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Author(s): Özlem Galip

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance

Cengiz Gunes

London and New York, Routledge, 2012, 256 pp., \$136.00 / £85.00, Hardback

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REVIEWED BY ÖZLEM GALİP

Faculty Associate in Kurdish and Armenian Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford; email: ozlem.galip@orinst.ox.ac.uk

Turkey's long-simmering war with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) stretching back 30 years is often considered as one of the world's bloodiest conflicts, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of lives. The PKK, experiencing radical political transformations since its foundation in 1978, has managed to achieve considerable support from Kurds despite the on-going oppression and bans imposed by the Turkish state on those who support Kurdish rights. Why has the Kurdish national movement in Turkey turned to violence? Why do a large number of Kurds worldwide still support the PKK despite its being designated as a terrorist organisation by international bodies such as the EU and the UN? How does the PKK manage to mobilise Kurdish populations in Europe, Turkey and Greater Kurdistan? Why and how has the PKK alone survived out of tens of Kurdish leftist parties and political groups which have risen and fallen in Turkey since the 1970s?

Cengiz Gunes traces the answers for these questions by covering the two decades prior to the advent of PKK through his book. The book has eight chapters and offers an interpretive and critical analysis of Kurdish identity, Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish national movement in Turkey. It also contributes to our understanding of the activities of leftist, Islamist and nationalist opposition movements in Turkey during the 1960s and 1970s. The power of this book lies in its success in drawing from multiple and extensive primary sources including posters, music, TV broadcasts, political magazines, leaflets and newspapers produced by Kurdish political parties and activists since the 1960s.

By drawing on discourse theory and the discourse analysis framework developed in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Gunes offers a detailed historical account of two of the main discourses used by the Kurdish national movement. It is his original theoretical approach and methodology that distinguishes this book from other scholarly books on the Kurdish national movement in Turkey. In the first chapter of the book, Gunes compellingly challenges the arguments and methodology applied in the existing literature regarding Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, claiming that the inadequate attention given to the nature of Kurdish political identity, and the demands raised by the Kurdish national movement has resulted in a failure to understand Kurdish 'national liberation' and 'democratic' discourses (pp. 19-23). The author devotes the second chapter to a detailed and evocative analysis of the theoretical framework and methodology of his research in which he particularly elaborates on issues of political transformation, mass mobilisation and the concept of 'hegemony' developed by Antonio Gramsci.

The empirical material is critically analysed in the following six chapters of the book and the author uses a chronological order that is particularly useful for coherently explaining the process of change and transformation taking place within Kurdish politics and society in the past 50 years.

The constitution of 1961 resulted in the return of democratic politics in Turkey and contributed to the foundation of a left-wing opposition movement that the early Kurdish activists took an interest in. In order to explain the Kurds' participation in, and their eventual separation from, Turkey's left-wing movement, the author examines the ideological discussions, strategies and internal conflicts taking place during the 1960s. The separation of Kurdish activists from the Turkish left-wing movement began in the late 1960s and intensified during the 1970s. From then on, Kurdish activists began to establish their own socialist groups and political parties, increasingly challenging, in a more comprehensive manner, the country's official ideology, Kemalism, for denying the existence of a distinct Kurdish identity.

In the fourth chapter, the author further elaborates on the Kurds' separation from Turkey's left-wing movement and lays out the emergence and fragmentation of Kurdish socialist movement during the 1970s. An account of Kurdish political parties that came into existence during the 1970s is also provided, which is useful and fills a void in the existent literature that overlooks their activities and ideas in this era. The fifth chapter provides further details on Kurdish political parties by paying close attention to their discourses and elaborating on their discussions of strategy, ideology and tactics. It analyses the answers Kurdish political parties formulated for the following question: What would be the most effective strategy for 'liberating' and 'unifying' Kurdistan? The chapter compares and contrasts the discourses and political practices of various political parties in the hope of finding 'clues' for why the PKK succeeded while the others failed (p. 82). The rivalry between these political parties and their contest to become the dominant group led to the use of violence between them. A detailed account of the activities of Kurdish political parties during the late 1970s is also provided in the fifth chapter.

Turkey experienced a military coup in 1980, followed by severe repression. Due to the crackdown, many Kurdish political parties and groups disappeared during the 1980s. This situation left the PKK, which had managed to move many of its members to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley just before the coup, in a position to dominate Kurdish politics in Turkey from the early 1980s onwards. In the sixth chapter, Gunes examines the question of why the PKK has become the hegemonic force within the Kurdish resistance in Turkey. Gunes singles out two key factors to explain the PKK success in this context: The reorganisation of the party as a guerrilla movement and the PKK's reactivation of the myth of *Newroz* - the myth of Kurdish origin - to create a contemporary myth of resistance that it has used extensively to legitimise its struggle in the eyes of Kurds, clarify its objectives and reinvigorating Kurdish culture (pp. 112-125).

Following this, in the seventh chapter, the author strives to present the political transformation of the PKK from the 1990s until the recent period, as it began to support political reconciliation and democracy rather than Kurdish independence. This chapter also focuses on the PKK's sub-organisations based in Iranian Kurdistan such as the PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, Free Life Party of Kurdistan) and in Iraqi Kurdistan entitled the PÇDK (Partiya Çareseriya Demokratîk a Kurdistan, Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party), and the women's party and the women's armed group.

In the eighth chapter, the author turns his focus to the pro-Kurdish democratic movement and traces its emergence from 1990 until 2011. In this period, the pro-Kurdish democratic movement has been represented by numerous political parties. Gunes argues that the main difficulties pro-Kurdish political parties have faced in Turkey arise from the nature of the political demands they raise around the recognition of Kurdish identity and national rights. Consequently, as the discussion highlights, many of the pro-Kurdish political parties have been closed down by Turkey's constitutional court with many of their activists imprisoned. Despite the closure of many parties, the democratic pro-Kurdish movement has

maintained its existence. The eighth chapter also analyses Turkey's experience of democracy in the 1990s and 2000s, and shows how difficult it has been for the state to accommodate the demands of minorities. In that sense, it represents a valuable contribution to the study of Turkish democracy as well as the Kurdish national movement.

It is true that with the military coup in 1980 and the massive operations to destroy Kurdish organizations, party members were, as a result, either imprisoned or forced to escape to Europe. Despite the dispersal of other Kurdish parties and organisations, the PKK with its guerrilla war had, by the mid-1980s, managed to become central to the Kurdish national struggle. Although the author argues that PKK has been the only hegemonic force, it would still be useful to know how the successors of other Kurdish political groups who fled to Europe have strived to continue their politics. In this respect, the inclusion of material on the political activities of Kurdish socialist groups based in Europe would have been a welcome addition, particularly for the comparison of their activities with the PKK's mobilization of the Kurdish diaspora.

Despite this void, through its impressive breadth and depth in primary sources and secondary literature, in both thematic and empirical terms, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey* is a well-researched and cogently argued book tracing the falls and rises of the Kurdish national movement from the 1960s onwards. It is a useful book to read for a broad understanding of the on-going political transformations of the Kurdish movement and the current attempts at peace negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK.