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The Kurdish Movement in Turkey

Between Political Differentiation
and Violent Confrontation

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Summary

The last three years of Turkish politics have been tumultuous, from the constitutional entrenchment of President Erdoğan's personal power, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war, to an attempted military coup, and the subsequent clampdown on all expressions of opposition to the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*/Development and Justice Party) government. In the midst of this confusion, the depth of the Kurdish crisis in Turkey has not garnered much international political attention. The country has returned to open war in the Kurdish region in Turkey, resulting in 3,000 deaths since 2015 (Mandiraci 2017) and the state has imprisoned thousands of pro-Kurdish politicians and seized control over their democratically elected municipalities. Reports from the region are often hard to understand, in part because of the clampdown on Turkey's independent media but also because the mass of political actors active in Kurdish politics can seem overwhelmingly confusing. Multiple organisations with oftentimes similar acronyms, some operating in complementary but parallel political systems, others replacing banned predecessors, most referencing the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan, have resulted in a deeply complicated political environment. This report attempts to shed some light on the contemporary Kurdish movement by distinguishing between the Kurdish movement's institutional political parties, the HDP (*Partiya Demokratîk a Gelan*/Peoples' Democratic Party), which operates at the national level in Turkey and the DBP (*Partiya Herêman a Demokratîk*/Democratic Regions Party), active only in Kurdistan, and the veteran insurgent movement, the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*/Kurdish Workers Party). The report outlines the PKK's origins and political objectives and does the same for the Kurdish parliamentary political tradition. The historical analysis shows the relationship between the two of them, characterised by structural differentiation but also social and emotional proximity. The two poles – PKK and the Kurdish parliamentary parties – have undergone a degree of ideological convergence by their reciprocal endorsement support for Öcalan's philosophy of Democratic Confederalism. Both wings have found a shared political space in the massive grassroots' social and political mobilisation which has taken root in Kurdistan since the mid-2000s. It concludes by arguing that the relationship between the PKK and the HDP/DBP should be viewed as one of constructive ambiguity; the HDP has demonstrated its commitment to institutional politics in extremely challenging political conditions but it also maintains the sympathy of the PKK. It is thus in a promising position to act as a trusted interlocutor to revive the moribund peace process.

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1. Introduction¹

The failed coup attempt in July 2016 has had dramatic consequences for democracy and political freedom in Turkey. It has resulted in more than 150,000 arrests, and 100,000 civil servants have been fired on the basis of their supposed sympathies for the network that the Turkish state refers to as the Fethullahist Terror Organisation (FETÖ). There has been a notable upsurge in reports of torture in custody and a number of cases of forced disappearances (HRW 2017, 2016). Freedom of assembly has been severely restricted, academic freedoms abrogated (Baser/Akgönül/Öztürk 2017) and a comprehensive clamp-down on media freedoms has rendered Turkey, the world's worst jailer of journalists in 2017 (Beiser 2017). It has led to a concentration of government powers, particularly in the office of President, now held by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Notwithstanding that the HDP (*Partiya Demokratîk a Gelan/Peoples' Democratic Party*) and DBP (*Partiya Herêman a Demokratîk/Democratic Regions Party*, which predominantly represent the country's Kurdish population, had no part to play in the coup and publically denounced it (Esen/Gumuscu 2017: 67), they have suffered disproportionately from its fallout. At the time of writing, the HDP's imprisoned co-leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ are on trial, on an array of charges related to supposed involvement in, and support for, terrorism. Since 2015, 5,471 HDP officials and members have been arrested with 1,482 held in pre-trial detention. Its regional sister-party in Kurdistan² the DBP can count 3,547 party members similarly detained (HRW 2017). The government has also used its post-coup, emergency powers to seize 94 of the 102 of the democratically elected mayoralties governed by the DBP (M. Bozarslan 2017). The government justifies this repression by arguing that the HDP and DBP are merely fronts for the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê/Kurdish Workers Party*), which it classifies as a terrorist organisation.

This report empirically analyses the nature of the relationship between the armed movement, the PKK, the institutional political parties the HDP/DBP and the masses of local assemblies and initiatives that are part of what is commonly referred to as the Kurdish movement. It does not make any elaborate theoretical arguments; it rather seeks to empirically clarify the confusing array of actors which comprise the Kurdish movement. The relationship is a sensitive subject to analyse, as it is precisely the legal justification for which many non-violent Kurdish activists and politicians have been jailed in Turkey and in a number of European countries. This report argues that the contemporary Kurdish movement comprises two distinct elements, armed and party

- 1 I would like to express sincere thanks to Una O'Connor, Brian Kitt, Karan Sharma, Semih, Bahar and Jakob for the various forms of support and feedback that have enormously improved this report. I would also like to thank my PRIF colleagues for sharing their suggestions, with special mention for İdil and Niklas.
- 2 As this paper is exclusively concerned with the Kurdish movement in the state of Turkey, the term Kurdistan refers to the Kurdish region in Turkey and not the broader Kurdish territory which spreads across parts of Syria, Iraq and Iran.

political, which draw support from the same Kurdish political milieu. Since the mid-2000s, this milieu has given rise to a mass of grassroots co-operatives, local assemblies and councils inspired by the ideology of Democratic Confederalism conceptualised by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. These shared constituency and networks have inevitably led to an emotional imbrication and the formation of interpersonal ties between the institutional politics and armed wings of the movement; this however, does not imply that they have a coherent or unified structural relationship, wherein the HDP/DBP follows the commands of the PKK, or vice versa.

The tragedy of the authoritarian turn politics in Turkey has recently taken is that until 2015, there was widespread optimism in the country that the Kurdish conflict was on the verge of resolution. Following the AKP's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*/Development and Justice Party) ascent to power in 2002, it sought to consolidate its Kurdish support base by making concessions such as permitting the opening of Kurdish studies departments in several universities and providing a Kurdish language TV channel (Grigoriadis/Dilek 2018: 292). Coupled with the constitutional changes and democratic openings inherent to Turkey's EU ascension process (Yildiz 2005), it led to a degree of optimism that a solution could be found to the conflict. This culminated in clandestine peace talks initiated between the PKK and the Turkish government in 2009, resulting in a PKK ceasefire. Although violence re-erupted in 2011, subsequent protracted efforts led to talks between senior members of the HDP and a government delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan, which eventually progressed to the formulation of the Dolmabahçe Agreement in February 2015. The accord agreed the ten key principles on which to negotiate a formal peace agreement (Kose 2017: 156). However, that was as far as the peace process was to progress, before completely unravelling after the June 2015 parliamentary elections. In July 2015, Erdoğan renounced the peace process and the Dolmabahçe Agreement reached only months earlier. He declared "[t]here cannot be an agreement with a political party [HDP] that is being supported by a terrorist organization" (Hürriyet Daily News 2015). The reasons for the collapse of the process are many and beyond the scope of this report (see Sunca 2017; Rumelili/Çelik 2017; Hakyemez 2017; Baser 2017; Kose 2017; Jongerden 2017), but the unprecedented popularity of the HDP had unnerved the AKP and Erdoğan. HDP support had begun to dramatically undermine the government's Kurdish electoral base and they were concerned (rightly as demonstrated by the June 2015 election) that it would deprive the AKP of the absolute parliamentary majority required to change the constitution and implement a Presidential model of governance.

