



Oppression, Solidarity, Resistance: The Forging of Kurdish Identity in Turkey

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the intersection of oppression and Kurdish resistance to the state in Turkey and the impacts these have on the formation of ethnic identity amongst the Kurds of Diyarbakır. It examines how repressive state measures imposed upon the Kurds, ostensibly to crush the PKK, rallied Kurdish political sentiment such that resistance to state hegemony expanded to encompass a much broader ‘popular resistance’. Resistance by ‘everyday’ Kurds to what they perceive as hegemonic projects, whether instigated by Kemalists or the AKP, continues to forge internal cohesion and highlight their differences from the majority Turks. In this way, resistance becomes a central pillar of Kurdish identity.

Introduction

One evening in October 2014, in the backstreets of the old city of Diyarbakır, I encountered a group of Kurdish boys aged between 10 and 12 years. Fingers raised in the V-for-victory sign, with steadfast looks on their faces, they were chanting, ‘Bijî serok Apo’. Translated from Kurdish, their chant means ‘Long live leader Apo’. They were brandishing the name of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), imprisoned near Istanbul since 1999. Local residents smiled and nodded as they passed. Although delivered in everyday surroundings, the boys’ gesture was undeniably political. Their posture was one of defiance. Why would small boys do such a thing? What sociopolitical circumstances would prompt boys to evoke the name of a jailed political leader in a nameless backstreet? How had a message of resistance been imbued in children so young?

At the time of this encounter, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was besieging the Kurdish city of Kobane 250 km away across the Syrian border. The Syrian-Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia was resisting, but appeared to be succumbing to ISIS’ superior firepower. Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had predicted matter-of-factly that Kobane’s fall was imminent.¹ Kurds despairing at the fate of their ethnic kin in Kobane had protested across Turkey, resulting in multiple deaths and a curfew being placed on Diyarbakır.² Diyarbakır is no stranger to curfews, protests or

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civilian deaths. The largest Kurdish-populated city in south-eastern Turkey, it remains an emblematic city for Kurds. The scene of repressive measures targeting Kurdish public figures and political organisations throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey, it has long been the epicentre of Kurdish resistance to the Turkish state.

This paper examines the intersection of oppression and Kurdish resistance to the state and the impacts these have on the formation of ethnic identity amongst the Kurds of Diyarbakır. Identity has historically been highly contested and subject to intense debate in Turkey, none more so than Kurdish identity. For years, the ardent embrace of the Kemalist-nationalist axiom that the Republic of Turkey was bound together by ‘unity of [Turkish] language, culture and ideal’ (Özbudun, 2012, p. 79) led to the widespread conviction that any acknowledgement of Kurdish identity would weaken the national bond and lead to the fragmentation of the nation state. This was particularly so through the 1980s and 1990s, when the PKK’s separatist agenda and military campaign led to the conflation of claims to a distinct Kurdish identity with separatism and terrorism (Barkey & Fuller, 1998, p. 118). In this milieu, the Turkish government and its security apparatus pursued a military campaign to destroy the PKK, simultaneously moving to quash Kurdish identity, purportedly in order to safeguard the political and territorial integrity of the Republic. Ultimately, however, this endeavour was unsuccessful. Ethno-nationalist terror groups often operate in the knowledge that their activities will provoke repressive state responses that will have the effect of galvanising ethnic solidarity (Byman, 1998). This appears to have been the case with the PKK. To this day, many Kurds continue to assert their distinct ethnic identity in Turkey. This paper examines how the repressive state measures imposed upon the Kurds, ostensibly directed towards the PKK, actually had the effect of rallying Kurdish political sentiment such that resistance to state hegemony expanded beyond the PKK’s military campaign to encompass a much broader ‘popular resistance’. State oppression galvanised Kurds to cling more tightly to their ethnic identity and to define themselves in contradistinction to the state-proscribed Turkish identity.

Since the 1990s, identity politics has emerged ‘across the political spectrum’ in Turkey, allowing the ‘institutionalisation of multiculturalism’ (Massicard, 2012, p. 86). Previously calls for ethnic identification were seen as threatening the foundations of the Republic; they are now understood to amount to ‘demands for group-specific rights’ (Massicard, 2012, p. 83). The 1999 capture of Öcalan and the subsequent initiation of a ‘Kurdish opening’ by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) resulted in the Kurdish issue in Turkey being de-securitized. While Kurds have little scope for political activity amid a deteriorating security environment since late 2015, the Kurdish issue is no longer solely framed as a quest for a Kurdish state and Kurdish identity is no longer deemed an existential threat. Nonetheless, the imperative to conform remains strong in a political sphere dominated by the AKP and the personality of President Erdoğan. This paper thus examines how narratives of oppression and resistance retain currency amongst Kurds despite their now being able to more freely assert their ethnic identity.

Identity, Resistance and Identity Politics

In recent decades, the term ‘identity’ has become increasingly prominent in political and social analysis. Story and Walker (2016, p. 138) highlight identity in contemporary

discourse as being understood, firstly, as a definition that delineates an individual or a group and, secondly, as ‘specific sets of characteristics . . . to which both individuals and groups may subscribe in order to emphasize who they are and to distinguish themselves from others’. With the field of identity politics broadening in Turkey in the 1990s, it was sometimes argued that once the strictures of state-sanctioned, secular, Kemalist ideology were loosened, alternative identities—Kurdish, Islamic and Alevi—would re-emerge in their ‘pure’ forms (Massicard, 2012, p. 83). Similar arguments arise in circumstances where major geopolitical shifts allow purportedly unadulterated ethnic or national identities to awaken once foreign influences are cast off (Kafadar, 1995, pp. 20–21; Mazower, 2001, pp. 15–16).

