

A Spatial Perspective on Political Group Formation in Turkey after the 1971 Coup: the Kurdistan Workers' Party of Turkey (PKK)

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Abstract

The five years preceding the 1978 founding congress of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, PKK) are referred to by its members as the party's "existential period". In the PKK's "existential period" public spaces, such as university dormitories and canteens and student associations played an important role as meeting places, yet political formation occurred mainly in private spaces, especially private apartments and houses. This article considers this early history of the PKK from a spatial perspective. The main question addressed is how the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, as the group was known before its formal establishment, sustained itself spatially at a time when political life had been paralysed as a result of martial law and became subject to securitisation politics. Data for this article has been collected by means of interviews and the study of (auto)biographical texts.

Keywords

PKK – group formation – private – public

Nêrîneke mekanî li ser avabûna komên siyasi li Tirkiyeyê piştî derbeya 1971ê: Partiya Karkerê Kurdistan a Tirkiyeyê (PKK)

5 salên beriya 1978an, berî kongreya avabûna Partiya Karkerê Kurdistan, ji teref endamên wê ve wek qonaxa hebûnî ya partiyê tê nîşankirin. Di ‘qonaxa hebûnî’ ya PKKê de roleke gîrîng a mekanên giştî yên wek xewgeh û kantîn û komeleyên xwendekaran li zanîngehan hebû lewre ew wek cihêن civînê bûn, lê avabûna siyasi esasen li mekanên taybet, bi taybetî jî li mal û xaniyên taybet çêbû. Ev gotar wê dîroka pêşîn a PKKê bi nêrîneke mekanî dinirxîne. Pirsa bingehîn ew e ka Şoreşgerên Kurdistanê, wek ku berî avabûna xwe ya fermî dihatin zanîn, piştî ku jiyana siyasi jî ber qanûnên şer felc bûbû û tûşî siyaseteke rijd a asayîşê dibû, çawa karîn xwe li ser piya bigirin. Daneyên vê gotarê bi rîya hevpeyînan û xebatê (oto)biyografîk hatine berhevkirin.

Rwangeyekî şwênmend sebaret be drûstbûnî grupêkî siyasi le Turkiyay dway kudetay 1971: Partî Kirêkaranî Kurdistan le Turkiya (PKK)

Mawey pênc sallî pêş le damezranî kongrey Partî Kirêkaranî Kurdistan le sallî 1978, le layen endamanî em hîzbewey wekû “qonaşî wucûdî” amajey pê dekrê. Lem “qonaşî wucûdîyey” Partî Kirêkaranî Kurdistan feza giştîyekan, wekû jûre nawxoyîyekanî zankokan, çêştxorîyekan û encûmene xwêndkarîyekanî dewrêkî giringyan wek şwênmî kobûnewe debînî, le katêkda ta ew qonaşî riskanî siyasi zortir le feza taybetekan, be taybet apartman û mallî şexsîy hawwillatiyan debînra. Em wutare le rwangeyekî şwênmendewe serîncî mêtûy seretayî PKK dedat. Pirsyarî serekîy em twêjînewe bo ewe degerrêtewê ke çon şorrişgêrranî Kurdistan, pêş lewey be resmî wekû grupêk dabimez-rênen denasran, û herweha le ruwî şwêni çalakîyewe çon ewan twaniyan xoyan rabigirin le katêkda jiyanî siyasi, wek babetî siyasetêkî emniyewe seyr dekra û le derencamî maddeyekî yasayîyewe iffîc kirabû. Datay em wutare le rîgey wutuwêj û lêkollînewey deqekanî (xo)jiyanînamekanewe ko kirawetewe.

Introduction

The five years preceding the 1978 founding congress of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan*, PKK) are referred to by its members as the

party's "existential period".¹ During this time, a process of group formation took place, in which a distinctive ideology was crafted, a kindred spirit forged, and a political organisation established (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012: 9). This process of group formation followed the 1971 military coup, which thoroughly repressed and demoralised the left and a newly re-emerging Kurdish movement (Ahmad, 1993: 160; Gunes, 2012). In the PKK's "existential period" public spaces, such as university dormitories and canteens and student associations, played an important role as meeting place, yet political formation occurred mainly in private spaces, especially private apartments and houses (Akkaya, 2016). This article considers this early history of the PKK from a spatial perspective. The main question addressed is how the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, as the group was known before its formal establishment, sustained itself spatially at a time when politics had been paralysed as a result of martial law² and became subject to securitisation politics (Ahmad 1993: 150). Based on interviews and (auto)biographical material, this article mainly covers the period 1973–77 in Ankara, where the initial process of PKK group formation occurred, before the group dispersed and disseminated its work in other regions.

Analysis of Turkey's Kurdish issue from a spatial perspective is not entirely new (see e.g. Öktem, 2004, 2005; Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015), but spatial analyses are still relatively scarce. This is also the case for studies about the PKK. Most studies present a temporal analysis, looking at the emergence and rise of the PKK, and changes over time. This article will discuss how political relations were established, taking as axiomatic that political and social existence is also spatial existence. It was the thinker Henry Lefebvre who once made it clear that a social or political existence that does not produce its own space is condemned to be subordinated or disappear:

Any 'social existence' aspiring or claiming to be 'real', but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the 'cultural' realm. It would fall to the level of folklore and sooner or later disappear altogether, thereby immediately losing its identity, its denomination and its feeble degree of reality (Lefebvre, 1991: 53).

¹ Duran Kalkan in an interview with Cihan Özgür, 25-11-2014, Stêrk TV. See also Akkaya, A. H. (2005). *Ateşten Tarih*, DVD documentary. Dusseldorf & Brussels, BRD/Roj. All translations are the author's own.

² On April 27, 1971 martial law was declared in Adana, Ankara, Eskişehir, İstanbul, İzmir, Kocaeli, Sakarya, Zonguldak, Diyarbakır, Hatay and Siirt, remaining in effect for 31 months (Nye, 1977: 219).

So what was the space that sustained the **PKK** in becoming real, in becoming a, or maybe even the, main political actor on the left and in the Kurdish movement at the time of the military coup in 1980?