This report rather takes a step back from recent political developments, to contextualise and historicise the relationship of the parliamentary and insurgent elements of the Kurdish movement; and explain the importance of the immense and multi-layered grassroots movement, which oscillates between them. To begin, the term 'Kurdish movement' is a political rather than an analytical one and has been confusingly used to refer to different actors and social realities. A singular 'Kurdish movement' was used to

describe the multiple, often violently feuding, Kurdish groups in the 1970s (Çalışlar 2013). It has, at times, been used simply as a synonym for the PKK, while others use it as an umbrella term embracing both legal and non-violent elements and the armed wing (Casier/Jongerden/Walker 2011).³ Therefore, who belongs to it, and of what exactly the Kurdish movement consists, is unclear. This report argues that there are three core elements of the movement – an armed group, a parliamentary party, and a multi-layered amorphous social movement. The PKK's armed forces are governed by a militaristic, hierarchical order headed by a few key figures dating back to PKK's establishment in the 1970s. The political parties are obliged to operate within the confines of Turkish electoral institutions, while the array of grassroots initiatives aspire to implement participatory and horizontal practises at the local level. This is further complicated by the presence of the PKK's imprisoned charismatic leader Abdullah Öcalan, whose domineering presence looms over the whole edifice. Some structural and ideological clarity has been afforded to this entangled complex with the formation of the KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan/ Kurdistan Communities Union*) in 2005 and the DTK (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi/ Democratic Society Congress*) in 2007. The former is banned while the latter, although suffering from state repression, remains legal. The PKK and its variety of armed units are present in the KCK along with masses of political and cultural associations uninvolved in armed struggle. The DTK is dominated by the HDP and the DBP, along with many local associations that have some degree of interpersonal informal overlap with analogous initiatives in the KCK. For the purposes of this report, I consider the Kurdish movement as composed of all the actors and initiatives included in the DTK and KCK and its broader milieu of sympathisers. My definition, necessarily excludes other movements which make also demands on a collective Kurdish basis, such as the Islamist Hizbullah⁴ (Gurbuz 2016; Kurt 2017) or the socialist HAK-PAR (Rights and Freedoms Party)⁵. Elements of the movement, particularly in the KCK, are also present in the Kurdish diaspora and operate in most Kurdish-inhabited areas, most notably in Northern Syria; however, these will not be addressed in this report.

This reports draws predominantly on primary movement sources regarding contemporary developments, including the writings of Öcalan, publications of the Kurdish parties and the DTK. Additionally, it draws on some material gathered in interviews conducted for the author's PhD, which although it focused on an earlier phase of PKK mobilisation did provide material of relevance for this report (O'Connor 2014). The report embeds this data in the extensive secondary literature on the Kurdish conflict.

- 3 In summer 2015, a PKK founding member Cemil Bayık declared that “[t]he Kurdish movement is made up of three fundamental units: Our leader Öcalan, the PKK and the HDP” (Yucel 2015).
- 4 The movement has been spelled in a number of different ways, according to the transliteration of the Arabic ‘Party of God’. Although, it shares the name as the Hizbullah movement in Lebanon, they have no relationship and are completely separate organisations.
- 5 HAK-PAR is the contemporary successor to the PSK (Socialist Party of Kurdistan) which was headed by Kemal Burkay, one of the key leaders of Kurdish activism since the 1970s.

In the first section, it will provide a historical summary of the Kurds in Turkey. The report then outlines the PKK and the Kurdish parliamentary parties' origins and development. The second section will track how the relationship between the PKK and the parliamentary parties has evolved. The third part looks at Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism and how it has inspired a mass grassroots mobilisation and also generated a shared political space where the political parties and the PKK have ideologically converged.

2. The Kurds in Turkey

The Kurdish nation straddles four contemporary states: Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The Kurdish population in Turkey is the largest of the four, numbering between 12 and 15 million or 18–23% of Turkey's population (Gunter 2010). The area of Kurdistan within the Turkish state's boundaries is known as Northern Kurdistan or *Bakurê* by many Kurds, rejecting Turkey centric terms like the 'South East' or the East (Jongerden 2007: 30; Gündoğan 2011).

Figure 1: Map⁶



⁶ There is no consensus regarding boundaries of Kurdistan (O'Shea 1994) and it remains a topic of political contention (Akyol 2017). Decades of economic migration and internal displacement have resulted in huge numbers of Kurds living in western parts of Turkey. The area indicated as Kurdistan in the map roughly coincides with areas of a majority Kurdish population but naturally also includes areas inhabited by different ethnic and religious groups.

The majority of Kurds in Turkey are Sunni Muslims but a sizeable minority of Kurds are Alevi (Shankland 2003). Kurdistan has also a number of historic religious minorities such as Yazidis (Allison 2017), and a range of Christian denominations (Galletti 2003). However, the complex and often violent relationships between these communities has ensured that many members of these minorities prioritise their religious identity over Kurdish or Turkish national ones. Two main variants of Kurdish (Kurmanji and Zaza) are spoken in Turkey. They are Indo-Iranian languages and therefore completely unintelligible to Turkish speakers.

In the sixteenth century, the Kurds were divided between the Ottoman and Saffavid Empires (McDowall 2004: 26–29). Under Ottoman rule, tribally organised Kurds enjoyed almost complete political and cultural autonomy. It was only as the Empire began to crumble in the 19th and 20th centuries, in the face of the burgeoning nationalisms of its constituent elements that a politicised Kurdish identity began to emerge. After the Ottoman defeat in World War I, the victorious European powers further sundered the Kurds between the emergent states of Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The nascent Turkish state was constructed as a Turkish ethno-national state and sought to homogenise its ethnically and religiously diverse population (Özcan 2006: 86). The first two decades of the Turkish Republic resulted in a series of 19 tribally led Kurdish uprisings (Kiliç 1998: 97), all of which were crushed with immense loss of life by the Turkish army (see Jwaideh 2006; Watts 2000; Özoğlu 2009; McDowall 2004). This violent repression was reinforced by a targeted campaign to eradicate Kurdish culture and language (Zeydanlioglu 2013). After the tumult of years of rebellion, the 1940s and 1950s were decades of relative political calm. The Kurdish question re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s; however, this time it was pioneered by young educated Kurds rather than tribal Kurdish elites. They were inspired by successful anti-colonial struggles and the 1970s witnessed the emergence of a plethora of Kurdish movements and groups committed to armed struggle to obtain independence for Kurdistan, the most enduring of which was the PKK (see Gündoğan 2011; Gunes 2012; H. Bozarslan 2012; Jongerden/Akkaya 2011).

3. The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)

The PKK was officially founded in 1978 with the goal of obtaining a unified socialist independent state of Kurdistan, including the Kurdish territories in Iraq, Iran and Syria (Jongerden/Akkaya 2011). Although, it suffered significant personnel losses following the 1980 coup, it re-emerged to launch a guerrilla insurgency in the mountainous areas of Kurdistan in 1984 (Marcus 2007: 52–89). In the wake of the mass brutality of the coup period, the launching of the rebellion offered renewed hope to many Kurds. In the absence of any other Kurdish movement or political party, the PKK was perceived as the sole means to resist or avenge oneself against the Turkish state. A PKK sympathiser from Mardin described the emergence of armed opposition to the state as comparable to “the rising of the sun”⁷. By 1986, the PKK’s structure had evolved beyond a core nucleus of armed guerrillas, reconfigured in the ARGK (*Arteshen Rizgariya Gelli Kurdistan/People’s Liberation Army of Kurdistan*), to also encompass the ERNK (*Eniye Rizgariye Navata Kurdistan/National Liberation Front of Kurdistan*). The ERNK was charged with “organising the peasantry, the youth, the women’s section, the tradesmen, the workers, the people who are abroad, even the old people, the mosques, and developing organisations that take the characteristics of different national and religious denominations as their basis” (Gunes 2012: 129). It grew to become the umbrella front for the range of PKK sub-organisations that emerged after 1987 (Gunes 2012: 110; Özcan 2006: 199). It was through the ERNK that the PKK became a mass movement and how it consolidated a huge supportive constituency which financed the armed campaign, provided it with recruits and furnished it with political legitimacy. In addition to the movement restructuring decided at the PKK’s 1986 Congress, it was also the occasion that Öcalan “gained special status” within the movement and he was thereafter referred to as “the party Leadership (*Önderlik*)” (Jongerden/Akkaya 2011: 137).

