kültür Derneği* were established but they refrain from explicit engagement in politics and are more active in religious and cultural fields. A radical leftist movement the Turkish Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist*, TKP-ML) with an armed wing known as the Workers' Peasants Liberation Army of Turkey (*Türkiye İşci ve Köylü Kurtuluş Ordusu*, TIKKO) became synonymous to such an extent with the Alevi community in the Tunceli/Dersim area that it became known as the *Tuncelililer* (those from Tunceli) (Leezenberg, 2003: 199). Yet, it has always formulated its demands in universalistic left wing discourse. Other groups such as the Laz (Sarigil, 2012) and Circassians (Kaya, 2004) have undergone a form of ethnic revival in recent years but they have stopped short of engaging in conventional party politics or more militant channels of political mobilisation. The major exception to the lack of ethno-religious

[3] Turkey Unity Party (*Türkiye Birlik Partisi*, TBP) was founded in 1966 and participated in elections until the 1980 coup.

mobilisation (aside from the hegemonic Sunni-Turkish identity) has been the Kurds. The first decades of the Turkish republic were characterised by a series of Kurdish rebellions which were all bloodily repressed. After a lull in the 1950s and 1960s, Kurdish society began to reassert itself and in the period preceding the 1980 coup, a broad Kurdish political movement had emerged ranging from cultural associations to leftist insurgent groups. In the wake of the coup, collective Kurdish political demands were predominantly voiced by the PKK and after 1990 by a succession of Kurdish parliamentary parties which shared a similar political outlook to the PKK, with varying degrees of interpersonal connections between them.

Diaspora – internal and otherwise

The concept of diaspora has become widely deployed in both academic and political circles in recent years. The term has been used in often contradictory terms and is understood in many different ways according to the audience to whom it is directed and the actors deploying it. It has been "suggested that it is not possible to define diaspora sharply, either by recourse to essential features or to privative oppositions" (Clifford, 1994: 310). A first important point to emphasise is that contrary to how it is often popularly understood, a "diaspora is not a natural result of mass migration and there is a difference between migrant communities and diaspora groups" (Baser and Swain, 2010: 40). Houston has further suggested "the community of diaspora is always less than the population of the group declared in official censuses (if declared)" (Houston, 2005: 403). Secondly, diasporas should not be considered in "substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim" and as a "category of practise" (Brubaker, 2005: 12). Finally, it is mistaken to consider diaspora communities as hermetically sealed units distinct from those in the homeland. In certain cases of traumatic dispersion, entire families and villages are forced to flee, severing links with their places of origin. But in many cases, links with their homelands are maintained through extended family ties, tribal connections and other informal networks and associations. Physical bonds with the homeland can also be maintained by seasonal migration, marital patterns and holidays.

This article concurs with the non-essentialist and relational definition of diaspora as provided by Brubaker. He identifies three criteria: traumatic dispersion across and also within state borders; homeland orientation; and boundary maintenance vis-à-vis the host society (2005). His emphasis on homeland orientation is particularly nuanced because it marks a rupture with previous definitions which characterised diasporas as inextricably guided by a *telos* of return and thus by referring to "homeland" it de-emphasises the role of the state. Brubaker seemingly concurs with Clifford's suggestion that "decentred, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return" (Clifford, 1994: 306). Soysal Nuhoglu has explained that the concept of diaspora is an extension of the nation-state

because it assumes a congruence between the territorial state and the national community"(Soysal Nuhoglu, 2000: 4). By referencing a homeland rather than a state, this understanding of diaspora can be expanded to include stateless diasporas such as the Kurds. This paper asserts that a large proportion of the Kurdish population in western Turkey can be understood as belonging to a diaspora, but rather than a conventional and more widespread international diaspora, as an *internal diaspora* because it remains within the same state confines and legal jurisdiction as its homeland of origin.

Diasporas are not homogenous entities; they can be composed of an array of tendencies which exhibit varying degrees of commitment to homeland politics and can oftentimes be composed of rival or even oppositional movements. Werbner's description of the Pakistani diaspora in Britain as "stratified by class, caste, education, occupation, religious affiliation, cultural interests, urban or rural background" (Werbner, 1999: 24) exemplifies this variegated composition. It has been argued that diasporas are "an elite mobilised political project" that "is constructed, rather than a natural result of mass migration" (Baser and Swain, 2010: 39). This naturally leads to the likelihood that multiple political movements, not necessarily of a shared political orientation, can serve as the infrastructural components upon which diasporas are constructed. The international Kurdish diaspora is but one example, home to many groups and associations that largely overlap with the PKK but also many movements which have long been opposed to them such as the Kurdish Socialist Party (*Partiya Sosyalîst a Kurdistan*, PSK) and its European based wing, the Federation of Kurdish Associations (*Yekitiya Komelên Kurdistan*, KOMKAR) (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2007: 50). Intra-diaspora tensions can even escalate to physical clashes and violence, as occurred in the Sikh diaspora in the United States and the United Kingdom (Fair, 2005: 132) and between the PKK and KOMKAR in Germany (Baser, 2015).