Before presenting a spatial analysis of group formation, a background will be sketched against which **PKK** group formation took place. This is a background in which emerging possibilities for legal avenues for political change became firmly closed by the 1971 military coup, but also one in which the left in Turkey, from which the **PKK** emerged, began to emancipate itself from Kemalism and develop an autonomous position. In the following paragraphs, a spatial reassembling of the political left after the 1971 coup is discussed, particularly in relation to the emergence of the Kurdistan Revolutionaries and its spatial politics of association. It is evident that when public space is closed or only accessible on via state consent (Cornwall, 2004), thus excluding the unwanted (Baud and Nainan, 2008) and supressing discontent and difference (as was the case in Turkey following the coups of 1971 and 1980, and in the aftermath of the failed coup of 2016), then private space may become an important political space and meeting place from which opposition and resistance emerge (Polletta, 1999: 6).

The 1971 Coup and the End of Public Politics

The **PKK** was formed between the two military coups of 1971 and 1980, but another coup, that of 1960, formed an important background to the process of group formation. The 1960 coup brought with it significant changes that were yet ambiguous in character. The post-coup 1961 constitution gave wider rights to the populace but also formalised military tutelage. On the one hand, it empowered civil society through an explicit recognition of the freedom of thought and association, guarantee of social and economic rights, and with clear checks and balances of the executive powers; on the other hand, it introduced a military control mechanism over political decision-making through the creation of a so-called advisory board to the cabinet, the National Security Council, which included the Chief of the General Staff and the commanders of the land, sea, and air forces (Ahmad, 1993: 11). The 1960s did not only witness political changes, moreover, but also some important social developments, such as a growing industrial working class (Zürcher, 2004: 254), mainly as a result of import substitution industrialisation (Bayar, 1996: 777) and a rising student population as a result of a government-sponsored scholarship programme. Many of the students who played a role in the process of **PKK** group formation had come to Ankara under the government scholarship program.

The foundation of the socialist Workers Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TIP*) by trade unions in 1961 was a sign of the changing political and social conditions. Reflecting optimism for change and fuelled by the new constitution, economic growth, and an emerging political consciousness, the party adhered to the idea that capitalism had advanced in Turkey and that a peaceful transition to socialism was possible. In Turkey, people advocating this political position were referred to as “socialist revolutionaries” (Lipovsky, 1992; Zürcher, 2004: 255; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012: 13). Another current emerged around the Federation of Thinking Clubs (*Fikir Kulupleri Federasyonu*), a socialist student and youth organisation established at Ankara University in 1965 and in 1969 renamed the Revolutionary Youth (*Devrimci Gençlik*, or *Dev-Genç*). Within these clubs, the idea was developed that Turkey was still a semi-feudal society dominated by imperialist (US) forces. It was argued that a national-democratic revolution based on an alliance of workers, peasants and progressive forces within the bourgeoisie, which would be anti-feudal and anti-imperialist in character, should precede a socialist revolution. These “national-democratic revolutionaries” were convinced that violent force was necessary to bring about the change required (Lipovsky, 1992; Zürcher, 2004: 255–6; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012: 13). Considering Kemalism a progressive force and marrying democracy with authoritarianism (Örmeci, 2010), these national-democratic revolutionaries thought that the revolution likely would take place by means of a coup by progressive officers.³

Against the context of revolutionary strategy, and the role of the military, an important debate took place in the 1960s which had a profound impact on the TIP. This debate centred on the question of whether the Ottoman state was a feudal state, like Western countries had been, or whether it should be considered an Asiatic despotic state. Those who argued Turkey was a (semi-) feudal state, reasoned that the next necessary stage was a bourgeois revolution. However, if the Ottoman Empire had to be characterised (after Marx) as an Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP), Turkey was not a semi-feudal state (Ulus, 2011: 76), and it did not follow that the next revolution should be bourgeois-led. If an Asiatic despotic state, the main contradiction was not with a feudal class, but with the state bureaucracy being the dominant class (Tuncer, 2008: 93). The discussion on the mode of production represented an important attempt to read the history of Turkey as different from the West. This marked an ideological break with Kemalism, which had oriented itself strongly towards the West (Aydin and Ünüvar, 2007: 1082; Tuncer, 2008: 22).

³ Communists made up two other currents, comprising a Maoist group, and the Pro-Soviet Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP*).

Relatedly, the proponents of the AMP thesis did not consider the Kemalists as a progressive force, but as a repressive class. Originally developed by Sencer Divitçioğlu⁴ and Idris Küçükömer (Kayalı, 2007: 1103), it was Mehmet Ali Aybar, leading the TİP between 1962 and 1969, who advanced the AMP thesis against those who defended change through a military coup and a strong state. It was argued that the main contradiction in an AMP is that of the relationship between the people and a repressive state. Those who considered the Ottoman Empire as feudal argued for a revolution from above in which the people, in alliance with a progressive bureaucracy and the military and by means of a coup, would bring about change. In the AMP reading, the military and bureaucracy were regarded as the dominant class themselves and thus unable to play a revolutionary role. The AMP analysis thus provided the left in Turkey with a theoretical argument to develop itself not only autonomously from but also in opposition to the state, emancipating itself from Kemalist state tutelage (Ulus 2011: 80). The emphasis on the contradiction between people and state in the AMP was one of the reasons why Kurdish political activists were attracted to the TİP, which became the first legal party to recognise the existence of Kurds and the Kurdish issue as a product of state repression, assimilation and deprivation of rights (Ulus, 2011: 75–80). The party thus became an autonomous space in which discontent and difference could be discussed – but it was banned after the 1971 coup.