The PKK’s armed peak came in the early 1990s when it numbered somewhere between 15,000 to 20,000 guerrillas. It controlled large swathes of the countryside and Turkish security forces were confined to the towns and heavily fortified garrisons (Jongerden 2007: 66). By 1993, it was a feasible possibility that the PKK would actually succeed in its goal of militarily obtaining a Kurdish homeland in Turkey. However, in response, the Turkish military completely reassessed its priorities and underwent a massive restructuring (Özdağ 2003: 52). It adopted the Field Domination Doctrine which pursued the guerrilla units deep into the mountains and transferred huge numbers of soldiers to the Kurdish region to partake in sweeps of PKK dominated territory (Jongerden 2007: 68; Özdağ 2003: 53–56). It combined these military efforts with mass displacement of the local rural Kurdish population in order to deprive the PKK of its local support networks. The precise figures of the forcibly displaced remain unknown with figures ranging from a

7 Personal Interview, 13 September 2012, Mardin.

state acknowledged 350,000 to a Human Rights Watch estimate of 2 million (HRW 1994; Jongerden 2007: 43). The state's counter-insurgency had a number of significant consequences. Firstly, it marginalised the PKK's armed threat and eradicated any hopes of a military victory. Secondly, it dispersed millions from the Kurdish countryside, resulting in the huge expansion of Kurdish cities like Diyarbakır and Mardin (Kocher 2002: 99; Tezcur 2015: 76) and the expansion of an internal Kurdish diaspora in western Turkey's cities (O'Connor 2015). However, support for the PKK did not decline and instead of being confined – for the most part – to the Kurdish region it was dispersed across the countryside, becoming a state-wide rather than regional phenomenon. Many of the displaced Kurds had been sympathetic to the PKK in their places of origin and with the additional grievances of violent displacement and ruthless counter-insurgency, many resumed supportive activities for the PKK in Turkey's western cities.

Prior to the shifting of power in favour of the Turkish military, the PKK undertook a unilateral ceasefire in 1993, in response to the first 'Kurdish opening' of Turgut Özal. The ceasefire was eventually ruptured by grassroots PKK units, contrary to the express wishes of Öcalan (Özcan 2006: 189). Subsequently, from a position of weakness, the PKK's ceasefires of 1995 and 1998 went without response from the Turkish state (van Bruinessen 1999). In February 1999, Abdullah Öcalan was captured by Turkish secret services in Kenya and has been since imprisoned on the island of İmralı in the Marmara Sea. After the upsurge in violence that followed his arrest, the PKK re-launched a ceasefire which held until 2004. Immediately after his capture, Öcalan declared that he was opposed to the armed struggle and argued for what he termed a Democratic Republic, and vowed "to work, in the service of the state, for peace and fraternity" (Yegen 2016: 377). This period was one of immense tumult and disorientation for the PKK. There were several splinters from the group, one led by Öcalan's brother Osman (White 2015: 151), and a significant number of guerrillas (particularly the women's units) de-mobilised. The PKK changed its avowed objectives at its 2000 Extraordinary Congress from national liberation to the installation of a democratic republic in Turkey (thus formally discarding the dream of a unified independent state). In 2002, it changed its name to KADEK (*Kongreya Azadiya Demokrasiya Kurdistan/The Congress of Freedom and Democracy in Kurdistan*) (Yegen 2016: 377). It changed name again from KADEK to Kongra-Gel in 2003 before returning to the name PKK in 2005 (see Akkaya/Jongerden 2011). In 2004, following pressure from the remaining rank and file guerrillas, the PKK ended the ceasefire, but the recommenced hostilities were at a much lower intensity than those of the 1990s. Notwithstanding the return to arms, the post-2004 violence marks a break with the armed campaign of the previous decades. The PKK now argues that its violence is defensive in nature and in support of the broader mobilisation of the Kurdish movement rather than the vehicle which would propel the Kurds to victory.

4. Kurdish Parliamentary Parties

Since the first Kurdish parliamentary party HEP (*Halkın Emek Partisi*/People's Labour Party) was founded in 1990, there have been eight subsequent parties, with the most recent incarnations being the HDP at a Turkey-wide level and the DBP in Kurdistan. Most of the previous parties were banned by the Constitutional Court on variations of the pretext that they violated the Constitution and the Political Parties Law in Turkey, undermined national unity and territorial integrity, and because of alleged support for the PKK (Celep 2014: 385). The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has judged that in all instances the rulings were in violation of Article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights (Smith 2011: 271). Watts claims that "although, it would be a mistake to say the parties were identical to one another, for the most part the pro-Kurdish parties did not split or substantially revise their agendas and they exhibited many of the same characteristics established by HEP" (2010: 69). However, the HDP's origins are in a 2014 merging of the of the preceding Kurdish party, the BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*/Peace and Democracy Party) and a number of small leftist parties, trade unions and movements gathered in the HDK (*Halkların Demokratik Kongresi*/Societies' Democratic Congress). Indeed, its co-chairperson Figen Yüksekdağ's political career had been in the ESP (*Ezilenlerin Sosyalist Partisi*/ Socialist Party of the Oppressed), one of the components of the HDK. It has thus, in line with the ideology of Democratic Confederalism (discussed in more detail in subsequent sections), been a Kurdish led rather than simply pro-Kurdish party, encompassing a plurality of identities, ranging from religious minorities to feminists and LGBTQ members and emphasising horizontalism, environmentalism and leftist objectives and practises (Tekdemir 2016: 657). An analysis of the content of election speeches of independent BDP candidates in 2011 and HDP candidates in 2015 showed a marked difference between the orientations of the two parties. Although the BDP certainly emphasised the plurality of identities inherent in its political vision, it remained a profoundly Kurd-centric party focusing on the necessity of Kurdish self-determination and autonomy (Grigoriadis/Dilek 2018: 296). In contrast, the HDP concentrated on a Turkey-wide agenda, and sought to address broader grievances beyond Kurdish concerns and promoted inclusivity and human rights (ibid: 298). It has been argued that the HDP functioned as a platform to channel the political energies generated during the 2013 Gezi uprising (Göksel/Tekdemir 2017), although that is not an interpretation that has been universally accepted (Grigoriadis 2016). The HDP's categorisation of itself as a "party of Turkey" rather than just a Kurdish one (Grigoriadis/Dilek 2018: 299), thus marked a qualitatively greater leap between it and the BDP than previous transitions between parties. This section will briefly outline three key features of these Kurdish parties: their origins, experiences of state repression and their electoral fortunes.

4.1 Party Origins

Firstly, the HEP emerged from within the Turkish parliamentary system. The HEP emerged from within the SHP (*Sosyaldemokrat Halk Partisi*/Social Democratic Populist Party), which was the continuation of the Kemalist parliamentary tradition and it was the second biggest party in parliament after the 1987 election. It included several Kurdish parliamentary representatives and was more open than other parties to countenance the specificities of the Kurdish question. Yet, after a number of its Kurdish deputies attended an international Kurdish conference in Paris in 1989, the party expelled them. In protest at the expulsion, 19 deputies resigned from the party and eleven of them went on to establish HEP (Watts 2010: 62). Accordingly, the party's origins are not comparable to Sinn Féin and the PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army), Unión Patriótica and FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army) or Herri Batasuna and ETA (Basque Homeland and Liberty; see Barkey 1998: 131). The party did not start out as a Kurdish party and many of its founding members were Turkish but it quickly began to emphasise Kurdish issues over leftist concerns and many Turkish members drifted away from the party (Watts 2010: 63–65). Importantly, none of the founding members of HEP “were known to be close to the PKK” (Watts 2010: 64). Indeed, notwithstanding the splinter, there were efforts to re-integrate the HEP and the SHP and they agreed to run on a joint ticket for the 1991 election. The SHP president Erdal İnönü went so far as to argue that it was to be the first step to the full reintegration of the HEP members to the party. The election was relatively successful for HEP and they returned 22 deputies to the parliament, more than a quarter of the SHP's total (Watts 2010: 66). However, the controversy surrounding the swearing-in ceremony of some of the HEP deputies, notably Hatip Dicle and Leyla Zana, prised open the cleavage between the Turkish centre-left and the Kurdish party. Dicle asserted that he was taking the oath under duress and Zana⁸ wore a red-yellow-green hair tie and added a phrase in Kurdish endorsing the brotherhood of the Kurdish and Turkish peoples (Watts 2010: 134). When their parliamentary immunity was subsequently revoked, both were condemned to jail sentences in 1994 for alleged membership of the PKK.