Such analyses posit identity as an essential quality, uniform and fixed. Story and Walker, however, argue against the idea that identities are immutable or universally applicable (2016, p. 138). Massicard (2012, p. 6) notes amongst Alevis in Turkey ‘the fluctuating and disputed nature of the identity being laid claim to’. Hakan Yavuz, in turn, stresses the ‘multiple layers in meaning and substance of Kurdish identity’ (1998, p. 10). Rather than undermining the veracity of identity claims, ‘identity confusion’, according to Massicard (2012, p. 6), is a result of the political and societal conditions under which identity assumes its form(s). Like Alevi identity, Kurdish identity has been contested and shaped by historical and political events at individual and collective levels. Seen this way, identities are constructed in a ‘continual and never-complete process’ (Doty, 1996, p. 126); they are not ‘stable, social realities’, but are created out of ‘people-based activity’ (Wallerstein, 1991, p. 85). Brubaker (2004, p. 11) holds that identities—ethnic or national—should not be conceived as ‘tangible, bounded and enduring’, but as ‘processual, dynamic and disaggregated’. ‘Contingent events’, he maintains, are crucial forces in the shaping of identities. This paper proceeds on the understanding that identity formation occurs within social and political settings; thus, the form that identity assumes is determined by ongoing events, interactions and confrontations.

Ethnic identity comes into focus ‘through social situations and encounters, and through people’s ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life’ (Eriksen, 2010, p. 1). Thus, public and political spaces are of crucial importance in ethnicity. When individuals express grievances about their political circumstances in public spaces, solidarities and collective identities are forged (Bayat, 2010). The airing of grievances can take myriad forms, from public protest to ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1985) to violent insurgency. These activities in turn may themselves constitute a form of identity-making. In Lebanon, Hizbullah conceives of society, in all of its manifestations and all of its participants, as the embodiment of resistance itself. Resistance, seen in these terms, is a vital marker of identity (Harb & Leenders, 2005, pp. 189–190). For Palestinians, denied an identity in Israeli nationalist rhetoric, taking up arms is ‘a powerful means of gaining recognition . . . from the international community and from the dispersed and demoralized Palestinians themselves’ (Tripp, 2013, p. 29). In coming together in public spaces to resist military occupation, oppressive regimes or government agenda, individuals broaden their circles to make known their discontents and assert their presence; in so doing they proclaim their identities as individuals and collectivities.

Interactions between ethnic groups within the same state need not always be acrimonious or conflictual, but they may become so when threat or opportunity for one of the groups arises (Wolff, 2006, pp. 36–42). One such example is that where an ethnic group, or state, seeks to assimilate another, as was the case with the Turkish state’s

attempt to deny and eliminate Kurdishness. The existence of a significant Kurdish minority represented a threat to the legitimacy of the Republic of Turkey; thus, a programme of assimilation was pursued from the 1920s. Barth (1969), in discussing the persistence of ethnic boundaries despite communal interactions, contends that assimilation is effective where it provides clear advantages to those who comply. In Turkey, some Kurds perceived such an advantage, or sought the alleviation of state pressure, and willingly adopted a Turkish identity. Others saw no advantage, or at least chose to cling to their identity; thus, the ethnic boundary persisted for some. The goal of assimilation was part and parcel of the state's exclusionary nationalist ideology, one of the political factors that Wolff (2006, p. 68) cites as giving rise to the possibility of ethnic conflict. Sure enough, for many Kurds acrimonious dealings with the state ensued across the ethnic boundary. These had a further galvanising effect on identity.

Simmel's rule states that the internal cohesion of a given group is determined by the degree of external pressure placed upon that group (cited in Eriksen, 2004, p. 163). The Gypsies are a people whose sense of identity is much stronger because they have been subjugated by others (Eriksen, 2004, p. 164). This paper makes a corresponding argument for the Kurds in Turkey—the Republic of Turkey's marginalisation of and attempts to smother Kurdish identity in its promotion of a unified Turkish national identity have driven many Kurds to hold more tightly to their Kurdishness. The military and political measures enacted by the Republic of Turkey impelled Kurds into a 'shared mission of reinstating or re-inventing "Kurdishness" as a socially and politically meaningful category of belonging' (Watts, 2004, p. 129). As with the Palestinians and Hizbullah, the Kurds' acts of resistance to oppression, both that of state security agencies and the more recent hegemonic imperatives of the AKP's instrumentalization of the 'national will' (Sevinin & Altınok, 2016), have become important markers of Kurdish identity that allow them to call attention both to who they are and to how they are different from others (Story & Walker, 2016).

Talking about 'Resistance' with Kurds in Diyarbakır

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Diyarbakır in 2014 and 2015. Data were collected from 32 semi-structured interviews with participants who self-identified as Kurds, all of whom resided in or had grown up in Diyarbakır. Interviews were complemented by observations of the 'Kurdish street' and numerous brief conversations within the context of daily life in shops, teahouses, street corners and bazaars in Sur and Yenişehir neighbourhoods in Diyarbakır.³ In the literature, there are several notable investigations of Kurdish resistance from the viewpoint of Kurdish political organisations (Gambetti, 2005; Guneş, 2012, 2013); however, this project examines Kurdish resistance from the ground up, from the perspectives of individual Kurds in everyday contexts. Participants did not profess to be part of the Kurdish political movement, nor of any political organisations. In this sense, this study eschews the limitations of analysis of institutions and their formalised discourses; rather, it enters 'public life' (Navaro-Yashin, 2002) as the location in which political narratives unfurl and identities are forged. The research was undertaken in October–November 2014 and May–June 2015, two periods of heightened political activity in Turkey, the first due to Kurdish concerns at the plight of Kobane and the second due to ongoing campaigns for the June 7 general election. Thus, while participants were not members of Kurdish political organisations, there was much public discussion of politics and a charged political atmosphere during both periods.

Participants were reached through online forums, personal networks, contacts established during earlier visits to Turkey and chance encounters in the course of everyday life in Diyarbakır. They included shop attendants, teahouse proprietors, teachers, municipal employees, self-described ‘business men’, a *kebabçı* (kebab seller), journalists and artists. Participants were engaged in their own time and space and interviews were designed to elicit accounts of lived experiences rather than impressions or opinions. My intention was to encourage interviewees to build a narrative, thus affording a contextual understanding of incidents and events they had lived through as Kurds and as citizens of the Republic of Turkey. The paper, thus, incorporates retellings of events that illustrate participants’ experiences of oppression and resistance. It seeks to demonstrate how these inform a sense of Kurdish identity and solidarity, and how resistance to oppression in everyday contexts becomes a banner of Kurdishness such that, for many Kurds in Diyarbakır, it may be seen as a central pillar of Kurdish ethnic identity.