Diaspora engagement in homeland politics has long been viewed in a negative light. Diasporas have been described as "disaffected groups living far away [...], who find solace in the fantasies about their origins which are often far-removed from reality" (Kaldor, 1999: 85). Their political views are said to be based on romanticised and outdated perceptions of the past. Diaspora communities are purveyors *par excellence* of long distance nationalism which has been described as "a set of identity claims and practises that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory they see as their ancestral homes" (Glick Schiller, 2005: 570). Furthermore, as subsequent generations' cultural and linguistic links with their homeland become dissipated over time there is a tendency to emphasise a form of corporeal nationalism which often emphasises fictive "blood ties" to the homeland (ibid: 577). Diasporas are thus frequently characterised as being ignorant or ill-informed of the realities of homeland politics (Winland, 2013). As a result, it has been asserted that "some of the most violent articulations of purity and racial exclusivism come from diaspora populations" (Clifford,

1994: 307). Long distant nationalists are usually safely ensconced beyond the jurisdiction of their homelands; as a result their political outlook is less moderated by fear of its potential consequences (Byman, 2013: 989) thereby rendering it more radical than their co-ethnics still under the immediate control of the authorities homeland state. A form of politics Anderson scathingly describes as being without "responsibility or accountability" (Anderson, 1992: 11). Thus, according to this interpretation, diasporas have two factors enhancing radicalism, an ignorance of the actual political dynamics and environment of the homeland and its insulation from potential repercussions and reprisals. Additionally, the gullible romanticism of emigrants also renders them fertile ground for political manipulation by nationalist movements which translate such predispositions into actual material support for militant groups.

There is a degree of empirical evidence to substantiate the correlation between the presence of diasporas and armed insurgencies. Byman reports that diaspora support has been verified in twenty seven of the thirty eight worldwide conflicts in the immediate period before 2013 (Byman, 2013: 987). The most common form of support is in the provision of financial resources, it has been argued that diasporas provide "potentially important source of start-up finance for rebellion" (Collier and Hoeffler, 1999: 11). Sometimes financial support is indeed voluntary and derived from shared ideological convictions and solidarity with militant groups but on other occasions, armed groups can coerce support even in the diaspora. Threats and violence can be deployed *in situ* or directed against family members still living in the homeland (Fair, 2005: 141; Cochrane, Baser and Swain, 2009: 690). Diasporas can also contribute to insurgent campaigns in an indirect fashion; the repatriation of remittances to kin members in their homelands can facilitate a territorial basis whence armed groups can launch and conduct their campaigns (Byman, 2013: 988). The diaspora can also serve as a form of free space (Polletta, 1999) where foreign governments and transnational organisations can be lobbied and as a base of cultural revival which can complement militant groups' efforts. In other cases, diaspora communities even provide recruits for armed movements (Byman, 2013: 990; Shain, 2002: 142).

The narrative which castigates diaspora engagement in homeland politics as overwhelmingly negative has become rather more nuanced. It could be argued that this correlation between diasporas and armed conflicts is rooted in a confirmative bias which overlooks the numerable instances of diaspora mobilisation which are not channelled toward militant ends. It also seems likely that certain high profile cases such as that of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora have skewed wider understandings of diasporas' role in violence, "the LTTE's[4] experience is not typical, but rather represents the apex of how an insurgent organization can exploit a diaspora for its own ends" (Byman et

[4] Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is the name of the Tamil insurgent group in Sri Lanka.

al., 2001: 42). Instances of the moderating impact of diasporas are plentiful, such as the peaceful lobbying of the US government by Irish Americans (Cochrane, 2007).

As diasporas are not inherent social categories *per se* but rather a relationally defined category they change and evolve. In certain instances, members of diasporas can halt practices of diasporic engagement and thus revert to becoming individuals in migrant communities or even assimilated citizens of their host countries or regions. Their ethnic or citizenship status need not necessarily be altered but for social scientific analytical purposes they can no longer be classified as part of a diaspora. In the case of an internal diaspora, the distinctions between homeland and diaspora are even more nuanced. In terms of citizenship, members of an internal diaspora's legal status do not change if they live in their homeland or outside it thereby pointing out the greatest distinction between the classic transnational diaspora and an internal one.