4.2 State Repression of Parliamentary Parties

Although, parties of differing ideological orientation have been banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court (e.g., the Refah party), Kurdish ones have been disproportionately proscribed (Celep 2014: 386). The 1993 ruling banning the HEP declared that its “agitative and separatist acts are trying to create a feeling of minority within some citizens. Attempts to give up the union-creating and unitary foundation of the Turkish Republic cannot be

8 Zana was recognised a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International in 1994 and was the recipient of Sakharov prize in 1995.

seen as a necessity of democracy or of the contemporary age” (Kogacioglu 2003: 259). The repeated banning of parties “not only prevented the party from participating in the political system, it also granted the state the right to appropriate the party’s material assets and strip any of the party’s parliamentary members from their positions” (Watts 2010: 98). The state imprisoned many of its key figures and proscribed many more from engaging in electoral politics thus depriving the parties of the experienced personnel required to maintain and run a party. However, repression was not limited to juridical impediments but also included an outright campaign of violence conducted by shadowy pro-state paramilitary units. By 1996, the parties had already endured the murder of 92 of their members (H. Bozarslan 1996: 17). Targets ranged from local level party affiliates to national deputies such as Mehmet Sincar, the Democracy Party (DEP) deputy for the city of Batman assassinated in 1993 (van Bruinessen 1996; Gunes 2012: 111; Pope 1992). Although, the rate of extra-judicial killings declined after the 1990s, strong repression of party members has continued. The former mayor Abdullah Demirbaş of Sur⁹ (the historic centre of Diyarbakır) has been repeatedly arrested and jailed over his use of languages other than Turkish in the daily business of the municipality (Toumani 2008; see Watts 2010: 114–18). The current co-mayors of Diyarbakır, Gültan Kışanak and Fırat Anlı are in prison since November 2016 facing a raft of charges which carry 230 and 121 year prison sentences respectively (HRW 2017). Reflecting the importance of the surreptitious repressive capacities of the state, the HDP’s June 2015 election campaign was beset by systematic violent targeting, which at least in certain local iterations, was actively orchestrated by the AKP (O’Connor/Baser, forthcoming). Although formally, the Kurdish parties have the same participatory rights as other parties in Turkey, it is clear that the institutional openings are gravely restricted and that engagement in legal political activities has proven oftentimes as dangerous as taking up arms and confronting the state directly.

4.3 Electoral Performance

The final feature of the Kurdish parties has been their arguably poor electoral performance since the 1991 election. The first impediment to electoral access has been the presence of a very high electoral threshold of 10 per cent (Grigoriadis 2016: 40). The votes of parties which do not reach the threshold are then re-distributed to the next biggest party, resulting in a seat bonus for the Kurdish parties biggest rivals, which since the mid-1990s has been the AKP and its predecessors (O’Connor/Baser, forthcoming). The successive parties’ fortunes have, until recently, been inconsistent and apart from the elections of 2015, they have only been able to serve in parliament as independent

9 It is a very poor area and last winter it suffered massive destruction in the clashes between the security forces and the YDG-H (Tevgera Ciwanan Welatparêz Yên Şoreşge/Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement). A large percentage of its population has been displaced as much of the centre has been completely levelled and thus is uninhabitable.

candidates¹⁰ rather than as a unitary party. In the 1995 election, HADEP (People's Democracy Party) only obtained 4.3% of the vote and DEHAP (Democratic People's Party) 6.2% in 2002, DTP (Democratic Society Party) slipped to only 3.8% in 2007 and the BDP rose to 5.8% in 2011 (Yegen 2011). The party has carved out regional strongholds in Kurdistan where it dominates, but it has been observed that the parties have failed to win the votes of Kurds living in western Turkey (Watts 2010; Barkey 1998). The immense logistical difficulties inherent in operating a truly national, in the sense of Turkey-wide, campaign should not be underestimated. The impact of the convoluted procedures for transferring one's vote (especially in the case of forced migrants) (Tezcur 2015: 78), the fear many migrants have of publicly expressing their support for the party (Wedel 2001: 64), the logistical difficulties of fielding independent candidates (Yegen 2011: 2), the deeply embedded nature of patronage bloc voting in marginal migrant neighbourhoods (Grabolle-Çeliker 2012: 117), would test the capacities of any party, especially parties whose experienced and best known candidates are constitutionally barred from participation. Although, the votes of the Kurdish parties do not correlate to the percentage of Kurds in Turkey, in light of the political conditions and restrictions, their performances up until 2014, though inconsistent, can be viewed as relatively successful.

5. The Relationship between PKK and Kurdish Political Parties

The relationship between the PKK and the parliamentary parties has been characterised by periods of closer co-operation, tensions at specific junctures and a reconfigured balance of power with the decline of the insurgency since the late 1990s. The PKK never opposed the presence of an institutional Kurdish party in the Turkish general assembly, this contrasts with Sinn Féin's policy of abstention in Westminster or Herri Batasuna's position on the Spanish parliament (Tezcur 2015: 77; see Irvin 1999). In 1990, the PKK was in a phase of expansion and did not feel that its hegemonic position in Kurdish politics would have been threatened by any emergent institutional party actor. By the time the PKK had become militarily marginalised in the late 1990s, it had realised the advantages of a non-antagonistic relationship with the parties. Conversely, the parties have never disavowed the PKK and their infrequent criticisms of insurgent violence have always been couched in very cautious terms. As Aysel Tuğluk, a former head of the DTP explained, "if you force the DTP to condemn the PKK, you deny us the possibility to take initiative in a way that could turn out to be effective" (Toumani 2008).

Although Nicole Watts' book (2010) is certainly the most authoritative account on Kurdish parliamentary politics, this author differs from her depiction of the parties'

10 The have stood independent candidates as a means of circumventing the threshold.

relationships with the PKK as characterised by outright coercion. In chapter four of her book, she posits that that the DEP was coerced from one side by the state and the other by the PKK, arguing that the PKK forced the DEP to boycott the 1994 municipal elections. In mid-1993, the DEP had expressed its intention to participate in the following year's election but had not begun to make active preparations. However, mid-1993 was a watershed in the conflict marked by the launching of the state's massive counter-insurgency and DEP decisions taken prior to then, were designed for a very different political context. Watts herself details the unprecedented violence directed against the DEP in January and February 1994 (2010: 107–8). The PKK called for a boycott of the elections and threatened violence against parties which participated but the correlation of the DEP's boycott with the PKK demand does not necessarily mean causation. I argue that given the profound imbrication between the two, particularly at emotional and interpersonal levels, their shared targeting by the state and the impossibility of a fair election under such conditions, rendered the decision to boycott more nuanced than Watts' depiction of it. In retrospect, the boycott was arguably an error as it allowed the Refah party (forerunner to the AKP) to gain an electoral foothold in the region and deprived the Kurdish movement of the resources inherent in municipal governance (Watts 2010: 109). It should also be acknowledged that although, there is no evidence (at least to the author's knowledge) of the PKK violently targeting members of the Kurdish parliamentary party, it has in the past used violence against other Kurdish movements, particularly in the 1970s (H. Bozarslan 2012: 8) but also against other revolutionary groups in Dersim (Tunceli) in the 1990s (Masullo/O'Connor 2017).

The election of Hatip Dicle as DEP party chair marked a switch to greater sympathy with the PKK (Watts 2010: 69; Güney/Başkan 2008: 273). HADEP which succeeded DEP, made a distinct effort to re-define its objectives in a more moderate fashion. However, the intensification of the counter-insurgency and targeted repression of the Kurdish parties undoubtedly radicalised their positions. HADEP leader Murat Bozlak rejected the assertion that the party was "the political arm of the PKK. It is not true [...] HADEP is not a separatist party. Neither is it an ordinary nationalist party. Ours is a leftist mass party. We have never perceived ourselves as a Kurdish Party" (Güney/Başkan 2008: 274).