The Kurds in the Republic of Turkey: A History of Oppression?

The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923; by 1938 there had been 18 insurrections, 16 of them Kurdish (Findley, 2010, p. 251). All were brutally put down by the Turkish military. Kurdish nationalists have used this history to construct a narrative of ongoing state oppression and heroic resistance by Kurds. Some allege the narrative has been manipulated to portray all conflicts involving Kurds as being attacks targeting Kurdish ethnic or cultural identity (Kaya, 2013, p. 115). Regardless of whether one agrees with this, it is clear that the narrative of state oppression retains currency amongst Kurds in Turkey, many of whom feel they have been marginalised and treated unjustly by the state apparatus due to their ethnic identity. When asked what it means to be a Kurd, Salih, an editor, told me, ‘To be a Kurd is to be oppressed. To be isolated from your culture, your language, your nation . . . We have lived under the oppression of the state for years’ (Personal communication, October 21, 2014). Another interviewee, Refik, told me, ‘Most Kurds have been trampled over (*Kürtlerin çoğu ezilmiştir*)’ (Personal communication, October 20, 2014).

It is well documented that as a stateless people, Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria have suffered repressive measures since the establishment of these nation states, and that Kurdish nationalism has developed in response (Entessar, 1992; Gunter, 2007; McDowall, 1996). During a televised interview, Selahattin Demirtaş, leader of the pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokrat Partisi (People’s Democracy Party, HDP), and the most widely recognised Kurdish politician in Turkey, recalled hearing, as a high-school student, of the massacre of Kurds in Halabja by Saddam Hussein’s regime in 1988. Demirtaş remarked that after the events of Halabja, ‘I discovered my identity and realized what a heavy responsibility it is to be Kurdish’ (Sarıkaya, 2015). Comments of this ilk find a receptive audience amongst segments of the Kurdish population in Turkey, certainly they did amongst the Kurds I interviewed, many of whom adopted a narrative of oppression. I argue that for these Kurds this narrative plays an important role in identity formation. The politician Demirtaş saw the Halabja massacre as investing his identity as a Kurd with ‘responsibility’. My interviewee Salih insists that oppression contributes to the ‘meaning’ of Kurdishness.

Salih and Refik, both in their twenties, attained adulthood in a time of relative calm in Turkey’s south-east. Earlier decades were more traumatic. Emergency rule was imposed

on the Kurdish-populated provinces in 1987 as the state's war on the PKK grew more intense. Repressive measures peaked accordingly. Kurdish children in some districts were so used to police intimidation that if a policeman came to their house, they would 'immediately put their hands on their heads in a gesture of surrender' (cited in McDowall, 1992, p. 61). Recalling life in Diyarbakır during the 1980s and 1990s, Ali remarked, 'I am 50 years old, but I remember problems started when I was 16 ... I grew up under the shadow of weapons. Every day ... there is an uneasy weather [atmosphere] around here' (Personal communication, October 26, 2014). The 'uneasy weather' in Diyarbakır was immediately apparent. Visiting in 1992, I noted a pervasive military presence and the resentment with which locals looked upon security agencies. Public life was tense. Yavuz (2005, p. 247) argues that a generation of Kurds had their self-images shaped as a result of growing up under emergency rule. Yavuz expands his argument to claim that the PKK terror campaign exacted a 'human cost' upon Kurds. One might alternatively attribute such a cost to the actions of the Turkish security agencies and the government that condoned the 'draconian' measures undertaken (McDowall, 1996, pp. 425–427). Here the restrictions of emergency law are the 'contingent events' that mould identities. Sociopolitical dynamics resulted in an 'uneasy weather', restricted opportunities, lack of development and strained state–society interactions, all of which had an impact on Kurdish identity. Just what impacts these dynamics had on identities depends on how Kurds, individually or collectively, perceived and reacted to them.

During the interviews I conducted, respondents immediately blamed state security operatives for the repression they had experienced; none of them mentioned the PKK. Interviewees recounted diverse experiences of brutality, mistreatment and discrimination. One stallholder in Diyarbakır's bazaar quipped, 'Who can say "I didn't have a problem with the state, or police, or soldiers"? Everyone has' (Personal communication, June 11, 2015). Specific examples reported to me included forced evacuations from homes and villages, street harassment by police and arbitrary arrests. Dilek, a shop attendant, recalled that when she was 12 years old in the 1990s, the 'secret police' came to her family's home every night, thumping on the door at the same hour, then rifling through personal items and threatening her parents (Personal communication, June 8, 2015). This led to negative associations with the state for Dilek. She recounted her shock, after her family fled to Malatya, seeing locals willingly approaching police to ask for directions, something that she could not reconcile with her experiences of the Diyarbakır police. Zoran, also a child during the 1990s, told of the arbitrary arrest of his father, who returned home severely beaten. 'That's why it makes me ... protect my identity', he commented (Personal communication, June 8, 2015).

Experiences of oppression and discrimination have been channelled by the Kurdish nationalist movement into a convincing narrative that finds wide support amongst the Kurdish masses (Güneş, 2013). Testimonies gathered in my research suggest that this narrative found such a willing audience because experiences of ill treatment and discrimination were common, from tales of ill-treatment at schools and discrimination in the workplace to repressive measures from state bodies endured either personally or by friends, family and acquaintances. In light of this, many Kurds blame the state and associated nationalist ideology, not the PKK, for the 'human cost' that Yavuz says was imposed on Kurdish society. Through these experiences of ill-treatment by the state, the 'self-image', or identity, of respondents was shaped. Dilek's and Zoran's stories are cases in point: their experiences of police intimidation pushed them to identify as Kurdish.

