

Reconstruction in the Midst of Rebellion: A Kurdish Case Study of Gender, Militancy, and Ideology in the MENA Region

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Abstract

Women's military participation, although becoming more prevalent in the fields of political science and gender studies, can be characterized as an anomalous outcome in the context of war. When women do participate, the temporary strides towards equality garnered as a result of their military contributions almost never endure during the reconstruction that takes place once conflict is resolved. The near-equality within military forces and enduring gender-based reforms achieved by Kurdish women in Northern Syria can be characterized as nothing other than extraordinary. The Syrian Women's Defense Units (YJA Star) first attracted national attention when images of armed Kurdish women fighting for the liberation of Kobani from the dominion of ISIS began circulating in the media. However, the social reconstruction that was taking place in the freshly liberated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria known as Rojava was largely overlooked by the press. I contend that the Kurdish case is unique in the context of women's militant movements. Not only did women find a way to participate militarily, an impressive feat in and of itself, they carved out space for themselves in the political reconstruction that occurred in the aftermath of the war against ISIS.

Explanations for Women's Participation in Militant Movements

The prevailing scholarship regarding women's participation in armed movements cites three broad explanations for this irregular outcome: opportunity structures, established ideology, and the nature of the conflict (Darden 459). "Opportunity structure," as defined by Darden, is a set of circumstances that facilitate women's participation in armed conflict when ordinarily women would be excluded from military affairs. For example, a heightened threat level can induce the incorporation of women into the ranks. Thus, changing the

opportunity structure, and shifting the nature of their contribution from medical support services to more combat-oriented roles. "Established ideology" refers to the widely accepted notion that egalitarian and communist ideologies are more conducive to women's participation due to their liberal ideas. "The nature of the conflict" represents how women's participation in military conflict is oftentimes highly contingent upon context, and may occur as a result of broader goals such as ethnic liberation or ousting a foreign power. Unfortunately, regardless of the motivation for inclusion of women in military action, expanded social and economic gains achieved through their

participation in armed conflict are rarely sustained. Even in the context of egalitarian or liberatory groups, when the liberation struggle is “won,” female soldiers are once again relegated to the home sphere and are rarely offered positions in the state or military (Darden 461). Therein lies the factor distinguishing the Kurdish women’s militant movement from other instances of armed female participation: the space garnered for women during conflict endured once the Northern Syrian region of Rojava was “liberated” from the dominion of ISIS. What’s more, the Kurdish women’s movement does not fall neatly under any of the aforementioned categories typically invoked to explain women’s participation in war.

Opportunity Structure

Opportunity structures were available for Kurdish women in the 1990s, as male leaders in the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) were arrested en masse. This left much of the income earning and political organizing to the women. However, once many of these men were released from prison and more men joined the party, women were not relegated to the sidelines; they would not allow it.

Ideology

The PKK’s charismatic leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was originally a communist ideologue who advocated for an independent Kurdish nation and ultimately placed women’s liberation at the center of the Kurdish Liberation Movement. Öcalan’s position on women, however, was not consistent, and evolved over time as more women became involved in the PKK and criticized the male hegemony predominant in Kurdish society (Al-Ali, Tas 2137). Öcalan

infused the movement with communist and egalitarian ideas from the outset, but he initially did not advocate for women’s equality.

Conflict Dynamics

The nature of this conflict was informed by years of abject discrimination against Kurds administered by the Turkish state. The Women’s Defense Units arose as part of a larger movement for Kurdish liberation from the Turkish Kemalist state and ISIS, but traditional Kurdish society was unequivocally patriarchal. There was no inherent characteristic of Kurdish liberation that called for women’s equality; Kurdish women took initiative to advance their feminist agenda in the midst of fighting for their rights as an ethnic minority. The existing opportunity structures, prevailing communist ideology, and nature of the conflict (ethnic liberation) were not what spurred Kurdish women into action. The enduring gender-related reforms produced by this movement are a result of a women’s movement tailored by Kurdish women, for Kurdish women with the aim of transforming patriarchal Kurdish society while pursuing Kurdish sovereignty. However, these women are seldom credited for being instrumental in their own enfranchisement.