Within the current of “national-democratic revolutionaries” an important break occurred over the character of Kemalism. In 1970, two illegal organisations emerged from the “national democratic revolution” current – the People’s Liberation Army of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu*, THKO) and the People’s Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi*, THKP-C). In 1972, the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist*, TKP/ML) emerged from a Maoist current. These were organisations that believed only an armed struggle guided by a political party could bring the necessary changes to the country. They criticised the idea that a socialist revolution could be realised through a coup and took the position that the revolution would have to be proletarian, with peasants forming a main force of support (THKO, 1972; Çayan, 2008). All three,

⁴ Based on the AMP analysis, Sencer Divitçioğlu would argue that the CHP, and its embedment in the state bureaucracy and army, was a right-wing party, and the Democratic Party, with its popular support a progressive party (Aydın and Ünüvar, 2007: pp. 1082–1088). In a somewhat similar vein, intellectuals characterised the AKP in its first years as a progressive party vis-a-vis the Kemalist CHP.

but in particular the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist – Leninist (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist*, TKP-ML), took a critical standpoint towards Kemalism, regarding it as a form of fascism representing the comprador-bourgeoisie and feudal landlords (STMA, 1988: 2194).

This emergence of the left in the 1960s, and its emancipation from Kemalism, came together with a re-emerging Kurdish movement demanding a better life and political rights, which developed along two (intertwining) currents (Gündoğan, 2015: 28–9). The first was a nationalist Kurdish current represented by the Turkey Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Türkiye Kurdistan Demokratik Partisi*, TKDP), a sister party to the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*, PDK). The TKDP was established in 1965, and was the most influential Kurdish political party up to the beginning of the 1970s, although probably also the only one (Gunes, 2012), before it disintegrated as a result of infighting and the unsolved murders of its leadership. The second current comprised the TİP. The party provided a legal platform for political actions. At its fourth congress, the TİP decided to establish a convention to investigate the Kurdish issue, which until then had been referred to by the euphemism the “Eastern question”.⁵ The two currents came together and worked in the organisation of the “Eastern Meetings”, a series of demonstrations organised in Kurdish cities in 1967 voicing Kurdish demands against economic exploitation and state repression (Gündoğan, 2015: 411). In 1969, the Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Hearths (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Oacakları*, DDKO)⁶ were established, a legal platform for the articulation of Kurdish concerns (Bozarslan, 2009: 346).

Since the glory of the nation was defined by the Kemalist regime in terms of the degree to which its subjects responded to the ideal of a Turkish cultural identity, cultural difference and therefore the expression and even the mention of a Kurdish identity became perceived as a national security threat. In 1970, prior to the coup, the Turkish military had started commando operations in the southeast, in what we today would call a “pre-emptive” strike against the perceived risk of a rising voice for Kurdish rights. Under the pretext of “confiscating weapons”, commandos brought violence and humiliation to the villages, collecting people in the middle of the village, stripping men and women naked, and beating them until they bled. Some villages were allegedly raided by commando units and subject to this treatment up to nine

5 It was TİP's mention of the 'Kurdish issue' that would lead to its closure in 1971, shortly after the military coup.

6 The DDKO was closed about six weeks after the coup, on April 26, 1971 (Doğanoğlu, 2016).

times that year (Cem, 1971). However, the military operations in the 1970s had only led to a radicalisation of the Kurds, their perception of Kurdistan as a colony, and the need to engage in a decolonisation struggle in Turkey (Bozarslan, 2009: 346–7).

While the left was on the rise, the parliament in Ankara was divided and the government paralysed. On March 12, 1971, the military presented a memorandum to Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel in which the general staff demanded a strong government that would put an end to social unrest and carry out reforms in a Kemalist spirit (Zürcher, 2004: 257). The military held Demirel responsible for driving the country into “anarchy, fratricidal strife, and social and economic unrest,” and demanded “the formation, within the context of democratic principles of a strong and credible government, which will neutralise the current anarchical situation and which, inspired by Atatürk’s views, will implement the reformist laws envisaged by the constitution” (Ahmad, 1993: 148). The memorandum was a thinly veiled threat to intervene if the government did not step down. Demirel, who had no hold over the assembly, and was unable to give direction to his government, stepped down, leaving the vacuum to be filled by the military. It would take until the elections of October 14, 1973, over 30 months, before the military would eventually step down to allow a coalition government (Zürcher, 2004: 258).

Initially, many had thought that the coup had been organised by radical-reformist officers, the same who had supported the constitution of 1961. This turned out not to be the case; by means of the “memorandum coup”, the general staff not only wanted to put an end to the incapable government of Demirel, but also to pre-empt a possible intervention by young progressive officers. According to a statement by the new government, four dangers had made the coup necessary: the extreme left, the urban guerrilla, the extreme right, and Kurdish separatism (Olson, 1973: 202). The “restoration of law and order” emerged as a priority for the military, and in practise meant crushing the left and Kurdish organisations. Under the influence of the military interveners, the constitution was amended twice, cutting back on individual rights and the power of the judiciary while increasing the power of the executive and the military. The ultra-nationalists, who had been responsible for much of the street violence, meanwhile remained untouched. Their militants operated as vigilantes, and their publications continued to circulate freely. An important reason why the ultra-nationalists could continue their activities and the left and Kurdish organisations were targeted was the refusal of the latter to discuss the problems in Turkey within the discourse of nationalism (Ahmad, 1993: 156).

Reassembling Political Spaces

In the three years following the 1971 coup, the military empowered the state against civil society, installed special courts to deal with dissent quickly and ruthlessly, and put universities under political surveillance. A ban on meetings and gatherings and criminalisation of strikes and lockouts, along with the closure of organisations and the arrest of leaders, resulted in a collapse of the organised left (Ahmad, 1993: 156; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012: 18). Cemil Bayık, part of the current PKK leadership, who went to Ankara in 1971, recalls the period thus:

Before the coup, a variety of leftist groups were active both within and outside the university. After the coup, all organisations were banned, members arrested and the revolutionary movement destroyed. There were continuous operations against the left, arrests, prosecutions and lawsuits. Organised activities came to a halt. In that period, the political consciousness of the youth was high, but people could not become active in an organised way, because all the leftist organisations had been destroyed by the coup and there was a prohibition on all types of political gatherings. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication October 30, 2014)

The closure of public space resulted in the emergence of the political as a private affair. Emphasising individual relationships as the basic unit of politics after the military coup, Bayık continues thus:

So, politics took place within the context of personal bonds. There were groups of friends, of school friends, of people you knew from your home-town, who came together, read together, discussed together. This continued until the end of 1973. So, in this period 1971 to 1973, the bonds were not organisational bonds, but bonds of friendship between people who met at school, the university, the faculty (Cemil Bayık, personal communication October 30, 2014).