Waves of Kurdish migration

Kurdish migration is not a recent phenomenon; concern about Kurdish migrants' presence in western Turkey is documented in Ottoman sources dating to the early 19th century. It can be broken down into three broad 'generations' of migration over which a form of diaspora identity has slowly emerged. As the seat of power in the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul historically attracted members of the Kurdish tribal elite which doubled as its nascent intelligentsia and was the site of early Kurdish nationalist agitation (Klein, 2007: 139; McDowall, 2004: 90). In the early stages of the Republic, this limited number of Kurds in western Turkey was supplemented by waves of forced migrants militarily dispersed across western Anatolia. Therefore, the first waves of twentieth century migration were examples of "traumatic dispersion" (Brubaker, 2005: 5) which is one of the fundamental pillars of diaspora communities. The historic memory of these deportations is also the narrative foundation of the contemporary Kurdish diaspora. Houston has argued that that the very narrativisation of one's diasporic condition is a defining characteristic of it (Houston, 2005: 403). Although other ethnic minorities such as the Armenians and the Assyrians were also subject to campaigns of violent dispersion, their collective memories of the events have not led to a coherent political mobilisation.

The second wave of Kurdish migration occurred in the course of huge population restructuring in conjunction with Turkey's industrialisation and concomitant urbanisation. The majority of Kurds or people of Kurdish origin owe their presence in western Turkey to this period stretching from the 1950s until the 1980s. This migration was distinctly rural to urban in nature. The magnitude of this migration was such that by 1990, 15% of Istanbul's population had been born in the east or south-east (Wedel, 2001: 116). This migration was minutely organised and expanded incrementally. The first

pioneers were young male seasonal migrants known as *gurbetçiler*. They worked in menial and physically demanding jobs, such as porters or on the construction of the railroads (Karpat, 1976: 54). They usually found accommodation in overcrowded male boarding houses known as *bekar evi*. Overtime, as these initial migrants established themselves they arranged for other family and *hemşehri* members to join them and the migration drifted from being seasonal to more permanent in nature. Turkey's growing demand for manual labour workers in its expanding industries ensured that employment was relatively easy to find. Eventually, workers began to invite their families to join them in the west and relocated to squatter *gecekondu* (slum) neighbourhoods (Karpat, 1976: 92). Accordingly, both employment and housing was available and migration led to upward social mobility.

This wave of migration contrasts with antecedent and subsequent waves as it was self-initiated and not coerced by the state. Links with the homeland were maintained by means of *hemşehri* networks. However, this engagement with the homeland differs from diasporic forms of engagement as it was limited to specific villages or kinship groups and did not refer to a broader conception of a shared Kurdish identity. Although, *hemşehri* associations were heavily engaged in politics, their political strength was deployed for objectives which would exclusively benefit their own specific community and was often in competition for resources against other co-ethnic migrant communities. *Hemşehri* networks served as associations of mutual solidarity which facilitated access to housing and labour market and served as a form of autonomous welfare state (Betül Çelik, 2003: 144; Grabolle-Çeliker, 2012: 117-216). *Hemşehri* groups are not restricted to the Kurds and are to be found throughout Turkey. In exchange for the provision of services such as electricity and roads or retrospective concession of land titles for housing, *hemşehri* provided political parties with guaranteed electoral support in the form of block voting (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2012: 117-126). Furthermore, aside from their limitations in terms of scope, *hemşehri* associations were predominantly, but not exclusively so, concerned with achieving improvements for migrant communities in the west. In contrast, in diaspora mobilisation the emphasis tends to be reversed; it mostly prioritises developments in the homeland and extends beyond the micro-solidarities of *hemşehri* groups.

The final generation of Kurdish migrants are those forced from their land as a result of the conflict which began in 1984 when the PKK launched an armed insurgency, lasting until 1999 when the first ceasefire was declared. The Turkish state launched a massive military offensive in 1993 (see Özdağ, 2003) and during the 1990s masses of Kurds were systematically driven from their homes as part of the Turkish state's counter insurgency strategy. It has been observed that in distinction to earlier waves, these migrants fled "without the slightest institutional organization, completely through an informal process and under the pressure of extraordinary conditions. This forced migration is

highly dissimilar to the voluntary migration even though the places of departure are the same" (Erder in Yilmaz, 2003: 9). In many cases their villages of origin had been destroyed, so there was no fall-back option of returning home or even benefiting from some material sustenance provided from their lands. The violence of their expulsions deprived Kurds of their wealth and the destruction of their only means of livelihood, such as cattle and land, leaving many penniless. As Herro[5] a victim of forced displacement from Malazgirt explained, his family had been roused by the army in the middle of the night and were not permitted to retrieve any belongings, meaning that a number of his family began their journey into exile, literally barefoot (Herro, personal communication, March 2012,). In addition, many of the migrants were unsuited to the modern labour market given their background in agriculture. Many of the women could speak only Kurdish and were thus further disadvantaged than their male counterparts. There were two ulterior exacerbating factors: firstly, macro-economic developments had led to a decline in Turkey's industrialisation and a subsequent fall off in demand for unskilled manual labour. Secondly, the preponderance of cheap accommodation available in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods, of which earlier waves of migrants had benefited, was exhausted. *Gecekondu* neighbourhoods had become commercialised spaces and the squatting of new land was no longer tolerated (Saraçoğlu, 2010; Yilmaz, 2004: 142-143). As a consequence, internally displaced Kurds were forced ever further to the margins of cities or to inner city slums, such as Tarlabaşı in Istanbul. It was amongst this vastly heterogeneous Kurdish population in terms of class, spatial distribution and sub-regional provenance that a politically engaged Kurdish diaspora emerged.