Oppression by the state apparatus made significant numbers of Kurds less likely to identify with the (Turkish) state and more likely to seek recourse in an alternative (Kurdish) identity.

Oppression Catalysing a Collective Identity

Oppression did not only occur at the hands of the security apparatus. Initiatives from the early years of the Republic of Turkey aimed at removing the Kurdish imprint from society and the landscape of Anatolia (Aslan, 2009; McDowall, pp. 191–192). Refik complained of state policies ‘... restricting our language, destroying our culture or putting it under a shroud (*bir örtü altına alınması*)’. He equated it to ‘top-down oppression (*tepeden baskılmas*)’ (Personal communication, October 20, 2014). This widely shared historical narrative made Refik more determined to defend his Kurdish identity, even though he lived in an era when Kurdish culture was less likely to be put ‘under a shroud’. Historically, the south-eastern provinces have also routinely received less state resources, schools and medical facilities such that Kurdish-populated regions have been the most underdeveloped in the country (Bozarlan, 2008, pp. 334–335). Such circumstances had a cumulative effect on burgeoning Kurdish awareness from the 1980s. Yavuz notes (2005, pp. 243–244) that the ‘lack of democratisation and worsening economic conditions consolidated ethnic and regional loyalties. People gradually became more aware of their “Kurdish-being”’. The associated narrative of marginalisation and neglect from the state is still broadly accepted by many Kurds. A study in mid-2014 found that amongst various segments of society in Turkey, including Kurds, Turks, ‘secularists’ and ‘religious’, it was Kurds who recorded feeling the highest levels of ‘ill-treatment’ (*kötü muamele*) in a range of public settings such as shops, universities, hospitals and state offices (Yılmaz, 2014, p. 10).

Encapsulating such circumstances, Nesrin, a journalist in Diyarbakır, told me, ‘If one part of your body is paining [hurting] you emphasise that part... My paining part is Kurdish... So we firstly emphasize that we are Kurdish’ (Personal communication, October 27, 2014). As Nesrin explained, the actions of the state and Turkey’s political milieu meant that it was the Kurdish component of her identity that was ‘paining’; thus, she was more determined to assert her Kurdishness. Applied to Turkey’s Kurdish population *en masse*, this is a textbook reiteration of Simmel’s rule, which states that the internal cohesion of any group depends on the degree of external pressure that is placed upon it. As Eriksen (2004, pp. 163–164) elucidates, Simmel’s rule does not merely explain the relative strength of group identification, it also highlights what *kind* of group will be formed in the face of that pressure. The nature of the ‘group depends on where the pressure is perceived as coming from, e.g. class, nationality, gender’. This accords neatly with Nesrin’s comments about which aspect of her identity is ‘paining’: she mentioned that aside from her ethnicity, it could equally have been her gender or her religion. But in everyday life in the Republic of Turkey, she saw her Kurdishness as most under pressure. She saw the need to defend that most vigorously; she saw Kurdishness as her primary identity.

Nesrin did not consider her own experiences as isolated, but placed herself within the context of the collective experience of Kurds; this in turn contributed to their cohesiveness, their distinctiveness: ‘Why [do] we still insist that we are Kurdish? Because we experience the same thing’. Further, she highlights that because shared experiences were negative,

they reinforced a sense of identity and solidarity: ‘We saw the same nightmare . . . All the people who saw the nightmare have a link after this . . . This makes the meaning of Kurdishness, I think’ (Personal communication, October 27, 2014). Sharing ‘the same nightmare’, as Nesrin frames it, plays a role in Kurdish conceptualisations of themselves as a people who have suffered throughout history, creating a ‘victim tradition’, similar to discourses amongst Armenians and Jews (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2013, p. 102). This is another measure of authenticity and catalyst for ethnic solidarity. Identity is generally more politicised amongst Kurds who have been subjected to repressive state measures; Grabolle-Çeliker (2013, pp. 87–89) records Kurds from Van lamenting they were more ‘assimilated’, thus less authentically Kurdish than those from Diyarbakır and places where state oppression—and resistance to it—was more pronounced. Darweish and Rigby (2015) note how non-violent resistance has, at times, fostered a sense of unity and common purpose amongst Palestinians.

Further highlighting how experiences of war and oppression catalyse a sense of group identity, Aras (2014, p. 197), in interviews with Kurdish villagers, notes how respondents used ‘I’ in their testimonies when telling tales of village life, but when recounting episodes of violence they used ‘we’ or ‘the Kurds’. Aras contends that framing their memories as being part of a collective was a way of protecting themselves from individual repercussions from the state, but it may also be argued that while everyday life is recalled as an individual experience, oppressive measures have the effect of creating a bond between those who endure them, hence forging a stronger sense of collective identity. Singled out by security forces for their Kurdishness, these Kurds were alerted to their own distinctiveness, their own shared identity.

The murder in 1991 of Vedat Aydın is an example of oppression having a catalysing effect on Kurdish identity and solidarity. Aydın, a member of the pro-Kurdish Halkın Emek Partisi (HEP), was taken from his home in Diyarbakır by police officers in July 1991 and later found dead (Amnesty International, 1991). Aydın’s murder has never been solved, but it is widely believed to have been carried out by state agents. His funeral in Diyarbakır drew a huge crowd. Semih, a teenager at the time, attended the funeral and recalls it as a pivotal event. He recounted the enormity of the crowd, aged ‘from seven to 70’, and the pervasive ‘sense of humiliation’ amongst locals. Standing in the crowd, Semih recalled, he felt an intense solidarity, ‘after years of shame’ (Personal communication, May 30, 2015). A sense of injustice strengthened his resolve to uphold his Kurdish identity, and camaraderie drew him closer to other Kurds. Asef Bayat (2010, p. 12) notes the streets as locations where individuals may air grievances; by doing so in public places, they also ‘enlarge solidarities and extend their protests . . . by recognising their mutual interests and shared sentiments’. For Semih, amid the funeral crowd, this was just such a moment. He noted that ‘everything changed’, in the sense not only that he was individually more conscious of his ethnic identity, but also that those gathered in Diyarbakır felt a greater sense of collective resentment and common purpose.