Thus, the period following the 1971 coup and preceding the general elections in 1973, which came with a partial re-opening of political space, was marked by an absence of publicly visible and active political organisations on the left, and what remained were groups of friends. Remnants of the TKHO, THKP-C and TKP-ML continued to exist, but they were disoriented and weak. Ali Haydar Kaytan, like Cemil Bayık part of the PKK's current leadership who went to Ankara in 1971, recalls:

In 1971, I started my study at the Political Science Faculty [at Ankara University]. (...) When I was still in high school, I had leftist sympathies. When I registered at the Political Science Faculty of Ankara University, I opened my eyes to the revolutionary movement. Ankara University was an important university. It was the school where Mahir Çayan studied. As a result, the THKP-c was influential in this period, both ideologically and action-wise. But most of its cadre was in prison; those who played an important role in the movement were in prison. Those who left behind were mainly sympathisers.⁷

The left, reformist and revolutionary, had been destroyed, and what remained were circles of people (*çevreler*) who knew each other through familial bonds or regional ties (*hemşehrilik*), from previous political activities or from the campus, and were mainly active as reading and discussion groups. The planned elections of October 14, 1973, however, created new opportunities for political action. Some leftist circles met in the context of the campaign of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) led by the young Bülent Ecevit, who voiced support for a general amnesty for those arrested after the coup (Suat Bozkuş, personal communication April 24, 2010). Circles referred to as "*doktorcular*", followers of the political school of thought of communist leader and theoretician Hikmet Külvüç, a former leader of the Communist Party of Turkey TKP, took the initiative of establishing a legal association in 1973.⁸ The initiative to establish a legal association was met with scepticism from those who were convinced that the formal establishment and registration of an association would, in practice, just be an announcement of identity and surrender to the police. However, the *doktorcular* insisted.

Initially we tried to establish an association for students at Middle East Technical University (METU), but we did not get permission from the police. Only one association per university or faculty was allowed, and right-wing students had already established one, so we decided to establish an association for all students in Ankara. (Suat Bozkuş, personal communication April 24, 2010)

In November 1973, to the surprise of many, the establishment of this association was permitted. The Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association

⁷ Ali Haydar Kaytan in an interview with Cihan Özgür, 25-11-2014, Stêrk TV.

⁸ Later, in June 16, 1974, these same circles would establish the Socialist Workers Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Sosyalist İşçi Partisi*, TSİP).

(*Ankara Demokratik Yüksek Öğrenim Derneği, ADYÖD*) started its activities in an apartment on the İzmir Avenue in Kızılay, in the centre of Ankara (Suat Bozkuş, personal communication, April 24, 2010). The association had a board of seven people, three members from the circles of “*doktorcular*” and four independent members. Following the official establishment of the association for all (leftist) students, it was argued that it should have a board representing all students, and not just the “*doktorcular*”. Thus, shortly after the formal establishment of the association, it was decided to turn ADYÖD into a joint association for the left as a whole (with the exception of a radical Maoist group following Doğu Perinçek, regarded as state agents). Elections were organised in which about 200 delegates participated, allegedly representing ten times that number of students, and eleven representatives were elected, who were then added to the official board of seven. Among these new board members were Abdullah Öcalan and Haki Karer, who would both play important roles in the process of group formation leading to the establishment of the PKK, and Nasuh Mitap and Taner Akçam, who came from the THKP-C tradition and would play an important role in founding the left wing movement Revolutionary Path (*Devrimci Yol*), predecessor of today’s Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlik ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP*) (Suat Bozkuş, personal communication, April 24, 2010). Duran Kalkan, who is also part of the current PKK leadership that went to Ankara in 1971, comments on this period as follows:

In that period we continuously had discussions. It was part of our life. After the amnesty [in May 1974], it also became easier to find and read particular books. We discussed the situation in the world, in Turkey, the attitude of the left towards the coup, the trust of parts of the left in the army, yet when the army took power, it attacked the left. Many had expected that the army would make a revolution, and they were astonished by the actual developments. So where did this expectation of a revolution by the army come from? What does it say about the political reality in Turkey?
(Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

The “national-democratic revolutionaries” had agitated for a violent take-over of power, either through a coup d'état or armed struggle. Mihri Belli, the main ideologue within the current of these revolutionaries, expressed his support for a reconciliation of the revolutionary movement with Kemalist ideology, through a coalition of workers and peasants, or the organisations representing them, and the left-leaning section of the military. Belli stressed the importance of an independent (not party-affiliated) student militancy, which, he hoped, would create a situation in which radical officers would seize power and form

a leftist junta (Kaypakkaya, 2014: 357; Samim, 1981: 70–71). Others, too, within the leftist movement, such as Hikmet Kivilcimli, thought of the “progressive military” as a natural partner. As Duran Kalkan reflected:

Hikmet Kivilcimli thought he could give directions to the leaders of the coup.⁹ On the one hand, the army massacres the Kurds, and on the other hand, he thinks the army will initiate a revolution. Mihri Belli went to Greece to join the guerrilla, to fight with them, but when the Kurds rose up, he did not show interest and looked with suspicion at their resistance. This is the tragedy of the left. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

In spite of their radical political outlook and practice, the national-democratic revolutionaries did not dispose of Kemalism. Muzaffer Erdost, an ideologue of the national-democratic revolution thesis, flirted with Turkish nationalism, arguing that it was imperialism that was weakened by the development of nationalism, not socialism (Lipovsky, 1992: 111–12). However, the military took a merciless position vis-a-vis the left, says Duran Kalkan, referring to the left:

They were really surprised. They had expected a left coup, yet in Kizildere and Mamak they [the military] killed the left without even bothering to negotiate.¹⁰ We argued that without looking at Kurdistan and the Kurdish issue, the relation of oppressed and oppressor, colonised and coloniser, one cannot understand Turkey and cannot make a good analysis of the situation. By looking at Kurdistan, one could understand developments in Turkey, the coup, better. These were things we discussed. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014).