Turkey, the Kurdish People, and the Syrian Civil War: A Timeline

The unique circumstances under which the Kurdish women’s movement took place is essential to understanding the scope of what they achieved. The Kurds are the world’s largest stateless nation, and Kurdish rebellion has been repressed by the Turkish state since the establishment of the Kemalist state in 1923 (Tank 413). In 1978, the rise of an urban proletariat concurrent with a

Turkish leftist movement set the stage for the rise of the PKK as a militant nationalist liberation front guided by a Marxist-Leninist ideology and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan (413). Turkey's military coup in 1980 served as a catalyst, as PKK members were tortured in prison, strengthening their resolve as a movement. By 1999, Turkey had imprisoned tens of thousands of Kurdish men suspected of sedition and evacuated 3500 Kurdish villages, leaving over three million people homeless. Kurdish women became the primary breadwinners for their families and the main intermediaries between their families and the Turkish officials who detained their male relatives. The conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurds led PKK militants across the border to Syria from the 1970s onwards, and the PKK served as a bargaining chip against the Turkish state's control of the water flowing from the Euphrates into Syria for the Syrian government (414). It was during these years when the relationship between Syrian Kurds and the PKK developed. After two decades of support, the PKK's sanctuary in Syria ended when the Syrian government ousted the movement in 1998 under threats from Turkey. Öcalan was imprisoned in February of 1999, during which time he began to redefine the PKK's ideology. He reframed the ideology along the principles of "democratic confederalism," ultimately placing women at the center of this new ideology. After Öcalan was expelled from Syria in 1998, remaining Syrian PKK cells created the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003.

Between 2004 and 2012, only women could function politically, as the men who organized would get arrested. Women organized at a grassroots level and held congresses. The outbreak of Syrian conflict in 2011 and the ensuing regional upheaval

presented great opportunity for the Kurds both regionally and internationally, as they were part of the uprising from the outset due to their mistreatment by the government. In 2012, Syrian forces withdrew from Kurdish inhabited areas in Northern Syria and ceded control to Kurdish militias after deciding to placate the Kurds to avoid confronting several enemy fronts. In March 2016, the de facto administration of Rojava declared the founding of a federal system of government entitled the Federation of Northern Syria: Rojava (415). The withdrawal of central authority from these predominantly Kurdish areas created a power vacuum, leading to violent clashes between radical Islamists and Kurds (Sargi 26).

Women in the PKK

Women had been active in the PKK since the 1990s, well before the media blitz they received in 2014 for their combat in the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). Women's inclusion started as a practical decision, as the PKK needed to grow its organization and lacked men due to periodic arrests (Tank 416). Öcalan saw women's emancipation as a means to reconfigure the structures of feudal Kurdish society, which would break down the traditional, patriarchal social order and replace them with the ideas set out by the liberation movement (417). Öcalan's views on women were informed by his leftist tendencies, as he saw gender oppression as the cornerstone of capitalism. There are major discrepancies, however, between Öcalan's writings from the 1990s and his later publications regarding women's roles. Initially, Öcalan viewed women as weak and dangerous, a "potential distraction for men during the revolution (Al-Ali, Tas 2136)." This stands in stark contrast to his later writings in which "women are glorified as the carriers of democracy, justice and equality

(2136).” Öcalan’s arrest in February of 1999 sent the movement into a state of disarray and led to a wide-scale reconsideration of ideology both within Öcalan’s writings and the wider movement with a reevaluation of the role of women and gender relations at its core. Kurdish women fighters’ and activists’ mobilizations during the 1990s and their criticism of male hegemony are considered to have exerted a distinct influence on Öcalan’s radical shift in defining women’s roles (2137).

Democratic Confederalism and Ideology

Öcalan’s ideological shift also transitioned the goal of his movement from commitment to armed struggle and establishing an independent Kurdistan to a political solution aimed at a radical democratic transformation within the existing nation-state boundaries, or democratic confederalism (2137). He aimed to avoid replicating the capitalistic and patriarchal characteristics exhibited by other nation-states in a newly established Kurdish nation-state. Öcalan defined democratic confederalism as “a political and democratic administration that does not rely on the state, and stands on three main pillars: social ecology, grassroots participation in politics, self-defense, and women’s freedom (Sargi 26).” The idea of a grand Kurdish revolution began to fade out in favor of grassroots action and efforts at reconstruction. According to gender scholar Acik, “it was women who supported Öcalan following his incarceration and his controversial political and ideological shift after 1999, Öcalan returned their confidence by making gender liberation a pillar of his new ideology (Tank 421).” As evidenced by his inconsistent positionality on the role of women in society, Öcalan cannot be entirely accredited with the women’s

advancements made in the context of the Kurdish liberation movement.