Berxwedan Jiyani: ‘Resistance is Life’

Following the uprisings of the Arab Spring, state oppression is seen, paradoxically, as an important generator of unity amongst political oppositions: a more brutal regime is more likely to see people mobilising against it (Hosseinioun, 2015, p. 68). Clearly, this is not always the case. There are countless incidents throughout history, including that relating

to the Kurds, where extreme repression has quelled social mobilisation (Bruinessen, 1994). It is important to note, thus, that *awareness of oppression* is not the same as *resistance to oppression* (Bayat, 2010, p. 53). Resistance is not passive, but is a conscious activity (Scott, 1985). Tripp defines resistance as ‘activities aimed at contesting and resisting systems of power that people in different places have found increasingly intolerable for a wide variety of reasons’ (2013, p. 8). Alongside its narrative of oppression, the PKK also promoted a narrative of resistance; from 1982 until 1995, it published a magazine entitled *Berxwedan* (‘Resistance’) (Güneş, 2013). In contrast, the Turkish state long framed Kurdish resistance as illegitimate, seeking to justify its harsh responses to Kurdish agitation (Yavuz, 2001, p. 8). Martin van Bruinessen argues, however, that repressive measures intended to subdue Kurdish identity and to stamp out radicalism backfired. ‘Misguided policies brought about precisely those developments that they had intended to stop’, he states (Bruinessen, 1998, p. 44). Even Recep Tayyip Erdoğan conceded this in 2013, remarking that ‘inhumane treatment’ had given the PKK ‘opportunity’ and ‘excuse’ to conduct its terror campaign.⁴ Erdoğan was attempting to explain the impact of state measures upon support for the PKK, rather than as a catalyst for Kurdish identity formation; nonetheless, his comments are an acknowledgement that the misdeeds of the state played a role in mobilisation.

Mobilisation need not always equate to violent insurgency, however. From early 1990, the funerals of PKK members attracted large crowds, as had the one for Vedat Aydın, such that for the first time ‘civil resistance’ outweighed PKK activities (McDowall, 1996, p. 427). Where previously the ‘Kurdish struggle’ had been carried out solely by PKK operatives, now a broader cross section of Kurdish society began to participate in individual, localised and largely uncoordinated activities that fall within Tripp’s definition of resistance. This marked a broadening from a Gramscian ‘war of manoeuvre’, solely comprising the PKK’s military campaign of guerrilla attacks, to a ‘war of position’ consisting of (non-violent) confrontations in the public sphere (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238) that included many more Kurds than just those who were members of the PKK.

A Kurdish proverb states *berxwedan jiyani* (literally, ‘resistance is life’). For many Kurds, perennially suffering oppression, resistance is seen as part of the fabric of the everyday. In Kurdish, this public mobilisation became known as the *serhildan*, from *ser* (head) and *hildan* (to raise). This nomenclature illustrates vital emic aspects of its conceptualisation, firstly as a symbol of resistance, raising one’s head in defiance of an oppressor, and secondly as an assertion of identity, raising one’s head to state one’s presence. This is a demonstration of the ‘art of presence’, making oneself ‘heard, seen, felt and realised’, in spite of political constraints or unjust strictures (Bayat, 2010, p. 69). It is *symbolic* resistance, a demonstration, through gestures and actions, of the Kurdish cause (Darweish & Rigby, 2015, p. 7). The *serhildan*, then, while consisting of acts of resistance, also constitutes a clear statement of collective identity. One interviewee lamented that Kurds lack a flag, homeland and other ‘normal’ markers of nationhood, but he saw the *serhildan* as a substitute. ‘We can [claim] ... solidarity ... because we have this thing *serhildan*’ (Personal communication, October 26, 2014). He saw it not only as a rallying point, something that all could participate in, but also as a hallmark of Kurdish identity where other ‘normal’ national markers were absent.

In contrast, the Kurdish language may be regarded as a ‘normal’ national marker, yet that too may be utilised in an act of resistance. Mithat, a Kurdish university student in Istanbul, related an episode when he was prosecuted, alongside others, for his political

activities. During court proceedings, he and his colleagues refused to address the court in Turkish, responding only in Kurdish (although all speak fluent Turkish). They demanded a Kurdish interpreter. ‘The court didn’t accept our request. And we protested . . . we turned our backs . . .’ Mithat explained (Personal communication, June 13, 2015). After some time, the court relented, finding an interpreter. Mithat revealed, however, that since the court case—over two years previously—he had not spoken Kurdish at all. The Kurdish language that Mithat and his colleagues insisted they had the right to speak was thus a way of redrawing the power dynamic of the court, resisting its authority, but it was simultaneously a forceful demonstration of their Kurdish identity. The very fact that Mithat had neither the inclination nor the need to speak Kurdish in the course of normal life since the court case amplifies the political nature of his demand to use the language and to utilise his ethnic identity as an act of resistance.

The nature of the *serhildan* is that it occurs in workaday circumstances. If, as the proverb states, ‘resistance is life’, it must be allowed to occur simply and without planning. Scott (1985, p. 29) argues that ‘everyday’ resistance is as important as that of major rebellions (which receive more attention, but rarely bring benefits to those rebelling). Resistance in the everyday is what must be done by the disempowered in order to maintain their interests as best they can, Scott contends. One correspondent related to me that Kurdish children playing soccer often shout *Bîjî Apo* (‘Long live Apo’) when they score a goal (Personal communication, October 27, 2014). The implication here is that by kicking a goal, one is scoring a small victory for the Kurdish cause, striking back against the Turkish state—it becomes something even children can accomplish. The boys I encountered in the Diyarbakır backstreets, related at the beginning of this article, were mimicking this activity, albeit without a soccer ball. The message of resistance is imparted from a young age and widely amongst Kurds, and it resonates even with children such that the act of kicking a goal in a game of street football has become politicised. These ‘Apo’ chants are resistance at its most ephemeral—no authority is even present to be challenged—but they build camaraderie and thereby solidarity, which creates the political capital with which to maintain Kurdish interests. As in the case of Hizbullah, resistance ‘goes beyond combat and becomes an individual process, carried out through daily practices related to body, sound, signs and space’ (Harb & Leenders, pp.186–189). It is something that everybody from schoolchildren to grandmothers can participate in. Everyday acts of resistance constitute ways to downplay or revoke the imperatives of dominant forces in political situations (Scott, 1985, p. 32). These acts impart agency to those who are overlooked or downtrodden, giving them a voice and a means of asserting their presence. In this way, the violence traditionally associated with resistance is made secondary and resistance itself demarcates peoples, creating a distinction between those who resist and those who oppress; in so doing, resistance becomes a central marker of identity.