Kurdish internal diaspora

The conceptual distinction between a migrant and a diaspora community is evident when considering the case of the Kurds in western Turkey. The first generation of migrants in the early republican period, in parallel to the dormancy of Kurdish politics in Kurdistan itself, was cowed into silence and politically quiescent. The economic migrants of later years mobilised political resources to enable greater access to ensure continued upward social mobility. Although, many Kurds had mobilised in broader leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, their Kurdish identity was not politically salient. The third wave of Kurdish migration was the classic example of a coercive dispersion but profound grievance does not necessarily lead to political resistance. The experience of dispersal, collective fragmentation and the dire socio-economic circumstances of many of the internally displaced Kurds could easily have led to resentful political torpidity. On the contrary, the 1990s marked the beginning of mass political revitalisation of Kurds in western Turkey.

[5] All interviewees' names have been anonymised.

The *telos* of return is said to be central to diasporas. In the Kurdish case, this is indeed a prevalent sentiment in many circumstances. Ahmetbeyzade cites a Kurdish woman in Istanbul:

> [...] we always think of going back to Kurdistan. Our roots are in Kurdistan. We will go back. We will all go back. The Mother Soil calls us. I don't know when, but I know we will. I am now looking for brides for my sons, not from the city but from our villages, so that I can take our sons and brides back to our land (2007: 166).

Yet for others, return is viewed rather more ambivalently. As a youth in Adana cited by Darici explained "there are too many old people there. To be honest, I can't go and live there. I can't go and settle down in the countryside; I can't live in a village" (2011: 474). Accordingly, the emphasis on return to Kurdistan varies across the diaspora and the myth of return for many Kurds takes on the qualities of "an eschatological identity" (Falzon, 2003: 664) rather than a concrete personal objective.

A diasporic characteristic shared by Kurds in the west of Turkey, as Ahmetbeyzade has explained, is that "they experience living in two separate spaces simultaneously; because they are spatially away from their homeland, [and] they bring their place to the new one" (2007: 164). It is a duality reinforced by the collective trans-generational narratives of state violence which link not only the past with the present but the spatially distant and the near. This form of a separate epistemic community renders Kurds in the west distinct from other migrant groups and the Turkish majority population. However, boundary maintenance is not simply a result of this collective self-narrativisation but also maintained by prevailing practises of exclusion. Collective experiences of communal exclusion or feeling of extraneousness from the Turkish majority largely define Kurdish existence in the west (Scarboro and Yiğit, 2014; Secor, 2004; Yilmaz, 2008; Yükseker, 2006). As a minor caveat, it is true that certain Kurds, particularly those possessing a large degree of social and cultural capital manage to assimilate themselves into the majority by denying or publicly concealing their ethnic background. Alternatively, other Kurds prioritise their religious identity thus emphasising their shared religious solidarity with the broader Muslim population.

Although anti-Kurdish sentiment had long been present in Turkey, its impact on the public opinion was limited. It was only upon the mass migration of the 1990s that most western Turks knowingly began to encounter Kurds. A perception began to emerge that the arrival of waves of "ignorant" Kurdish migrants unversed in the ways of the city, constituted a veritable Kurdish invasion of Turkish cities (see Saraçoğlu, 2009: 648). As the margins of the cities, which had hitherto embraced the preceding waves of poor rural migrants, became saturated, the migrant presence in public spaces was increasingly more evident and repelling for certain elements of Turkish society. This anti-Kurdish attitude was bolstered by hysterical media coverage

related to the criminal menace allegedly posed by Kurdish migrants (Saraçoğlu, 2009: 653) and opportunistic political discourses which collectively decried Kurds as terrorist supporters, thus relegating Kurds to the status of pseudo-citizens (Yeğen, 2009). Negative conceptions of Kurdish migrants were strengthened by public expressions of Kurdish identity in western cities in Newroz celebrations and other political demonstrations (Saraçoğlu, 2009: 648-649). Such prejudice reflected structural discrimination against Kurds in terms of their marginal position in the labour market, residential patterns and socio-economic indigence (Müderrisoğlu, 2006; Yilmaz, 2004: 33). In simple terms, the Turkish city was not a welcoming environment for Kurdish migrants, especially for those arriving in the 1990s.