Notwithstanding efforts made to distance the parliamentary parties from the PKK, it would be very naïve to accept that the PKK did not influence the parties' decisions at times. There are some instances of the PKK interfering in candidate selection processes. While choosing DEHAP candidates for the 1999 elections (national and municipal) in the Adiyaman region, the party wanted to put a locally popular former Kawa¹¹ militant Mehmet Polat forward in the municipal elections where he would have been almost certainly elected. However, the PKK demanded that he stand for the national elections, in which it was extremely improbable that he would have been elected given the weakness of DEHAP in the electoral district. A local source explained that the PKK's forsaking of an almost certain

11 Kawa was a prominent Maoist Kurdish movement in the 1970s.

municipal seat for a wasted effort at a national one was due to its distrust of Polat's background in Kawa.¹² For the 2014 municipal elections, Öcalan overrode party selection protocol and suggested that it run a female Syriac candidate, in Mardin (Güsten 2014).¹³ Although this was an effort to enhance Kurdish minorities' political representation, it confirms that the PKK or at least its leader can influence the party. Yet, contestation of candidate selection does not always necessarily result in the PKK's choice being preferred. Notably, DEHAP wanted to put forward Osman Baydemir for mayor of Diyarbakır in 2004 over the PKK's choice, outgoing mayor Feridun Çelik, nonetheless, Baydemir was chosen and subsequently has become a key figure in the Kurdish movement (Watts 2010: 88).

While the relationship between the two poles of the Kurdish movement has remained cohesive overall, that is not to suggest that it has not endured periods of contention (see Coşkun 2015: 4). In August 2015, after the Suruç bombing, in an interview with the *Financial Times*, HDP co-chair Demirtaş called "on the PKK to stop fighting against Turkey. I repeat this call every day. The two sides should take their fingers off the trigger and the weapons should be silenced" (Scott 2015). In the same period, in another interview with the Turkish edition of *Deutsche Welle*, he declared that "[w]e [the HDP] always express it quite clearly. We have never approved, encouraged or supported any armed attack" (Daily Sabah 2015). These comments came about as a semi-autonomous youth group in the PKK, the YDG-H¹⁴ had occupied a number of city centres in Kurdistan and the PKK had recently abandoned its ceasefire (Tekdemir 2016: 658). It was therefore a critical juncture when it seemed that the more violent tendencies within the Kurdish movement were reasserting themselves. In response, senior PKK commander Duran Kalkan targeted Demirtaş in an interview, questioning: "Who is he, what has he accomplished?" (Ibrahim 2015). Although these comments do reflect opposing views, they must be contextualised during a phase when the balance of power within the Kurdish movement seemed as if it had begun to shift away from the armed movement. In June after the HDP's unanticipated electoral success, the KCK released a statement declaring that "[w]e must openly declare that the question of the PKK giving up its armed struggle against Turkey and the decision to do so is exclusively up to us. Everyone must understand that the HDP is not a legal party of the PKK. Therefore, neither the HDP nor Abdullah Öcalan, with his conditions in İmralı, can make such a call" (Gurcan 2015). In 2014, another senior PKK figure, Cemil Bayık hinted at an unprecedented division of labour within the movement when he declared:

"We decide on war. The authority to end the cease-fire lies with us. But our leader Apo [as Öcalan is often called by his followers] decides on peace, on the continuation of the peace process. His role is different from ours. We are complementary." (Zaman 2014)

12 Personal Interview, 19 September 2012, Istanbul.

13 Februniye Akyol was successfully elected.

14 During the YDG-H's urban uprising in 2015, it was more closely incorporated into the PKK ranks, and renamed the YPS (*Yekîneyên Parastîna Sivîl*/Civil Protection Units).

Accordingly, tensions do exist within the movement, but they are rather more diffuse than simply the armed movement versus the political party cleavage. They encompass the reaction of veteran military commanders in the Kandil Mountains in Iraq to the emergence of other nuclei of armed struggle in Rojava/Northern Syria, differences between more Kurdish-focused and more leftist factions, openness to collaboration with the Turkish left and disputes over which forms of violence are tolerable and which are not.

It has been established that the Kurdish parties and the PKK are not structurally integrated. Yet, there has always been a form of relationship between them. Primarily this is because they both draw on the same reservoir of supporters and reference the same symbolic universe (Barkey 1998: 136). However, an instrumentalist understanding of their interactions fails to explain the emotional depth of the relationship. Many members of the parties have siblings and children in the mountains fighting with the guerrillas. Sırrı Sakık a founding DEP member and elected mayor of Ağrı is the brother of the PKK commander Şemdin Sakık. Selahattin Demirtaş' brother Nurettin, a long term political prisoner joined the guerrillas after serving a prison sentence. Abdullah Demirbaş explained that his son went to the mountains after he had been personally imprisoned.¹⁵ These direct familial ties exist at the higher levels of Kurdish politics but are dwarfed by the tens of thousands of direct bonds between insurgents and their families at the grassroots levels. These emotional bonds are particularly pronounced in the case of political prisoners and guerrillas who have been killed in the struggle. Accordingly, when one is trying to assess the balance of power between the Kurdish parties and the PKK, one must consider the micro-level articulation of this relationship which links politician brothers and guerrilla sisters. These ties result in a sense of mutual obligation between the electoral and insurgent wings, wherein both sides understand that to deliberately undermine one or the other, aside from potentially negative strategic consequences, would be to potentially rupture families and desecrate the joint sacrifices of both approaches.

A final element of the insurgent-political party relationship is that the PKK quickly realised the utility of thickening the Kurdish struggle, and the party understood that the ambiguity of its relationship with the PKK maintained its credibility in the eyes of more radical Kurds. The party drew in the support of the middle classes which had been hesitant to engage with the clandestine struggle. An ERNK commander in Istanbul declared that after a certain period of mobilisation in pro-PKK activism, that if one avoided prison, one inevitably had to choose between clandestinity either in the mountains as a guerrilla or as a full time ERNK cadre, or embracing the legal political parties.¹⁶ Indeed, activists often spent time in the legal parties before going to the mountains or embraced party activities after periods in the armed movement or after release from prison. However, the passage from a career as a PKK militant in the guerrilla ranks or engaged in clandestine activism to involvement in institutional party politics is

15 Personal Communication, 12 April 2012, Istanbul.

16 Personal Interview, 30 March 2012, Istanbul.

marked by a decisive break. For PKK cadres, their insurgent career is an all-encompassing full-time commitment (e.g., they are not permitted to marry or have partners) and excludes any possibility of combining contemporary activism in both. The presence of distinct phases in individual insurgent/ clandestine militant careers is common across all armed movements. Guerrillas do not necessarily spend all of their political lives involved in armed struggle; many move on to parliamentary style politics or community organisation (Bosi 2016; Söderström 2016).

The social milieu around party branches also served as open settings in which individuals could potentially forge connections with more radical actors. A PKK sympathiser from Adıyaman whose efforts to join the PKK with some school friends were scuppered by a military attack, was relocated to Istanbul by his family to distance him from the lure of the PKK. As a young migrant, in Istanbul he had no political contact with the PKK, but he began to frequent the HADEP office in the neighbourhood of Gaziosmanpaşa and through people he met there, he made contact with PKK members again.¹⁷ The legal parties also provided access to a range of material and symbolic resources which would have been unavailable to Kurdish insurgents. The high-profile presence of Kurdish politicians also raised the profile of the Kurdish struggle abroad and helped to forge alliances of solidarity with international civil society (Watts 2010). Although these resources were not necessarily channelled to the armed wing of the Kurdish movement, they certainly reinforced the broader political struggle.

17 Personal Interview, 30 October 2013, Istanbul.

6. Ideological Transition

Notwithstanding their distinct roots, the last decade has seen greater ideological convergence between the PKK and the political parties; both have adopted the tenets of Abdullah Öcalan's philosophy. Öcalan had already begun to move away from the objective of an independent united Kurdistan by 1993, when he tentatively put forward compromise proposals in favour of autonomy within Turkey. The PKK's objectives have not simply been reconfigured since Öcalan's imprisonment, albeit as late as 2000 he still made reference to obtaining a state (Akkaya/Jongerden 2011: 145). Öcalan used his trials as platforms to communicate an elaborate, all-encompassing system of societal organisation and self-governance. As a prisoner, Öcalan began to engage with a broad range of post-Marxist, autonomist and left-libertarian literature by writers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou and most importantly Murray Bookchin (see Jongerden 2015). Bookchin's ideas of Libertarian Municipalism and the embedding of a diffused, non-hierarchical system of councils became central to Öcalan's thinking. The PKK has explicitly renounced its demand for an independent state; Öcalan views the nature of the state as intrinsically exploitative, as a protector of capitalist interests, promoter of nationalism and oppressor of women (Öcalan 2011: 15–17). He distinguished between state based models of governance and Radical Democracy, observing that "states are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus" (Öcalan 2011: 21). In practise, his theory ignores the existence of states. He describes it as "an anti-Nationalist movement [...]. It aims at realizing the right of self-defence of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan *without* questioning the existing political borders" (Öcalan 2011: 34).