For many Kurds in Turkey, resistance is a reaction to political circumstances, a desire to challenge societal norms in a political space where Turkish nationalist discourse is dominant; it can be as simple as asserting one’s Kurdishness (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2013, pp. 96–97). Nesrin, remarked, ‘For many years we live under pressure. So we emphasise that we are Kurdish’ (Personal communication, October 27, 2014). This was a posture that was repeated by many participants, lending credence to Van Bruinessen’s argument that oppressive circumstances, whether due to state policy or nationalist intolerance and rhetoric, resulted in a hardening of Kurdish identification. When asked about his ethnicity as a

Kurd, Soner, a researcher in Istanbul, said, ‘It’s a . . . reaction . . . when I describe myself as a Kurd it also means a kind of protest . . . Sometimes I feel that Kurdish identity is not welcomed and I try to emphasise it’ (Personal communication, June 13, 2015). Thus, Soner and Nesrin are marking a political space in circumstances where they feel pressured to conform to a homogenous Turkish ideal; upholding—or flaunting—their Kurdish identity is a way of resisting this ideal. They are enacting a symbolic resistance (Darweish & Rigby, 2015), a gesture of the endurance of the Kurdish cause, as are the children playing soccer and Mîthat speaking Kurdish in the courtroom.

These actions should be seen in the context of the AKP’s crowding out of the political sphere and Erdoğan’s claims to being the sole representative of the ‘national will’ (*millî irade*). For some time, Erdoğan had made this claim on the basis of the AKP’s electoral majorities. He evokes the ‘national will’ in order to validate any and all AKP initiatives, but it is also used to vilify and delegitimise oppositional voices or those who do not conform (Ulgen, 2013). In this sense, Erdoğan’s ‘national will’ discourse is a homogenising project akin to the assimilation projects directed at Kurds in earlier decades. Here again Kurdish distinctiveness is frowned upon, not due to the state’s aspiration to ethnic uniformity, but due to the AKP’s goal of ideational uniformity, or universal subscription to Erdoğan’s political vision.

These instances are episodes of the Kurds’ ‘war of position’ writ small. They are more than attempts by Kurds to maintain their interests, more than a holding pattern against an overwhelming status quo; rather they are a pushing of boundaries. They are proactive attempts to redefine the political milieu in circumstances where the state no longer denies the existence of Kurds, nor makes overt attempts to assimilate them into a homogenous ‘Turkish’ national identity, but where many Kurds still feel the need to define and defend their own political space. These episodes of ‘everyday resistance’ are loud declarations of Kurdish identity.

The Case of Kobane

In the regional context, Kurdish resistance is exemplified in the siege of Kobane in late 2014. Kobane attracted significant international attention while also being a lightning rod for Kurdish solidarity. Prior to 2014, Kobane was little known amongst Kurds in Turkey, as most willingly admit. Brubaker (2004, p. 12) writes of ‘groupness as an event’, whereby groups—be they ethnic, national or otherwise—go through ‘phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity’. Observing the siege of Kobane, significant numbers of Kurds experienced just such an ‘event’. The prospect of annihilation at the hands of ISIS galvanised a sense of Kurdish unity. Kenan, a teacher, told me at the time, ‘It’s the first time all Kurdish hearts are together. The first time in all Kurdish history’. He said that defending Kobane was a question of ‘*namus*’ (honour) for the Kurds (Personal communication, October 28, 2014). In its impact on Kurdish solidarity, it was similar to the 1988 massacre at Halabja in Iraq. For Kenan and many other Kurds, Kobane was a righteous cause, win or lose, one that the Syrian Kurds were embracing despite overwhelming odds. It fell within a larger narrative of oppression and injustice inflicted upon Kurds, forces against which they had historically, bravely resisted. It was also a vindication and validation of the Kurdish cause. Another Kurd told me, ‘There is fighting between ISIS and the YPG, the Kurdish people . . . everybody knows how the Kurds are right and this makes it more clear’

(Personal communication, October 21, 2014). Seeing their cause celebrated validated the Kurdish resistance and brought greater international recognition of the Kurds.

The struggle in Kobane cannot be described as 'everyday resistance'. It involved military action against an armed adversary, a 'war of manoeuvre'. Nor were Kurdish participants in this study actively involved in hostilities. Nonetheless, there were flow-on effects in Diyarbakır and for Kurds in Turkey. Nesrin noted that some Diyarbakır Kurds were involved in the fighting; she had attended funerals in Diyarbakır of those who had been killed in the Kobane resistance. 'They are our children', she remarked (Personal communication, October 27, 2014). In this moment of solidarity with Kobane, Nesrin claimed a familial link with those participating in the defence: this was 'groupness as an event' (Brubaker, 2004, p. 14). There are indeed strong cultural and familial ties between Kurds in Turkey and Syria (Tejel, 2014, pp. 842–843), but Kurds were also attentive to the resistance in Kobane because for many it equated to resistance to Turkey. There are widespread allegations of Turkey's complicity with ISIS (Bekdil, 2015); many Kurds hold these to be self-evidently true. Kurds often reminded me that on social media many Turks supported ISIS and expressed their hope that Kobane would fall. Erdoğan's statement that Kobane's fall was imminent was also regarded as wishful thinking and evidence of the AKP's pro-ISIS, anti-Kurdish position. Accordingly, Kurds in Turkey saw supporting Kobane, even if only lending moral support, as resisting what they perceived as an AKP-Turkish agenda.