PKK mobilisation

The PKK was established in Ankara by a number of Kurdish and Turkish leftists before a decision was taken to relocate to Kurdistan as it appeared to be the most propitious location to launch an insurgency (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011). In the 1980s the PKK did not have a systematic presence in the cities of western Turkey. That is not to suggest that the PKK did not have support in the west (see Marcus, 2007: 132-133), but rather that such support was the product of interpersonal links to Kurdistan and not the product of any systemic distinct mobilisation. As the PKK insurgency expanded in Kurdistan in the 1980s, it led to a greater demand for fighters and material resources and the PKK recognised the untapped potential of the millions of Kurds in western Turkey. The PKK's organised presence in western Turkey was then a result of its "movement agency" (Jasper, 2004) by which it took active measures to consolidate the latent sympathies of Kurds living there. These efforts were facilitated by the difficult living conditions and hostility endured by many of the Kurdish community. The ensuing section will draw extensively on interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 with two former senior National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (*Eniya Rizgariya Netewa Kurdistan*, ERNK) cadres whom I have assigned the pseudonyms Daham and Sezer.[6] Both men served more than ten years in prison for PKK related activities and were heavily involved in the PKK's initial mobilisation efforts in Istanbul in the early 1990s.

The PKK mobilisation in western Turkey came about following a broader movement restructuring in 1987. A number of sub-organisations within the ERNK were established in order to "organize its various social strata individually" (Özcan, 2006: 172). The Union of Kurdish Youth (*Yekîtiya Ciwanên Kurdistan*, YCK) was formed as a means to mobilise students but it remained largely inactive for a number of years in the west, as the PKK

[6] I interviewed Daham in Istanbul in March 2012 and Sezer in November 2013. They both served lengthy prison sentences of more than ten years because of their activities in the ERNK and in Sezer's case also in relation to his role in the PKK's guerrilla force the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan (*Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan,* ARGK).

concentrated its efforts on the burgeoning insurgency in Kurdistan. Yet, it was eventually the student movement which went on to form the organisational hub of the ERNK in western Turkey. Given the PKK's lack of organisational presence, politically minded Kurdish students had begun to organise on an autonomous basis (Marcus, 2007: 133). Sezer, from Sivas, explained that when he started university in 1989, the PKK had no organised presence in the universities. He was from a very a politically active left-wing family and had himself been tortured as a child after the coup d'état in 1980. He was determined to join a revolutionary movement when he started university, preferably either Dev-Sol or the PKK due to their armed capacity. By coincidence he encountered a Kurdish student in the university canteen and struck up a friendship with him. This student had familial links with the PKK and together they autonomously set about creating a branch of the YCK at their university. They sounded out like minded students but had little contact with the PKK itself aside from occasionally receiving minutely printed copies of the movement's newspaper, *Serxwebûn*. To express solidarity with the *serhildan*[7] in Kurdistan in March 1990, the PKK called for a Newroz celebration at the Istanbul University's Beyazit campus; it transpired to be the first public PKK demonstration in Istanbul. Other nascent PKK groups which had organised in a similarly autonomous fashion to that of Sezer's, responded to the PKK's call and the event was attended by 2,500 students. Henceforth, the movement grew exponentially as the various groups at Yıldız, Marmara and Istanbul Technical Universities vertically consolidated their connections to the PKK and horizontally among themselves in the shared university dormitories. Large numbers of Kurdish students flocked to the movement. Many of them had moved to Istanbul from Kurdistan to study, often from areas such as Mardin and Hakkari which were the epicentre of the guerrilla struggle; they were thus well informed on the developments of the conflict through family connections and personal experiences. It also attracted numbers of radical Turkish students who had become dismayed by the inaction of the plethora of militant left wing revolutionary groups, thus ensuring that many new recruits were of non-Kurdish backgrounds.

These early student activists became the main actors in the ERNK branch in Istanbul and by June 1990, they had begun to mobilise amongst the wider Kurdish population in the city. New student recruits underwent intensive political training by more senior cadres for up to two weeks before they were dispatched to Kurdish neighbourhoods across the city. The PKK took a strategic decision to focus on the most marginal Kurdish neighbourhoods because they had large populations of men of fighting age and plagued by high unemployment rates, thus rendering them "biographically available"

[7] *Serhildan* is a Kurdish word which has a similar meaning to the better known term *intifada* or uprising. In 1990, clashes between unarmed Kurds and the security forces erupted across cities in Kurdistan. The first clashes occurred in Nusaybin following the funeral of a PKK guerrilla and quickly spread to other cities in the region (see Marcus, 2007: 140).

(Viterna, 2013: 15). As the insurgency intensified there was a dearth of candidates to join the guerrillas. This calculated choice again marks a break from conventional expectations about radical mobilisation in the diaspora; as efforts were made to directly recruit fighters and not to simply use the diaspora as source of "start-up finance" to fund the insurgency (Collier and Hoeffler, 1999: 11).