ADYÖD facilitated a coming together of an orphaned left and provided a platform for discussion. A year after its establishment, however, on December 4, 1974, police raided the association, arresting 162 students after a violent confrontation with “fascist” students. This was followed, on December 10, by

⁹ Hikmet Kivilcim had tried desperately to contact the so-called “progressive” military junta that came to power in 1960, hoping to work together with them, attempts which were in vain (Ünal, 1998: 123).

¹⁰ The THKP-C leadership and THKO cadre, 10 people in total, were killed in a shoot-out with the army in Kizildere village (Tokat) on March 30, 1972, after they had kidnapped three civilians working at a NATO base in order to bargain with the authorities for an exchange or to remove the death penalty imposed on the three imprisoned THKO leaders detained in Mamak prison in Ankara. The death penalty was carried out on May 6, 1972.

its closure under the Ankara Martial Law Command (*Ankara Sıkıyönetim Komutanlığı*).

The Emergence of the PKK

Shortly after the closure of ADYÖD, a new association was established under the name, Association for Higher Education in Ankara (*Ankara Yüksek Öğrenim Derneği*, AYÖD). Thinking that the association had lost its dynamic, Öcalan, Karer, and others did not participate in its establishment (Sayın, 1997), while for their part, the founders of AYÖD did not want the group around Öcalan to become involved either; Haki Karer, a former board member of ADYÖD, was not allowed to AYÖD meetings (Yüce, 1999: 244–46). In 1975, the group around Öcalan settled on a name, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries (*Kurdistan Devrimcileri*).¹¹ Others knew them as *Apocu*, followers of Apo, the nickname of Abdullah Öcalan (“apo” is also Kurdish for “paternal uncle”) and also the National Liberation Army (*Ulusal Kurtuluş Ordusu*, UKO).¹²

In 1974, the aim was still to re-establish a revolutionary left, as Duran Kalkan confirms:

In the beginning, the left managed to stay as one. (...) Within ADYÖD there was much sympathy for organisations that had resisted the coup, especially for THKP-C, THKO and TKP-ML. There were not yet separate organisations, but fluid groups of sympathisers. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

Though group profiles developed, there was no organizational separation. The different groupings had worked together closely, and in spite of differences, a unity of the left was highly valued.

We had already developed a group profile but also had intensive contacts with others in the left. The revolutionary left had put the Kurdish issue on the political agenda but had not yet liberated itself completely from Kemalism. We critiqued, but also respected them, with the exemption of

¹¹ Kurdish: *Şoresgerên Kurdistan*.

¹² In their court defence in 1981, Mazlum Doğan, Kemal Pir, Hayri Durmuş rejected the names Apocu and UKO. The party, they said, was called the PKK and was not the product of one person. See: http://www.diyarbakirzindani.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=6&id=16&Itemid=39. Last date of access, August 20, 2008.

Aydınlık (the group associated with Doğu Perinçek), who raised the flag of Kemalism. (Anonymous,¹³ December 30, 2010)

However, with the release of the old cadre and sympathisers, arrested in the aftermath of the 1971 coup, differences were turned into boundaries:

In May 1974, the Ecevit-Erbakan government announced a general amnesty, which resulted in the release of many of the imprisoned cadres of the old left. This contributed significantly to the re-establishment of different organisations and parties, which eventually was reflected in the youth movement. (...)

When ADYÖD was closed, a new association was established. This new association did not represent all of us. Sympathisers of the THKP-C, who were many now, took over the association, in spite of objections of the other currents, who made pleas for a common association. Öcalan was among those who objected, saying that a joint board of the association could contribute to the wholeness of the revolutionary movement, but this was rejected by the THKP-C sympathisers (...) AYÖD became the association of Dev-Yol. This was an important step towards separate group formation within the left. We had warned them a lot, don't do it, you'll damage the movement and yourselves, let's have an inclusive association, with representatives from all groups, but they refused. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

After the closure of ADYÖD and establishment of AYÖD as an association of Dev-Yol, others too started to establish their own associations and/or journals, not the group around Öcalan, however, who continued to meet but in private flats, forging a close group of kindred spirits:

The five years before the establishment of the party, the period between 1973 and 1978 was the existential period, the birth period, the creational period, the period in which the leadership emerged. All that defines the PKK, the principles, standards, characteristics, took shape in this period. One could say this was the period in which the foundation was laid, the period that formed the spirit, feelings, standards, principles, understandings, style of struggle and lifestyle. This was, of course, the result of huge efforts and struggles (...) by hundreds, thousands of people. (...) It was

¹³ Anonymous studied at the Gazi Institute in Ankara. He took part in group meetings in Ankara in 1973–4, but moved to another city in Turkey in 1974.

the foundation on which the party could exist (...) which kept the party on its feet. Without this, the party would have existed in a vacuum. (...) The **PKK** was not a party established around a table.¹⁴

During the meetings, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries discussed and analysed the situation in Turkey, in Kurdistan, the nature of the political struggle, and the political organisation necessary for the fulfilment of this struggle. The group close to Öcalan identified two main problems in the left, one organisational, the other ideological. At the level of organisation, the left's urgency to act and its hurry to engage in political action was criticised (PKK, 1982: 92; Sayın, 1997; Doğan, 1992; personal communication with anonymous, December 30, 2010). The Kurdistan Revolutionaries were convinced that hasty organisation and immediate action had followed each other apace, poorly thought out and under-planned. This had made the left vulnerable to state repression.