In late October 2014, Kurdish *peshmerga* crossed from northern Iraq into Turkey, passing through the Kurdish-populated south-east, to relieve Kobane. Jubilant crowds of cheering Kurds greeted the *peshmerga* convoy. Diyarbakır, which the *peshmerga* did not transit, was abuzz. In the teahouses all talk was of Kurdish brotherhood. Here was an example of Kurds from Iraq, Syria and Turkey coming together to resist, and ultimately defeat, a fearful adversary. When Kobane was relieved in early 2015, a *peshmerga* commander was quoted in the Kurdish press: 'We fought against the occupiers with our brothers and sisters in Kobane . . . The resistance and victory in Kobane was an important stage for national unity'.⁵

Kobane duly passed into Kurdish legend, its fighters valorised, its name perpetuated in popular songs and, in one instance that I saw, emblazoned on a newly opened teahouse. In my discussions with Kurds, Kobane was routinely mentioned as the most important Kurdish city outside of Turkey, even more so than Erbil, the Kurdistan Regional Government's capital. It is significant that a city that was almost destroyed, but where Kurdish forces put up a fierce resistance, struck more of a chord with Diyarbakır Kurds than did Erbil, which was a quasi-independent capital city, and as such an ostensible success story. The Kobane episode, which Kurds present as yet another instance of their persecution by the Other, served as a pole for cross-border co-operation, a symbol of Kurdish resistance and a repudiation of purported Turkish interests. In their accusations of complicity with ISIS whether directed at Erdoğan, the AKP government or Turks en masse, they saw this resistance as a way of standing up to an injustice perpetrated on fellow Kurds and standing up to a crowding out of the political sphere by a hegemonic Turkish project. Kobane had a catalysing effect for Kurdish identity well beyond the confines of the actual city. Here, again, is Simmel's rule made manifest: external pressure placed upon Kurds forged a greater sense of group identity, and this time, for once, the Kurds emerged victorious.

The Election of 7 June 2015

'Everyday resistance' may be a 'war of position' writ small, but a 'war of position' is more generally understood as an engagement in politics; it is an attempt to gradually win over civil institutions and the public sphere through the exercise of 'moral and intellectual leadership' (Bayat, 2007, pp. 20–21). As such, this provides a platform for resistance to be exercised through the mechanisms of the state, or through the ballot box. It is 'constructive resistance', a means of challenging the existing order (Darweish & Rigby, 2015, p. 8) by using the very mechanisms of that order to further a model that offers a political alternative.

On 7 June 2015, Turkey went to the polls for a general election. The election was significant because for the first time the pro-Kurdish HDP was contesting on a party basis. Kurdish candidates had previously run as independents to circumvent a rule that dictated that only parties passing a threshold of 10% of the national vote can assume seats in parliament. No Kurdish party had ever succeeded in passing the threshold. The election was also significant because President Erdoğan campaigned vigorously for the AKP in pursuit of a sufficient majority to facilitate the creation of a 'Turkish-style' presidency that would grant him expanded executive powers.⁶ Early in the campaign, Selahattin Demirtaş, leader of the HDP, stated baldly, 'We will not allow you to be president'.⁷ The HDP thus marked out a resistance posture for itself; it offered itself as the conduit of alternative values and political aspirations. The election thereafter was seen by some as a referendum on Erdoğan's presidential ambitions. Describing itself as a centre-left rather than solely Kurdish party, the HDP indeed won many non-Kurdish voters as a result of being seen as resisting AKP-Erdoğan hegemony. In this milieu, there was considerable intimidation of the HDP during the campaign, with many offices being targeted by violent acts, something, party officers allege, to which security and electoral officials remained indifferent.⁸

In the lead up to the election, Diyarbakır's streets were festooned with HDP banners, bunting, posters and graffiti. The culmination of the HDP campaign was a major rally held near Diyarbakır railway station two days before the election. From mid-afternoon, crowds gathered in the centre of the town, many joining a parade that snaked through the streets carrying banners and exuberantly chanting pro-HDP slogans en route to the rally station. At the rally, a festival atmosphere reigned. The Kurdish *tricolore* of red–yellow–green was clearly in evidence in scarves, bandanas, ribbons, banners and dresses. The event amounted to a clear demonstration of Kurdish identity: in this context the HDP, despite its multicultural agenda, was presented by the crowd as a manifestation of their Kurdishness. Of the many people I spoke to, all were convinced that the HDP would pass the threshold. One man told me, 'We will win' ('*Kazanacağız*') (Personal communication, June 5, 2015). He viewed victory not as winning government, but as seeing HDP candidates into parliament. This was a step towards a Kurdish 'war of position', an opportunity for Kurds, through their HDP representatives, to bring 'moral and intellectual leadership' to a 'civil institution', the parliament of Turkey, not necessarily as a precursor to usurping power, but as a means to promote a Kurdish political agenda through the officially sanctioned mechanisms of elections and the parliament. It was also a way of defining a political space, resisting the hegemonic political status quo, through legitimate means.

Late in the afternoon of June 5, two explosions—bombs planted by ISIS—disrupted the HDP rally. The carnival atmosphere abruptly dissipated as people fled in panic and rushed

the wounded to hospitals. Returning days later to the site of the blasts, I saw that locals had created a makeshift shrine decorated with balloons, flowers and handwritten notes. While I was present, others gathered and cars slowed to observe. The traffic ground to a halt and car horns sounded. Initially I thought this was the frustration of commuters being held up, but then I realised that bystanders at the makeshift shrine were facing the traffic and making the V-for-victory sign; those in cars were doing the same. Amid a growing chorus of horns, people faced each other, holding each other's gaze, raising their heads proudly. This was not a traffic jam, but a powerful gesture of solidarity and defiance on a gritty street corner where Kurdish lives had been taken. It was *serhildan* in action: people raising their heads in defiance and in a statement of presence.