Daham, an ERNK commander in charge of recruitment in two neighbourhoods with large Kurdish populations, provided three main explanations for the ease of recruitment and rapid expansion of PKK support. Firstly, he claimed that the living conditions of young Kurds were terrible. They resided in cramped conditions in *bekar evi* or with their families and were thus deprived of any privacy, compounded by the absence of any genuine educational or career prospects. Daham also explains that parallel to the intensification of the conflict, a pervasive politicisation characterised Kurdish communities in the west. It was not simply individuals who were mobilised, but reports of atrocities in Kurdistan motivated whole families to become involved. The third factor which favoured PKK expansion was the mobilisation strategies implemented by the movement itself. Sezer, who was also engaged in recruiting new militants, explained that as soon as was possible, the youthful ERNK cadre moved to live on a full time basis in working class neighbourhoods. They were hosted by families or else slept in nearby construction sites, thus sharing the drudgery of the lives of the people they sought to mobilise. They became fully immersed in the neighbourhood by attending weddings, accompanying children to the dentist and even in instances laden with symbolic relevance given Kurdish customs of hospitality, by washing the dishes of their hosts. They thereby broached political issues with prospective supporters from a position of interpersonal familiarity.

The PKK militants were also very calculated in how they presented their political arguments to potential supporters. They tailored their discourse to reflect the prevailing political outlooks of their prospective supporters. Sezer described how when the PKK assigned cadres to quarters such as Yakacık and İdealtepe, largely populated by left-wing Kurds and Alevis from Erzincan and Sivas, they were encouraged to focus on the leftist aspects of the struggle. However, militants active in neighbourhoods mostly consisting of Kurds from Mardin, such as Kasımpaşa and Tarlabaşı, pointedly focused on nationalist themes. Therefore, mobilisation amongst the Kurdish diaspora was, despite media censorship, rooted in an accurate knowledge of the conflict, this awareness being consolidated by subsequent waves of internally displaced migrants who brought first hand reports of it. The key however, was that the PKK made use of convincing recruitment strategies and persuaded prospective supporters of their credibility by living amongst them and spreading the word of the PKK form a horizontal position of familiarity.

Although, the PKK initially focused their mobilisation on recent migrants from Kurdistan, subsequently it began to mobilise earlier generations of

migrants and even assimilated Kurds which had previously primarily self-identified as Alevi or even Turkish. Daham was himself an illustrative example of the cognitive transformation of Kurds in the west. His family identified as Alevi and were politically disengaged. Daham had been active in leftist politics as a teenager and only became active in the PKK after he started university. He explained that he learned about his Kurdishness through the PKK, that his Kurdish identity did not precede his mobilisation but was rather formed endogenously in the course of his militant career. In many ways, this individual experience is representative of many Kurds in Western Turkey. Reports of the violence of the conflict, increasing anti-Kurdish sentiment in the west and the PKK's recruitment strategies and framing of the conflict, revived and reconstituted a Kurdish identity amongst migrants. The success of its recruitment tactics ensured a steady flow of guerrillas which led to greater demand for financial resources to maintain the insurgent effort.

Accordingly, the ERNK then sought to mobilise cross-class Kurdish support. It is worth mentioning that any support for the PKK came at great personal risk, as those found guilty were sentenced to a minimum three year prison sentence and an automatic period of detention of fifteen days during which the use of torture was widespread. Daham detailed how in addition to his efforts in poorer areas like *1 Mayıs mahallesi* (1st May neighbourhood), he secured ample support from wealthy gated communities in the Ataşehir neighbourhood. The PKK received a large degree of financial support from wealthier Kurds, but they also furnished the movement with safe houses and recruits. Similarly, poorer families were also encouraged to contribute to the movement proportionate to their means in financial or other terms. The routinised collecting of oftentimes miniscule amounts of money maintained interpersonal bonds between the PKK and its supporters which might have otherwise become disengaged. These encounters doubled up as reciprocal conduits of information between supporters and the movement. It can be argued that the PKK's interactions with Kurds from different class positions and regions weakened many of the class and local cleavages, as exemplified by the *hemşehri* associations and thus helped forge a more inclusive Kurdish identity.

Interestingly, the PKK mobilisation in western Turkey continued to grow even as the strength of the insurgency in Kurdistan declined. A restructuring of the armed forces, the launch of a massive counter-insurgency campaign in 1993 and the intensification of the evacuation of hundreds of Kurdish villages, militarily weakened the PKK and reversed its successes of the early 1990s. In stark contrast to other cases where diaspora support correlated to insurgent advancements (Byman et al., 2001: 105), the PKK continued to grow in western Turkey in spite of the retraction of its overall military capacity. Its organisational infrastructure expanded to such an extent that by the mid-1990s it was arguably the most potent revolutionary force in Istanbul. Its expansion must however be considered from a broader relational

perspective, especially in relation to the decline of the radical leftist movements in the city. The radical left spectrum was dramatically weakened in respect of its massive support of the late 1970s. It was fragmented and ideologically disorientated following the collapse of the USSR and many politically minded youth were deterred by its orthodox rhetoric and posturing.