Öcalan argued on several occasions that the **PKK** developed from the experiences, actually the mistakes, made in the organisation of the armed struggle by the revolutionary left in Turkey, in particular those of the THKP-C, THKO and TKP-ML. These revolutionary parties, Öcalan reasoned, had been defeated only a short time after their establishment because they entered into a direct confrontation with the state while they were still weak. With this knowledge, the group around Öcalan decided to organise itself thoroughly before embarking on such action (Sayın, 1997: 71–83). Instead of rushing into confrontation, they took five years to establish a party and then waited another year before publicly announcing its existence. And it was not until 1984, some eleven years after the process of group formation had begun, that the **PKK** eventually initiated its armed struggle against the state, only after, that is, it established spaces from and in which it could sustain itself.

In addition to organisational weakness, it was argued the development of the left was also hindered ideologically. A clear political and theoretically rigorous line was lacking. Firstly, Kemalist nationalism, or social-chauvinism, formed an obstacle to the progress of an autonomous left (PKK 1978, 1982). As analysed by the emergent **PKK**, the social chauvinism of Kemalism was rooted strongly in the left and prevented it from functioning as a genuine force of opposition, since it was unable to escape the very political reality it was struggling against. Secondly, after its re-establishment in the 1970s, the left had divided along sectarian lines. As Cemil Bayık suggested:

¹⁴ Duran Kalkan in an interview with Cihan Özgür, 25-11-2014, Stêrk TV.

In the period the PKK emerged, socialism had become fragmented. The Soviet Union considered itself the only correct representative of socialism. The Chinese considered themselves the only correct representatives of socialism. The Albanians considered themselves the only correct representatives of socialism. Everyone looked at the others as capitalist and imperialist. This had a great impact on the left in Turkey. A part of the left took Russia as an example, some took China or Albania as their example, and everyone considered the others as their enemy. At the time, people asked us too who we took as our centre. We said we do not take anyone as our centre. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication October 30, 2014)

The left, it was argued by those involved in the process of group formation eventually leading to the establishment of the PKK, had a sectarian and uncritical mentality. This resulted in heated debates over the nature of developments in the Soviet Union and China, and to a lesser extent Albania, and political fragmentation:

Within the left, hell on earth could break loose over debates over whether China was [more] revolutionary or the Soviet Union. The Kurdistan Revolutionaries did not take part in this. They paid respect to all those who struggled but did not try to establish in a black-and-white way who was wrong and who was right. We tried to learn from successes and failures. (Rıza Altun, personal communication October 30, 2014)

In the course of the 1970s, several Kurdish organisations were also established. They were prone to similar sectarian processes as in the Turkish left, such as a division between parties like the Socialist Party of Kurdistan-Turkey (*Türkiye Kürdistan Sosyalist Partisi*, TKSP), more widely known by the name of its journal, Path of Freedom (*Özgürlik Yolu*; in Kurdish, *Riya Azadî*), which had a pro-Soviet orientation, and Kawa, which had a pro-China orientation, and later split over Mao's "Three Worlds Theory" into pro-Chinese (Dengê-Kawa) and pro-Albanian (Kava-Red) factions. There were also frictions in the Kurdish movement in Iraq that affected the Kurdish parties in Turkey, leading to a split in Rizgarî, with Rizgarî orienting itself towards the KDP and the break-away Ala-Rizgarî orienting itself towards the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

These Kurdish parties, like the parties on the left, mainly organised themselves through the establishment of journals and associations. These journals and associations were more identity instruments for distinguishing themselves and making polemics than means to organise (Akkaya, 2013). Moreover,

the Kurdistan Revolutionaries did not consider the establishment of an association or journal as serious political action.

Among the Kurds, there were various organisations. They established associations and journals and talked about Kurdistan being a colony of Turkey. Yet their understanding of organising did not match the analysis. You cannot end colonialism with an association and a journal, and all in a legal way. The other side represses everything with violence. To fight a colonial state, one needs a serious ideological, political, military, organised system. Here we see that we distinguished ourselves from the others. We did not take the establishment of an association and journal very seriously. One military coup and they destroy you. Everything is under their control. It does not contribute to a Kurdish resistance, Kurdish existence – it is inconsistent. It is not revolutionary, not serious, not struggle. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

After the closing of ADYÖD, those following Öcalan did not turn to the establishment of a new association or journal. They did not consider the establishment of associations and journals a serious form of political struggle (PKK, 1982: 92; Sayın, 1997; Doğan, 1992).

A Spatial Politics of Association

The people in the group that would eventually become the PKK decided to organise themselves differently. They formed a tightly structured and well-disciplined but semi-open network, mainly engaged in discussion (Kaytan, 2006; Karasu, 2006; Kalkan, 2008). To others, the network was open by invitation, mostly in the form of a briefing by Abdullah Öcalan. The group members met in the secrecy of the flats where they lived, engaging in long and intensive discussions with one another. In Turkish, this process was conceptualised in terms of "*yoğunlaşmak*", a typical PKK term, literally meaning "to become intense" (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012). In practice, it was (and indeed continues to be) an intense process of thinking, discussion, reflection and (self)-criticism, a kind of focused group study. Sometimes two or three meetings a day took place, with 10 to 30 participants. The frequent, long intensive discussions at these meetings contributed to the carving out of a distinctive ideology, the enlisting of new recruits and the forging of a close camaraderie (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012: 22). Kemal Pir would later say about this period:

We were busy convincing people to work with us; that was the kind of work I was engaged in (...) If three hours were needed to convince people, we would be busy for three hours, if 300 hours were needed to convince them, we would be busy for 300 hours. We were working to convince people (...).¹⁵

Newcomers were introduced to the group through personal contacts. Initially, these contacts were established at the university and through political actions:

In Ankara, the youth movement was very big – so how did people meet? They met in class. At the time, there was a separation between revolutionaries and fascists at the university. At the faculties, revolutionary students knew each other. When they met one another at events and witnessed their commitment, this created a sense of closeness. In this way, we became aware of one another. This is also how we came to know one another – the Kurdistan Revolutionaries emerged from praxis. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

The university, dormitories, class, and cantinas were all important places for meeting and recruiting people. Other places where recruitment took place were associations and unions:

ADYÖD was an important place, Turkey Teachers' Union offices, TMMOB [the chamber of architects and engineers], the Political Sciences Faculty [of Ankara University] and Law dormitories, student flats, and then union offices and others. These were all public places (...) Political Sciences [Ankara University] was a faculty where the leftist students were strong. Next to Political Sciences was the Law Faculty. They had their own dormitories. In between was the Journalism-Publishing School. In all of these, the leftist students were in control. This was a big area where leftist students could come together. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)

This was also how Duran Kalkan, Cemil Bayık and Kemal Pir met. Both Kalkan and Bayık took the university's preparatory class in 1971, while Bayık and Pir started studying at the Language, History and Geography Faculty, where they mixed in leftist circles:

¹⁵ http://www.diyarbakirzindani.com/index.php?Itemid=39&id=65&option=com_content&task=view (last date of access, August 20, 2008).