The project of Radical Democracy has three constituent pillars, firstly the transformation of Turkey into a truly Democratic Republic, where citizenship is divorced from nationality (Akkaya/Jongerden 2013: 187). It is secondly characterised by Democratic Autonomy which refers to the "right of people to determine their own economic, cultural and social affairs" (ibid). Thirdly, Democratic Confederalism "can be called a non-state political administration or a democracy without the state (Öcalan 2011: 21). Jongerden succinctly summed up the difference between the two: "[D]emocratic autonomy concerns the ability and capacity to have (or regain) control over political, economic and cultural institutions, while Democratic Confederalism refers to the ability to decide and administer" (2015: 3). Structurally Democratic Confederalism is built

"[...] on the self-government of the local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. [...] It can even be continued across borders in order to create multinational democratic structures" (Öcalan 2008: 32).

Its first fundamental layer is composed of interrelated councils at the neighbourhood, village, town and district levels. There are then the organisations of social sectors like women and youth initiatives along with those of cultural and religious minorities and finally civil society organisations in a broader sense (Akkaya/Jongerden 2012: 6).

6.1 Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)

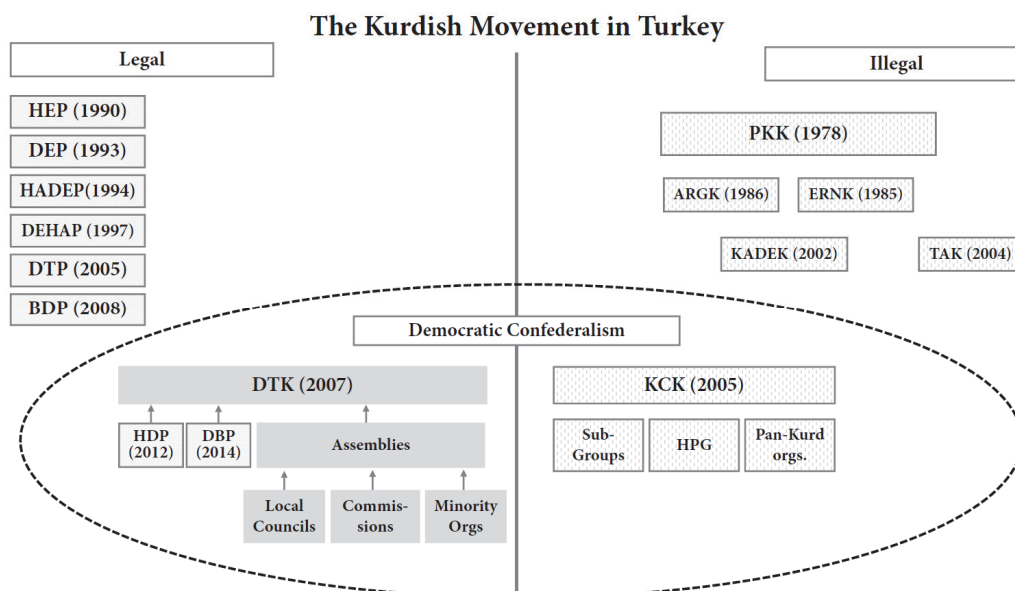
As a consequence of this radical ideological transformation, the PKK also necessitated a complete reconstruction, marking a move away from the traditional Leninist armed vanguard model to a more horizontal model in which the guerrilla forces in theory, merely serve to protect the broader movement rather than to lead it. In 2005, after six years of organisational chaos, the PKK was submerged into the KCK.¹⁸ The KCK is a vast multi-layered complex:¹⁹

“[...] involved in the establishment of local councils (at village, quarter, and city level), ‘people’s courts,’ a committee for civil society organizations that implements projects to activate civil society, and a language and education committee responsible for implementing projects to develop the usage of Kurdish as a written language” (Casier/Jongerden/Walker 2011: 114).

Most importantly, the KCK is tasked with implementing Democratic Confederalism and is not just as a logistic auxiliary to the guerrilla struggle (Casier/Jongerden/Walker 2011: 114). Its establishment in 2005 marks the decisive juncture, when the PKK’s political struggle superseded the armed struggle. Notwithstanding its avowedly anti-nationalist character, its 2010 charter is centred on Kurds: “All Kurds will come together for establishing their own federation and unite for confederation in case of the emergence of a Kurdish structure in Turkey, Iran, and Syria and even in Iraq” (Kekevi 2015: 114). The KCK is the structural nexus which binds the Kurdish movement beyond Turkey’s borders. It expounds a strongly democratic and participatory ethos but remains headed by the Party Leadership (Öcalan), which is “beyond control of the party institutions” (Akkaya/Jongerden 2011: 150). Additionally, although the guerrilla forces are but one component of the broader whole (see Figure 2), senior PKK commanders have a hugely disproportionate hold over its senior positions, beneath Öcalan. The KCK’s current co-chairpersons are noted guerrilla commanders Cemil Bayık and Bese Hozat, while other seasoned guerrilla commanders such as Duran Kalkan and Murat Karayılan are on its Executive Committee. Although, at an ideational level, the military elements of the KCK are situated on the same plane as the non-violent initiatives, in light of the short-term chronological imperatives of the armed struggle in comparison to more incremental civil society mobilisation, it seems improbable that the prerogatives of the armed struggle do not predominate.

18 Confusingly, it was initially named the KKK (*Koma Komalan Kurdistan/The Council of Associations in Kurdistan*), before changing to become the KCK.

19 See Kerkevi (2015) for a detailed diagram of its structure and component elements.

Figure 2: Contemporary Kurdish Movement in Turkey²⁰

7. Grassroots Mobilisation

Importantly, the illegal KCK does *not* include the legal Kurdish parliamentary parties. The legal elements of the Kurdish movement uninvolved in armed struggle are located in another umbrella organisation, the DTK which was founded in 2007 by the parliamentary party of the time.²¹ It is “not simply another organisation, but part of the attempt to forge a new political paradigm, defined by the direct and continual exercise of the people’s power through village, town, and city councils” (Akkaya/Jongerden 2013: 193). In 2011, the DTK formally pledged its support to implementing the structures and practises of Democratic Autonomy (DTK 2011). It reinforced its commitment to Democratic Autonomy in December 2015, at the peak of the urban clashes between the YDG-H youth militants and the Turkish security forces, when it released a “Declaration of Political Resolution regarding Self-Rule”. It stated: “We as DTK embrace the declarations of self-rule by people’s assemblies and this rightful and legitimate popular resistance in all areas. We

²⁰ This is a very simplified diagram and does not include the totality of all Kurdish movements and parties. Although, the left side of the figure is described as legal, it has also suffered extensive state repression.

²¹ The DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*/Democratic Society Party).

consider it essential that the Kurdish people and all peoples of Turkey join and support this resistance as part of the struggle for democracy and freedom” (HDP 2016). This declaration was also endorsed by the PKK and KCK (Biehl 2016). Accordingly, although the DTK is not linked vertically to the PKK, its council model overlaps with the existing councils of the KCK and it has expressed solidarity with elements of the movement like the YDG-H which have been involved in armed confrontation with security forces.