The Istanbul neighbourhood of Gaziosmanpaşa, which boasts a renowned revolutionary heritage dating back to the 1970s is a perfect microcosm of the PKK's emergence as the foremost radical group in the city. In the 1990s, the neighbourhood which is largely populated by Kurds and Alevis, was home to leftist armed groups such as the DHKP-C, MLKP[8] and TIKKO. One could conceivably imagine that the PKK would have immediately sought to mobilise in such a politically conscious neighbourhood, however it did the very contrary. The PKK made no effort to mobilise there until the mid to late 1990s. One former PKK prisoner from the neighbourhood recounted that the first PKK demonstration occurred as late as 1998 for the funeral of a local PKK guerrilla Adnan Seker (Rand, personal communication, November, 2013). Daham explained that the PKK avoiding mobilising in the neighbourhood because of competition for resources and recruits with other groups and a desire to maintain good relations with them.[9] It was also a strategic decision because given the level of political foment in the neighbourhood it had long been an area of police interest which sought to infiltrate the various groups active in the area. The PKK was determined to stay off the radar of the authorities as much as possible in order to avoid imperilling the supply routes of fighters and resources for the insurgency in Kurdistan. Notwithstanding or perhaps because of its cautious approach, by the end of the 1990s the PKK emerged as the leading revolutionary movement in Istanbul, including in neighbourhoods like Gaziosmanpaşa. Its success can be attributed to the decline of leftist alternatives, the credibility it possessed as a result of its military capabilities in Kurdistan and by its deployment of carefully calibrated recruitment strategies.

The central premise of this article is to question the assertion that diaspora groups tend to engage in more radical politics than those in their homeland because of immunity from the consequences of their political actions and because of a romanticised and simplistic understanding of conflict dynamics. In the first instance, as an internal diaspora the Kurds in western Turkey remain essentially under the same juridical authorities as Kurds resident in Kurdistan. Although, not under the martial law of the OHAL[10] regime imposed on most of Kurdistan, migrants in the west were resident in the

[8] Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (*Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi,* DHKP-C) and the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (*Marksist-Leninist Komünist Partisi,* MLKP).

[9] This is in marked contrast to its antagonistic relationship with many leftist and Kurdish groups in the late 1970s.

[10] OHAL (*Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği)* was a Regional State of Emergency Governorate established in Kurdistan in 1987, it was finally abolished in 2002.

major urban centres of Turkey, thus living in areas of increased policing capacity and resources as well as in the midst of an often hostile local population. It is therefore clear that the political choices of the internal Kurdish diaspora were not the result insulation from their consequences. It is similarly clear that Kurdish migrants in western Turkey were well informed about the conflict in Kurdistan. The first wave of PKK activists in the west were in fact mostly students from the areas worse afflicted by the conflict. The pre-existing Kurdish population, which the PKK subsequently mobilised, were also well informed of happenings in Kurdistan due to circulatory migration and communication with family members still resident there. While the subsequent Kurdish migrants were themselves first hand victims of the conflict. It is therefore clear that the internal diaspora's political engagement was rooted in a relatively sound knowledge of the conflict.

If the fundamental explanatory pillars of diaspora mobilisation are not applicable to this case, then what explains the internal diaspora's support for the most radical form of Kurdish political expression in spite of the potential repercussions? The continued indiscriminate repression of the counter-insurgency in Kurdistan continued to fuel collective grievances. While the often violent repression of pro-Kurdish initiatives in western Turkey such as Newroz celebrations, the Saturday Mothers' vigils[11] and political gatherings strengthened feelings of collective marginalisation. These sentiments were undoubtedly heightened by instances of casual discrimination by members of the public and of course the on-going socio-economic deprivation of the Kurdish migrant community. However, this article argues that the factor which most favoured radical mobilisation was the recruitment strategies utilised by the PKK. It adopted a nuanced repertoire of contention. It combined efforts to stay off of the authorities' radar, thus limiting supporters' exposure to arrests and other reprisals, with the organisation of low intensity street violence around protests. Similarly to how Basque Homeland and Freedom (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, ETA) used *kale borroka*[12] in the Basque country, clashes with the police usually consolidated loyalty to the movement, especially as any periods of brief detention almost certainly resulted in torture (personal communications, November 2013). In addition, the PKK did not demand a totalising commitment from its supporters. Once an individual became a full time cadre, their lives were wholly dedicated to the movement, but supporters engaged on a more flexible basis. The aforementioned Herro explained that after his father, who had been a PKK militia member in Malazgirt, fled to Istanbul, he disengaged from all political activities with the

[11] The Saturday Mother vigils were sit-ins organised by the mothers and relatives of people "disappeared" during the conflict. They gathered with photos of their missing loved ones in the centre of Istanbul and despite their peaceful intentions and the frailty of many elderly participants, on occasion they were victims of police violence (see Baydar and Ivegen, 2006).