We started university in the same year. We met during a fight with fascists in the university canteen. Our friendship developed from that moment and turned into a political relationship. Because he trusted me, he told me one day that he had some friends who had ideas about the Kurdish issue. He asked me if I wanted to meet them. "Why not?" I said (...) One day after class we went there together (...) After dinner he [Abdullah Öcalan] asked me what I thought about the Kurdish issue. At the time my ideas about the Kurdish issue were very limited. If there is a revolution in Turkey, the Kurds will also embrace freedom, I said (...) After that he talked with me for four-to-five hours about the Kurdish issue (...) It changed my perspective. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication, October 30, 2014)

Cemil Bayık joined the group and would stay with Abdullah Öcalan and Haydar Kaytan in the same flat. For his part, Cemil Bayık introduced Duran Kalkan to the group. Haki Karer recruited, among others, Mazlum Doğan.¹⁶

The foundation for the establishment of the PKK was made in October or November 1972, when Abdullah Öcalan met Kemal Pir and Haki Karer. Earlier that year, in April 1972, Öcalan was arrested and imprisoned for his involvement in the organisation of a university boycott to protest the killing of the THKP-C leadership in the shoot-out in Kızıldere. He was released at the end of October. Until his imprisonment, Öcalan had stayed in a student dormitory, but as a result of his engagement in political activities and his conviction he could not return there (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014). Looking for a flat to stay in, he talked with Doğan Firtina, who was studying at Ankara University with Öcalan and with whom he had been imprisoned with. Firtina told Öcalan he had two friends, like him from the Black Sea coastal region, with sympathies for the left. Kemal Pir was a sympathiser of the THKP-C and Haki Karer of the THKO. Firtina gave Öcalan an address in the

¹⁶ Mazlum Doğan was born in 1955 in Teman, a village in the Karakoçan district of Elazığ province. Doğan studied to be a teacher at Eskişehir and Bahkesir before starting a course in economics at Hacettepe University in Ankara in 1974. He committed suicide by hanging on the evening of the Kurdish New Year, the March 21, 1982. In PKK historiography, it is said that before killing himself, he lit three matches (symbolising the fire of Newroz, a major ritual celebration for Kurds, public observance of which was banned). His act of suicide is celebrated as an act of resistance against the torture he and other detainees were submitted to in Diyarbakir prison, regarded as a symbol for not surrendering to the daily tyranny or conforming to the humiliating prison regime (PKK prisoners refused to wear prison uniforms, sing the national anthem or repeat the oath of being "proud to be a Turk").

Emek district of Ankara (Cemil Bayık, personal communication 30-10-2014). After they met, Kemal Pir, Haki Karer and Abdullah Öcalan stayed in the flat for about a year, to the end of 1973 or the beginning of 1974, after which they dispersed to flats in other parts of Ankara. In the first year after Pir, Karer and Öcalan met, group formation, discussions and education, took place at the flat in Emek:

In the beginning, we had one flat. Later we rented another flat. The entire cadre were educated in those two flats. We used them as education centres. Of course the coming and going of people could attract attention and create unrest among neighbours, who could inform the police. We took this into consideration. People came together to the flat and not at all times or when people could see them. They came at times when people were not at home or not at the balconies of their flats. We also told the neighbours that we were students and that we could be visited by university friends to work together. We also made sure that we did not create a nuisance and behaved in a modest way. After a year, we changed the flats for new ones. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication October 30, 2014)

Meetings took place on a daily basis:

We met every night. We discussed socialism and also Stalin's work on the national question, which was just translated into Turkish. We discussed the status of Kurdistan as a colony. Sometimes 15 people participated in the meeting, sometimes 20 or 30. There was a permanent core of people, and others joined by invitation from the permanent members. Those invited could be friends from university or home. Some of them became members of the group, others left again. (anonymous, December 30, 2010)

In the ADYÖD period, in 1974, the flat in Emek where Pir, Karer, and Öcalan lived was vacated. Abdullah Öcalan, Ali Haydar Kaytan and Cemil Bayık then rented a flat in Yukarı Ayrancı, close to the Turkish Parliament. Haki Karer, Kemal Pir, and Duran Kalkan moved to a flat in Dikimevi. The two groups kept in touch through regular visits and meetings. In the next year, they moved again from the flat in Dikimevi to one in Anıttepe (Akkaya, 2005; 2016: 134). The three flats in Emek, Yukarı Ayrancı, and Dikimevi were crucial sites of ideological group formation and recruitment and provided a space for the development of the group from the end of 1972 until the beginning of 1975. The Kurdistan Revolutionaries rented flats close to Ankara University, but preferably not

neighbourhoods that were known to be “Alevi”, “Kurdish” or “revolutionary”, since these would be neighbourhoods under scrutiny by Turkish security forces and intelligence:

Aşağı Ayrancı was a good neighbourhood to stay. Dikimevi was not far from the Political Science Faculty [of Ankara University]. Close to Cebeci. The basement flats at the level were our preference. These we could pay for with the money we had. We did not have many resources. The only income we had was from our scholarships. Our families sometimes sent us food. In turn, every week two of us worked as a porter to earn some money. This is how we provided for our living and did our revolutionary work. We chose the flats where we lived at random. It would draw attention when we would be picky. We preferred not to stay in Alevi and revolutionary neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods were under constant police surveillance. The police would be able to identify who would enter and leave the neighbourhood. Because we had just started, we did not want to attract attention from the police. For that reason, we did not establish an association or journal, and we did not rent flats in places that would draw attention of the police. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication October 30, 2014)