7.1 Democratic Society Congress (DTK)

The DTK organises biannual general assemblies, attended by 501 delegates, 301 elected by local councils in 43 districts (structures of Democratic Confederalism) and 200 delegates which have been elected by conventional municipal elections and from other civil society organisations, with a certain number of places reserved for religious and ethnic minorities (Egret/Anderson 2016: 43). It has, following the model of the local level councils, a forty per cent threshold for women. It organises an array of full time commissions working on areas such as Male-Female Equality; Youth and Ecology and Local Government, among others. It is led by a thirteen-person executive council headed by a male and female chair (Akkaya/ Jongerden 2013: 202). The DTK argue that its organisational model will “establish democratic life of the community and will allow participation, pluralism and direct democracy to exist alongside the state” (DTK 2011: 7). It is therefore not set up in opposition to the state and in theory it can and does co-exist and overlap with elements of the state structure. At its 2011 congress, the DTK announced the active implementation of Democratic Autonomy which it argued would bring about greater democracy as well as addressing the concrete needs of the area represented by the DTK (Hurriyet Daily News 2011; White 2015: 67). Its founding declaration announced:

“Democratic autonomy will not change the borders. It will reinforce the brotherhood of peoples and their unity within the borders, which will end conflicts; the Kurdish people and Turkey will reach a new contract and launch a new era in Turkish-Kurdish relations. Our model is a democratisation model that can be applied to all other parts of Turkey” (DTK 2011).

The DTK’s, and thereby also the DBP’s, adherence to the objective of Democratic Autonomy as idealised by Öcalan, marked the ideological convergence of the PKK, the parliamentary Kurdish parties and the grassroots movements’ objectives. Therefore, the Kurdish movement can be viewed as united in terms of political vision, but not in the means by which to realise it.

At the city level, the structures and practises of the DTK actually governed many cities. This was possible because the DBP governed most Kurdish municipalities, thus facilitating the tangible realisation of Democratic Confederalism, and demonstrating the material benefits of the system to its many participants and supporters. Amed City

Council²² (the DTK one rather than the formal municipal Diyarbakır one), has thirteen districts each with its own council. The delegates of these councils meet with the formally elected councillors and mayors of Diyarbakır and jointly govern the city. Decisions are reached consensually when possible and then formally implemented by the official Diyarbakır municipality. As the former mayor of Sur Abdullah Demirbaş explained, “when we make a decision, officially it looks as if the municipal government made the decision, but in reality we [the DTK] made it jointly” (Tatort Kurdistan 2013: 54). Although, admittedly municipal powers are extremely restricted in Turkey, the state had been indirectly financing the Kurdish movement’s project of Democratic Confederalism. Through appropriating the resources of the state at the local level, the movement can actually realise concrete projects, collectively decided upon, thus exhibiting the actual benefits of the ideology.

Due to limited financial autonomy, the city councils invest much of their efforts in economically feasible projects. The Kadem women’s support centre in Diyarbakır has enjoyed the financial support of the municipality. It provides the women with raw materials and teaches them how to best market the traditional handicrafts they produce in order to allow them to earn some income independently of their husbands. It offers literacy classes and some childcare. The municipality’s women’s department pays the salaries of Kadem’s two full time employees, the rent of its building and materials for the classes. A further concrete example of a DTK initiative is the Bağlar²³ Women’s co-operative. It is a sewing workshop with around a dozen sewing machines. The women produce traditional clothing, thus their work also has a cultural component which they then sell, sharing the profits. As the head of the co-operative explained workers are mainly

“[...] women from the poorer social strata who work here. They’re mostly older. [...] They are mainly uneducated women who have worked at home. Many of them don’t know Turkish and so couldn’t get a job at a regular workplace” (Tatort Kurdistan 2013: 116).

These grassroots initiatives, also serve a political-educational function where gender norms are questioned and women’s rights are emphasised. As a member of the Dersim council explained,

“When we speak of Democratic Autonomy, we can’t wait till the laws have changed. We have to make that transformation ourselves, in practical deeds. So a problem may not be part of our jurisdiction, and we may not be paid for handling it, but every problem of the people is actually our problem” (Tatort Kurdistan 2013: 52).

However, it has not proved an easy task to explain such an ephemeral and complex concept to the general Kurdish public. As one organiser in Sur admitted, “let it not be said that that every woman on the street really understands what Democratic Autonomy [is]” (Tatort Kurdistan 2013: 131). The furnishing of tangible alternatives by an organ of Democratic

22 Amed is the Kurdish name for Diyarbakır, the DTK structures tend to use the Kurdish names in place of the Turkish ones.

23 A neighbourhood in Diyarbakır.

Confederalism, to women hitherto neglected or persecuted by the Turkish state, renders the abstract theories of the Kurdish movement's project comprehensible to them (Tatort Kurdistan 2013: 135–39). Democratic Confederalism, is therefore arguably the largest experiment in pre-figurative politics anywhere in the world today, with millions of Kurds engaging with it on a daily basis in Turkish Kurdistan as well as in Rojava (Dirik 2015; Gupta 2016; Taylor 2014).

When the Kurdish parliamentary parties embraced Democratic Confederalism under the auspices of the DTK, it had a reciprocally expansive impact on both the parties and the grassroots associations. The HDP and DBP grew massively in terms of electoral success, especially at the municipal level, and the councils and associations of the DTK mushroomed. Yet, there are unresolved tensions related to the different logics and imperatives of the various sectors of the Kurdish movement. This has occurred in a context of increasing state repression. At the micro-level this inhibits the consolidation of projects and the launching of new ones. The head of Bağlar's women co-operative surmised that "today sixty per cent of the women's movement are in prison, they have been arrested. So the institutions are woefully underpopulated" (Tatort Kurdistan 2013: 109). While at the level of representative politics, in September 2016 the Turkish government, utilising its Emergency Rule powers following the attempted coup in July, began to depose DBP mayors in Kurdish cities (Gursel 2016). It appointed trustee governors in their stead to run the municipalities instead of their elected representatives. A HDP response emphasised that this was a gross usurpation of democratic norms, highlighting that the deposed DBP mayors had received an average of 58.5% of the popular vote, with the lowest vote amounting to 39.08% and the highest 81.61% (HDP 2016). Aside from disregarding any semblance of representative democracy, it removes a key fulcrum of Democratic Confederalism. The appointed governors have shut down the cities' women's co-operatives and reversed many of the implemented reforms (HDP Europe 2017; HRW 2017; Gursel 2016). The vulnerability of Kurdish institutional politicians to repression has culminated in the mass arrests discussed in this report's introduction. This development just as the balance of power within the movement had swung decisively toward the non-violent part of the movement, deprives it of its leaders and experienced activists but further delegitimises the state and could contribute to a shift toward more violent forms of activism.

7.2 Inconsistencies in Democratic Confederalism

The inconsistencies within Democratic Confederalism itself have been subject to substantial self-interrogation by its supporters and proponents, and external observers. Öcalan's incontestable position as leader of a movement committed to horizontal forms of democracy is contradictory (Dirik 2015: 11; Leezenberg 2016: 4). Although Janet Biehl²⁴ has attempted to address this concern by framing it as a paradox, "a bottom-up system generated from the top down" (2015), it remains deeply problematic. Öcalan's dominance is reflected in the fact that the party's entire ideology is based on texts produced by Öcalan. His writings prior to 1999, known as *Önderlik çözümlmeleri* stretched to 144,000 pages (Özcan 2006: 399), while his later work has been produced in the form of documents for his trial defence. Accordingly, the ideology of the movement is entirely produced by a single imprisoned man in his sixties, who has only infrequent contact with the movement which he leads – he is frequently illegally denied access to his lawyers and denied visitors for protracted periods of time (ECHR 2014).