[12] *Kale boroka* translates as street fighting and refers to urban guerrilla action carried out by Basque nationalist youth, such as attacking the offices of political parties, vandalism and rioting.

PKK as he struggled to find a job and support his family. As soon as he achieved a degree of socio-economic stability, he returned to a degree of engagement with the movement (Herro, personal communication, March 2012). Financial contributions were also generally taken proportionate to one's means. However, it would be naive to suggest that coercion or its implicit threat was also not used to strengthen the "voluntary" intention of reluctant contributors.

The PKK was also careful to frame their political message in a fashion which was culturally resonant with its supporters. The fact that it emphasised leftist or nationalist aspects according to the inclination and sub-regional provenance of its audience serves to reinforce the heterogeneous composition of the Kurdish internal diaspora. It also avoided the haranguing overly ideological approach of the radical left, by engaging in political discussions from a more horizontal position of interpersonal familiarity. The PKK's successful mobilisation from a minimal starting point of just a few autonomously established student committees is remarkable and largely due to the PKK's movement agency, the weakness of radical alternatives and the continuing brutality of the state repression.

Conclusion

The PKK mobilisation amongst the Kurdish internal diaspora does not, of course, describe the entirety of political engagement by Kurdish migrants. As in Kurdistan itself, the PKK is but one of many political actors and remains bitterly opposed by many Kurds. Nonetheless, from the 1990s, it became the most influential Kurdish political actor in western Turkey. It can also be argued, in light of the recognition that diaspora is a relational category of practise rather than a social category *per se,* that in a circular process that the PKK's mobilisation encouraged the establishment of an internal diaspora while it contemporarily strengthened itself by funnelling support from the nascent internal diaspora. The PKK's mobilisation therefore was central to the formation of the diaspora but the diaspora in turn was crucial in the PKK's consolidation in western Turkey. The PKK's efforts to attract support traversed class, ethno-religious and sub-regional fractures that had previously undermined Kurdish unity. Accordingly, the PKK's mobilisation facilitated the emergence of a transversal Kurdish identity which overcame pre-existing tensions. Prior to the PKK mobilisation, no coherent vehicle of Kurdish political expression existed in western Turkey. The relationship between the PKK and the institutional Kurdish political parties from 1990 remains contested, but it seems highly unlikely that they would have enjoyed the same levels of success in the absence of the PKK insurgency and the impetus it gave to Kurdish identity formation coupled with the ethnicised repression it provoked from the Turkish state.

These findings serve to question the fundamental underpinnings of diasporas' political mobilisation which hold that diaspora ignorance and

freedom from the consequences of their political behaviour lead diasporas to engage in radical political behaviour (see Anderson, 1992; Byman et al., 2001; Winland, 2013). It is particularly true in this case, where a shared judicial regime and the lack of international obstacles to migration ensured that the distinction between the Kurdish internal diaspora and their co-ethnics in the homeland were located along a spectrum of continuity rather than distinct blocks. This article has highlighted that a significant proportion of Kurds in the west of Turkey did indeed support a radical political movement but for reasons very different to those advanced in much of the literature. The PKK obtained support from people who had either direct or indirect personal experience of the conflict and were convinced that state violence was best countered by armed resistance. It was a political understanding devoid of romanticism and taken with a full awareness of the grim realities of the conflict. Additionally, the PKK succeeded in establishing support networks owing to its legitimacy as the only political vehicle capable of defending the Kurdish people and because it adopted a calibrated recruitment strategy which recognised the normative expectations and ideological orientation of those it sought to mobilise.

The findings of this article are not just applicable to internal diasporas. Many of the same structural conditions increasingly characterise international diasporas by virtue of cheaper travel, better communication and the prevalence of shared international juridical frameworks, particularly related to the War on Terror. In an age of cheap travel and endless sources of information from alternative media on the internet and satellite television, diaspora ignorance is no more likely than the wilful political ignorance of people in general. This article concurs with Brubaker's argument of the need to move beyond "ethnic common sense" and distinguish between political actors and the broader collective groups they proclaim to represent (2002). I argue that this can also be extended to diaspora communities. Accordingly, in order to best analyse diasporic political engagement, both international and internal, it is best to consider the agents of diaspora formation and the practices they actually deploy before generalising about the purported radical collective tendencies of diasporas themselves. Finally, political movements active in diasporas do not adopt their political repertoires in a vacuum; they are rather formed in relation to the broader socio-political environment. The political opportunity structure of the host society can favour more radical or moderate political engagement and the presence or absence of alternative political groups also impacts on the degree of militancy exhibited by diaspora communities. It is therefore crucial to consider the diaspora not as a homogenous entity but rather to focus on the political groups which shape the diaspora from within. As Glick Schiller concluded in relation to long distance nationalism, diaspora political engagement "cannot be summarily classified as more pernicious" (2005: 579) than other forms of political engagement.

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