These events contributed further to the Kurdish discourses of oppression and resistance. They only heightened the desire of the Kurds of Diyarbakır to participate in the electoral process. Asserting one's right to vote was now, more than ever, imperative; it was a way to resist the forces arrayed against the Kurds' political ambitions. Polling booths were busy and lively on election day. Images of those wounded in the bombings in Diyarbakır casting their votes circulated widely on social media (Letsch, 2015). As if to vindicate the Kurds' posture against the status quo, the HDP polled impressively, gaining 13% of the vote, winning the third largest number of seats in parliament and denying the AKP a parliamentary majority for the first time since it emerged in 2002. I was told by many that Kurds saw the election as a way to deliver a message to Erdoğan. These Kurdish voters, and many others, had thus embarked on a 'war of position', participating in the political life of the Republic of Turkey, but at the same time performing an act of *constructive* resistance against the government, and Erdoğan specifically. There was a brazenness in this: Kurds used legal political mechanisms to define themselves *against* the status quo and *against* what they saw as the AKP's hegemonic ambitions, its complicity in the rise and onslaught of ISIS, and Erdoğan's anti-Kurdish posture.

Conclusion

The narrative of oppression finds a willing audience amongst significant numbers of Kurds in Turkey. The testimonies of participants in this study suggest that it does so precisely because many Kurds have first-hand experience of oppression at the hands of the state. This, in turn, has forged a sense of solidarity. Those who have 'shared the same nightmare' have forged a bond—as Simmel's rule predicts they should. That they have suffered as a result of their ethnicity—their Kurdishness—has precipitated strong identification with their ethnic kin, and in contradistinction to the homogenous Turkish identity that the founding elites of the Republic of Turkey imagined. Events such as the murder of Vedat Aydın, the siege of Kobane and the bombing of HDP rallies have heightened a sense of shared experience and, as a result, solidarity amongst many Kurds. Others, be they elements of the Turkish state machinery or elements such as ISIS, have singled out Kurds as targets, but in so doing they have further alerted the Kurds themselves to their own distinctiveness. And beyond just recognising the oppression they are subjected to, many Kurds in Turkey have actively responded to 'contesting and resisting systems of power' that they find intolerable. The PKK, with its military campaign, engendered the most extreme form, but resistance has been conducted by all walks of life and assumed many forms, from attendance at funerals to children's soccer-match celebrations, from insistence on speaking Kurdish in state institutions to simple assertions of Kurdish identity

in public forums. Everyday resistance, characterised in Kurdish as *serhildan*, represents not only the raising of the head in defiance, but is also a statement of presence, of a distinct identity.

The narrative of oppression and the desire to register one's resistance retain currency for many Kurds even in Turkey's current political landscape where the aspiration to ethnic homogeneity is no longer so rigidly pursued and debates about national identity are broader and more open. The endurance of this narrative stems not only from a desire for the acknowledgement of historical wrongs, but also from a conviction that there is still insufficient political space for the Kurds in Turkey. This manifests as opposition to the AKP government, which is seen as intent on hegemony over the Turkish political space, and to President Erdoğan, who is similarly perceived, by some, as being despotic, as well as anti-Kurdish and supportive of ISIS. In such circumstances, voting against the government becomes an act of constructive resistance, albeit within a government-sanctioned forum. In all of these acts, Kurds are adopting a resistance posture as a way of upholding their identity. Doing so provides a means both of rallying internal (Kurdish) cohesion and of delineating themselves against the (Turkish) Other. Within Turkey's current political dynamics, where divergence from government-sanctioned norms are 'Otherised', a Kurdish-resistance continuum develops: significant numbers of Kurds resist and in so doing highlight their difference as Kurds, which in turn incurs official opprobrium, which further impels Kurds to resist. The cycle is endless, until a new politics arises. Nonetheless, that Kurdish resistance occurs in everyday, legal contexts indicates that these assertions of Kurdishness are not statements of separatist intent, but are strikes at the status quo in order to define a new Kurdish way of belonging within Turkey's body politic.

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Notes

1. 'Erdoğan: Şu an Kobani düştü düşüyor.' (2014, October 7). *Cumhuriyet*. Retrieved from http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/127825/Erdoğan__Su_an_Kobani_dustu_dusuyor.html
2. 'Turkey Kurds: Kobane protests leave 19 dead.' (2014, October 8). *BBC*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29530640>
3. Participants were interviewed on the understanding that their contributions would be confidential. Names have been changed throughout this paper to protect the identity of the interviewees. Given the sample size and methodologies employed, this article does not claim to be representing the views of all Kurds in Diyarbakır; rather, it relates themes that recurred in many conversations and interviews. It should be noted that there is considerable diversity in outlook and political perspective amongst Kurds in Turkey, not all of whom necessarily subscribe to a narrative of oppression. Indeed, there are many Kurds who downplay or even renounce their ethnic identity, while there are still others who support the AKP and other political parties and do not feel any need to 'resist'.
4. 'Erdoğan: Past mistakes in fighting terrorism helped PKK.' (2013, January 22). *Today's Zaman*. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20130122172829/http://todayzaman.com/news-304769-.html>
5. 'YPG/YPJ fighters at the border to Jarablus', (2015, February 11). *Firat News Agency*. Retrieved from <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/ypgypj-fighters-border-jarablus>

6. Erdoğan got his way eventually, winning a referendum, with a slim majority, in April 2017, to initiate the shift to a new presidential system.
7. 'We will not make you the president, HDP co-chair tells Erdoğan.' (2015, March 17). *Hürriyet Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/we-will-not-make-you-the-president-hdp-co-chair-tells-erdogan.aspx?pageID=238&nID=79792&NewsCatID=338>
8. 'Demirtaş: Bugüne kadar 41 HDP seçim bürosu yakıldı.' (2015, May 5). *Radikal*. Retrieved from <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/demirtas-bugune-kadar-41-hdp-secim-burosu-yakildi-1350368/>

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