Jineoloji

In his book entitled *The Sociology of Freedom*, Öcalan suggested that women establish a “women’s science” and refers to this science as Jineoloji (Al-Ali, Käser 219). Across the Kurdish Middle East, but primarily in Rojava, “Jineoloji is practiced as a form of historical analysis, aimed at understanding the origins of women’s oppression and marginalization (213).” Jineoloji was officially recommended by Abdullah Öcalan in 2009, but the discussion surrounding Jineoloji started long before that, “growing out of continuous discussions among women cadres in the political and armed structures of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, taking place in PKK training academies in Syria and Lebanon, in prisons in Turkey, as well as in guerrilla camps in the mountains (219).” Jineoloji emerged as the prevailing women’s liberation ideology, which, in turn, was shaped by the history of struggle between the Turkish state and the PKK. Furthermore, Öcalan urged women to create their own separate branches and organizations to promote their rights and gender equality within the wider political movement and Kurdish society shortly after placing them at the center of his new ideology. It would be inaccurate to interpret the emergence of independent Kurdish women’s organizations as a result of Öcalan’s change of tune, as “Kurdish women had started organizing independently prior to his ideological shift (Al-Ali, Tas 2137).”

Kurdish Womens’ Agency

The Kurdish women’s movement was not engendered by opportunity structures, accommodating circumstances, or their male

leader's ideology. The women of Rojava displayed a significant and atypical amount of autonomy and influence over their liberation. Although Öcalan's writings were central to the PKK's shift from the emphasis on national liberation to the concept of radical democracy with gender equality at its core, the importance of women's resistance and struggle to implement the teachings of Jineolojî into the new political structures and organizations of the emergent region cannot be overstated. Öcalan maintained that Kurdish family structures obstructed women's freedoms and that women should begin "shifting away from patriarchal control of the family towards creating a stronger bond to the party and the movement (Ali-Ali, Tas 2136)." The idea of a "sexless woman" willing to "sacrifice herself for the state" was glorified (2136). This shift from more orthodox forms of patriarchy to those informed by the nation-state or political movement is not unique to the Kurdish movement; the construction and stringent control of gender have been tools for national identity building within independence movements and post-colonial state building initiatives. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, manifesting differently across various political agendas. Kurdish women took advantage of this political maneuver, forging the space for themselves to participate equally with their male counterparts despite resistance from their male comrades.

Internal Opposition to Women's Empowerment

Despite the ideological foundations provided by Öcalan, Kurdish women fighters and activists have faced multifaceted forms of discrimination within the movement, which they have challenged methodically. When

interviewed, long-term female guerrillas emphasized that until the early 2000s, Kurdish women fighters were still under the command of male guerrillas. Several respondents from Nade Al-Ali and Latif Tas' case study referred to one instance in 2003, when female guerrillas protested by shaving their hair to advocate for equality and representation within the military leadership. Female commanders and fighters fought for the legitimate recognition of women's branches and female leadership, including women's equal participation in the highest leadership committee. In that vein, female dissent began to rise in the 1990s, realized by a wave of women's organizations and women only units. Kurdish women activists started publishing women's journals such as *Jujin*, *Roza*, and *Jin û Jiyana* to advocate against national oppression and sexism emanating from their own ranks.

Most women's organizations were created as a result of the national liberation movement. However, there were a few noteworthy female leaders including one of the co-founders of the PKK, Sakine Cansiz, who advocated against the specific struggles and injustices exerted upon Kurdish women from the very beginning of their involvement. Guerrilla fighters like a forty-year-old woman named Suna asserted, when interviewed, that "If my male co-leader still jokes about my work or our co-leadership, even during this hard-core battle we are involved in, where many of our female and male fighters die every day, and if he does not take seriously what we are doing, then we cannot go very far to change society (2140)." In 1999, three Kurdish women were elected as local mayors for the first time. This number tripled in 2004 after several progressive changes were initiated by the Kurdish leadership, including the introduction of the co-chairing system.

Despite the fact that a 40% quota for women's representation had been a policy of the Kurdish political movement since 2002, women had to wait until 2007 for its implementation. This did not deter these female activists, instead, they collaborated with other Kurdish women's organizations to "discuss what more they could do, what kind of platform they can create to put women's rights as one of the main political aims in Kurdistan and Turkey (2142)."