Initially, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries did not settle in the neighbourhoods known as leftist, because they were under close supervision of the state. Yet these became important recruitment centres after the first group formation had taken place and the organisation aimed at further advancement. One of the first neighbourhoods where the PKK started to roll-out and recruit was Tuzluçayır, in the 1970s a “gecekondu” neighbourhood in Ankara with a large proportion of Alevi and Kurdish inhabitants (Akkaya, 2016: 147):

In Ankara, there were neighbourhoods like Tuzluçayır, Abidinpaşa and Mamak where many Kurdish Alevi lived and many leftists. In these neighbourhoods, fascist organisations were developed with the support of the police. Kemal Pir was the first who did organisational work in these neighbourhoods. He organised a struggle against fascist organisations and cleaned these three neighbourhoods. In these neighbourhoods, the left was king. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication October 30, 2014)

Rıza Altun, who has been member of the PKK Central Committee and Chairmanship Council and remains a high ranking PKK member, lived in Tuzluçayır.

At the time, he was a sympathiser of the THKO, and frequented an association close to the THKO in the neighbourhood:¹⁷

Our house ... We are of Kurdish background. Dersim. But we were exiled, from Dersim to Kayseri. The date of our exile is unknown. We don't know when we were deported, but we were resettled in Sarız, a district of Kayseri. Our Kurdish identity remained alive, however. At home, we always spoke Kurdish. We later moved to Ankara. That was in the 1960s. In Ankara, in our family, I grew up with a sympathy for the left. I sympathised with the THKO. In the neighbourhood, I went to leftist associations and met with leftists. In 1975, I heard of a group referred to as the Apocular. But what we heard was negative. They were compared to the [Turkish nationalist] MHP and referred to as Kurdish fascists, people who were aggressive, did not talk but fight. Such an image was created and such propaganda was made within the left. In the beginning, I did not give them much attention, but they were constantly on the agenda. One day I met Kemal Pir, and through him the others. The image created about them did not match with what I saw. They discussed the right of the Kurds to self-determination, and I immediately felt sympathy for this. (Rıza Altun, personal communication October 30, 2014)

Rıza Altun would join the movement, and the family house he lived in would subsequently become one of the movement's meeting places. This expanding network of houses, often changed to prevent discovery, formed the basis for the development of the group that would eventually establish the PKK. Not only in Ankara, but also in other cities in Turkey and the Kurdistan region, private spaces became the centres for political formation and public spaces, such as universities, dormitories and associations, functioned as meeting places and spaces for recruitment.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, "spatial analysis" did not simply refer to the ways in which people produce their material environment, but also and more specifically to the social relations established in the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Here,

¹⁷ The name of the association was the Tuzluçayır People's Cultural Association (*Tuzluçayır Halk Kültür Derneği*, THKD), a name chosen because it was close to the THKO (Akkaya, 2016: 147).

it is argued that such a spatial perspective contributes to our understanding of the process of group formation that resulted in the emergence of the *PKK*. It has been argued that for the process of group formation, private spaces were of crucial importance. Instead of turning “public”, as most leftist and Kurdish organizations did, and forming associations and journals as a means of polemics and identity politics about who represented the correct political line, the *PKK* turned “private” to discuss politics and strategy, and above all work on group formation and organization. The private spaces created enabled the establishment of associational ties through demonstrating the co-presence of others and the development and strengthening of a collective identity and ideology (Polletta, 1999: 25).

Although it is public space that is typically taken to be the “metaphorical concept referring to the various means through which citizens can deliberate” (Kingwell and Turmel, 2009: xiv), this article showed how politics after the 1971 coup in Turkey emerged from private spaces. After public space became securitised and structured according to strict rules of the state, leaving no venues of expression and appearance for oppositional voices and the expression of difference, a politics of resistance found its own space of appearance (*ibid.*: xiii). In the case discussed here, the closure of public space was followed by the employment of private spaces as meeting places. As such, private spaces obtained characteristics usually ascribed to public spaces. These private spaces functioned as sites of deliberation and association and political organisation, which were open to others on the basis of invitation. While political formation took place in spaces carrying a private form, namely the home, public spaces, such as dormitories, universities and associations, provided identification and recruitment possibilities. Thus, although public space is generally conceptualised as open and accessible and equated with the possibility of politics, private space is related to the home and the sphere of intimacy, and the public/private binary is used to demarcate the boundary of the political, in this case we see that the private form may obtain public and political characteristics, whereby the distinction between private and public becomes more performative than analytical.

The process of group formation is referred to by *PKK* members as its “existential period”. In the period 1973–78, a distinctive ideology was crafted, a kindred spirit forged, and a political organisation established in an interconnected network of private spaces. University canteens, student dormitories, youth associations, and later popular neighbourhoods, too, together formed an important area for identification of potential comrades and recruitment; however, the political formation took place in private apartments and houses. In the absence of legal venues to voice opposition and appear, with public space

securitised and society under military tutelage, political resistance found its space for organisation in and through private spaces, the home.

So when public space becomes “closed” or only available on “invitation” by the state, thus excluding and suppressing discontent and difference, such as in Turkey after the coups of 1971, 1980, and the aftermath of the failed coup of 2016, then private space may become an important political space and meeting place from which opposition and resistance emerge (Polletta, 1999: 6). With public space securitised, where appearance and speech were suppressed, private spaces played public functions: it was in these private spaces where speech and appearance became possible and from where a political and violent struggle was prepared for the decolonisation of Kurds and Kurdistan. Although the name of the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, or followers of Apo, circulated from the early mid-seventies, it was from this spatial context that the PKK emerged, mostly unnoticed by and invisible to the authorities. Without an office or an association and with a changing network of private flats, the group moved elusively within the city of Ankara, which they used as a base and point of departure for further proliferation. Giving a twist to Lefebvre’s claim, we could say that the PKK’s existence became real because it produced its own space.

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