The HDP and DBP are bound to the electoral logic of Turkish politics. The PKK did not retaliate after ISIS bombed a HDP rally prior to the June 2015 elections, which undoubtedly helped consolidate the public view of the HDP as a party of peace. However, it did not prevent local units killing two Turkish policemen suspected of being ISIS sympathisers after a further ISIS attack on the Kurdish movement in Suruç later that summer. There is a fundamental tension between one element of the movement being engaged in armed conflict and its related political party putting itself forward as a peacemaker. A further issue is that although the DTK promotes Democratic Confederalism and its emancipatory logic, it has compromised on some of its core tenets to consolidate a wider Kurdish support base. In the lead-up to the 2015 election, the DTK convinced many conservative Kurdish tribes to collectively back the HDP, for example the Raman tribe near Batman boasting 20,000 votes, pledged support to the HDP, even though its leader Faris Özdemir had been a deputy for a right-wing party in the past (Taştekin 2015). Although the prevalence of block voting has diminished in Kurdistan in recent years, it remains a feature of electoral politics and played a role in the HDP's strong electoral showings of 2015. Furthermore, the HDP has put forward a number of conservative candidates such as former Diyarbakır mufti Nimetullah Erdoğan and Altan Tan (Taştekin 2015; Grigoriadis/Dilek 2018: 295–96). While in the short-term this proved electorally successful, in the longer term it could potentially undermine the central prefigurative premise of Democratic Confederalism. Finally, these inconsistencies are exacerbated by the fact that since the founding of the KCK and DTK, all their efforts with the exception of 2013–2015 took place in the midst of a low-intensity civil war.

24 Janet Biehl is the widow and long-time collaborator of Murray Bookchin. She is a prominent activist in the Kurdish movement.

8. Conclusion

The Kurdish parliamentary parties and the PKK do not have a structural relationship. The parties emerged from a splinter in the centre-left of Turkish politics, to the general disinterest of the PKK in 1990. As the counter-insurgency intensified during the 1990s, the armed movement and political parties evolved in parallel, with periods of greater or lesser complementarity. Since 2005, the PKK has reconfigured itself according to Öcalan's philosophy and argues that its armed units only serve to protect the grassroots councils and their initiatives, which they argue will lead to Kurdish emancipation but not to a separate Kurdish state. This complex of guerrilla units and non-violent activists is structured in the illegal KCK. The parliamentary parties on the other hand formed the DTK in 2007, which currently includes both the DBP and HDP and an array of local assemblies, co-operatives, academies and concrete projects oriented to materially improving Kurdish society. The DTK openly endorses and attempts to realise the objectives of Democratic Confederalism. In terms of structure the parliamentary parties and the armed units are entirely separate. Yet, they both aspire to implement the premises of Democratic Confederalism and there is an overlap of personnel between former and active KCK activists and participants in the DTK. Additionally, on the ground, given the practical and quotidian nature of many of the activities of the DTK and KCK, it is certain that there is an intermingling of both. Perhaps, more importantly, DTK and KCK sympathisers and activists co-exist in a dense mesh of emotional solidarity, generated by the shared experiences of struggle and the hardships of surviving in a severely economically underdeveloped region, which has been a warzone since the 1980s.

The relationship between the PKK and the HDP/DBP is of utmost importance. Not because the latter is simply a front for the former as the Turkish government suggests but because the presence of an emotional and political solidarity between the two is potentially key to the resolution of the conflict. Most protracted conflicts (e.g., in Northern Ireland or more recently in Colombia) have been resolved by convincing insurgents that their objectives are more likely realised through non-violent politics than through force of arms. The proximity but structural differentiation between the PKK and the HDP/DBP should be valued as a form of constructive ambiguity. The HDP's institutional presence can act as a conduit for informal communication and reciprocal trust building between the PKK and the state. Direct communications between insurgents and governments are inherently risky, rendering both vulnerable to accusations of 'selling out' or submitting to 'terrorists' from hardliners on their respective sides. This is where an interlocutor, trusted on both sides such as the HDP/DBP could prove crucial, especially in early phases of negotiation. The government could trust the HDP/DBP because of its demonstrated commitment to institutional politics and on the other hand, the PKK could trust it because of their shared political vision and collective experiences of the struggle. Indeed, this is exactly what occurred during the peace process until spring 2015.

However, the intensification of violence in recent years (ICG 2016), the imbrication of forces aligned to the PKK and the Turkish army in the Syrian civil war and the mass persecution of the non-violent, institutional wing of the Kurdish movement have almost

certainly undermined any possibility of reviving the peace process in the near future. This report has outlined the structurally distinct but the increasing ideological unity of the Kurdish movement. The politically engaged Kurdish masses are not open to any unilateral reconciliation on the terms of the Turkish state. Consequently, only two options remain for them; the continuation of the struggle akin to the lead-up to the 2015 elections, combining institutional politics with extra-parliamentary non-violent opposition to the state or to veer toward more militaristic minded figures in PKK. The Syrian civil war is dwindling to a bloody end, and notwithstanding the Turkish army's and their affiliates' ongoing invasion attempt of the Kurdish canton of Afrin, it seems that the Kurdish movement in Syria will likely emerge strengthened and with some form of territorial control. It is entirely unclear what impact this will have on their kinsmen and co-ideologues across the border in Turkey. The current strategy of the Turkish state toward the Kurdish movement seems particularly ill-advised. The HDP/DBP is the best hope of reviving the arduous process of negotiating a settlement which is reciprocally tolerable to both sides. Yet, the state seeks to undermine it by imprisoning its members and dismantling its local networks. If the Turkish government continues to prevent a return to non-violent political engagement and democratic practises, it will find itself confronted by a Kurdish movement in which the internal balance of power will have swung back to the PKK hardliners in its military headquarters in the Qandil Mountains and away from the HDP/DBP leaders languishing in Turkish prisons.

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Appendix I – Kurdish Parliamentary Political Parties 1990–2017²⁷

Party	Name	Founded	Banned
HEP	Halkın Emek Partisi/People's Labour Party	1990	14 July 1993
ÖZDEP	Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi/Freedom and Democracy Party	1992	30 April 1993
DEP	Demokrasi Partisi/Democracy Party	1993	16 June 1994
HADEP	Halkın Demokrasi Partisi/People's Democracy Party	1994	13 March 2003
DEHAP	Demokratik Halk Partisi/Democratic People's Party	1997	Merged with DTP in 2005
DTP	Demokratik Toplum Partisi/Democratic Society Party	2005	11 March 2009
BDP	Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi/Peace and Democracy Party	2008	Became DBP in 2014 and only campaigns in Kurdistan.
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi/Democratic Party of the Peoples	2012	Active
DBP	Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi/Democratic Regions Party	2014	Active

²⁷ The parties' chronologies overlap because they were often founded in anticipation of the banning of their predecessors.

Appendix II – Glossary of Movements and Parties

Acronym	Name in Original Language	Name in English
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi	Justice and Development Party
ARGK	Arteshen Rizgariya Gelli Kurdistan	People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan
BDP	Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi	Peace and Democracy Party
DBP	Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi	Democratic Regions Party
DEHAP	Demokratik Halk Partisi	Democratic People's Party
DEP	Demokrasi Partisi	Democracy Party
DTK	Demokratik Toplum Kongresi	Democratic Society Congress
DTP	Demokratik Toplum Partisi	Democratic Society Party
ERNK	Eniye Rizgariye Navata Kurdistan	National Liberation Front of Kurdistan
ESP	Ezilenlerin Sosyalist Partisi	Socialist Party of the Oppressed
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna	Basque Homeland and Liberty
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army
FETÖ	Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü	Fethullahist Terror Organisation
HADEP	Halkın Demokrasi Partisi	People's Democracy Party
HAK-PAR	Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi	Rights and Freedoms Party
HDK	Halkların Demokratik Kongresi	Societies' Democratic Congress
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi	Peoples' Democratic Party
HEP	Halkın Emek Partisi	People's Labour Party
HPG	Hêzên Parastina Gel	People's Defense Forces
KADEK	Kongreya Azadiya Demokrasiya Kurdistan	The Congress of Freedom and Democracy in Kurdistan
KCK	Koma Civakên Kurdistan	Kurdistan Communities Union
KKK	Koma Komalan Kurdistan	The Council of Associations in Kurdistan
PIRA	Óglaigh na hÉireann	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê	Kurdish Workers Party
PSK	Partiya Sosyalist a Kurdistan	Socialist Party of Kurdistan
TAK	Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan	Kurdish Freedom Hawks
SHP	Sosyaldemokrat Halk Partisi	Social Democratic Populist Party
YDG-H	Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareket	Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement
YPS	Yekineyên Parastina Sivil	Civil Protection Units