Rojava and Turkish Expansionism

Turkish expansionism poses a distinctive threat to this remarkable democratic experiment in Rojava. The sense of "war fatigue" prevalent in the United States and the notion that "forever wars" must end caused then-president Donald Trump to order the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Kurdish-ruled Northeastern Syria in October of 2019, where the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has been the most successful (Jasim 2). Anger was expressed across partisan lines, Donald Trump had abandoned America's Kurdish allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and left them vulnerable to an attack from Turkey, which occurred mere hours after Trump's announcements. A week after Trump withdrew U.S. troops from Northeastern Syria, Biden made the following statement: "Turkey is the real problem here. And I would be having a real locked-down conversation with Erdoğan and letting him know that he's gonna pay a heavy price for what he has done (2)." Ultimately, little came of this assertion. In Syria and Iraq, Turkey prioritizes the fight against Kurdish independence over all else, willing to jeopardize the achievements of six years of fighting ISIS. This is because of Ankara's staunch opposition to the PKK, which has

consequently weakened the U.S.-led coalition's fight against ISIS (Dag 53). Turkey's aggressive military actions in both Syria and Iraq pose a drastic threat to the region and are pushing Rojava into a burgeoning humanitarian crisis (Jasim 2). By equipping and organizing different Islamist militias under the facade of the Syrian National Army (SNA), Turkey has deployed these militant groups against the Kurds in Syria to destabilize their autonomous region (Dag 58). Turkey's actions have gone from intervention to invasion, converting previously peaceful towns in Northern Syria into wartorn zones of poverty and conflict, and creating an environment in which Islamic jihadists can recruit and train terrorists.

The United States Secretary of Defense has advised the Erdogan regime against sabotaging the ongoing fight against ISIS and contributing to Syria's instability. Despite America's explicit opposition, the Turkish state has implemented an aggressive anti-Kurdish approach with every intent of eradicating the Kurdish gains made in Northern Syria through its partnership with Russia and the Assad regime (Dag 59). Erdogan's regime has publicly stated that the goal of the Turkish armed forces is to "attack Rojava's infrastructure and destroy whatever is operational (52)." In 2018 and 2019, the Turkish state launched two large scale incursions into Rojava, aided by Islamist jihadists. The Turkish state perceives the Kurds as hostile enemies to be eliminated at all costs and has refused to negotiate through peace talks to end this long-standing conflict (52). Ankara has declared its intentions to launch a third large scale military invasion to target Kurdish forces in Rojava and drive them thirty kilometers away from the Turkish border. In sum, the Turkish state seems to have abandoned its goals of

overthrowing the Assad regime and fighting ISIS in favor of preventing the Kurds in Northern Syria from maintaining any semblance of self-determination.

Women's Agency in the MENA Region: A Discussion

Women in the Middle East and North Africa are often referred to as the "losers of the Arab spring (Tank 405)." Many of the movements that swept across the MENA region included women in broader movements for democracy and civil liberties, and in the short term, positive changes were achieved. When these temporary trends towards democracy reverted into a startling regression towards authoritarianism, any gains made by women as a by-product of these social movements were thwarted along with the other goals of the revolution. The Kurdish case stands out in this regard: the movement for women's equality did not lose steam and dissipate due to internal challenges within the PYD, the goals and mores of the Kurdish Liberation movement have not eroded over time in response to the challenges of self governance. The sole threat to Rojava and the liberation of its women under this somewhat utopian system of governance is the Turkish state's resolve to annihilate it. The Kurdish outcome poses a contradiction to generally accepted notions as to the interaction of gender, ideology, militancy, and politics in the MENA region. Kurds were able to build a self-sustaining system of governance in the midst of the Syrian Civil War with the liberation of its women at its crux, and this model of democratic confederalism was stable and sound without the repeated military assaults of Turkey and its allies. Kurdish women rose in the ranks, attaining equal positioning to men in the highest offices. Although not necessarily cited as such, the Kurdish

movement is among the most notable and enduring of the Arab Spring. Carrying out the research necessary for this paper has left me with lingering questions about gender, ideology, militancy and political movements, and the different ways these factors can interact to create such contrasting outcomes across the MENA region. Another phase of this research project might entail a comparative case study, if such a movement parallel to the Kurdish Liberation Movement can be identified. For the purposes of this paper, however, the gains made by Kurdish women are as remarkable as they are anomalous in both the context of the Arab Spring and women's militant movements in the MENA region in the twenty-first century.

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