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Kurdish Women Guerrilla Fighters

by Meagan Muschara

Abstract: This article focuses on the female fighters of the PKK. The media over the past four years have continued to report about the female inclusion into this male dominated resistance group, the PKK in Turkey. The addition of women to the fight spread to various Kurdish resistance groups throughout the Middle East. The interviews brought about a plethora of questions about egalitarian rights for women entering the PKK. The questions that arose are: How equal are women's rights? Are there any stipulations? Why are females willing to fight for the cause and what do these women gain by fighting alongside the men? To begin answering these questions, a brief historical background is needed to fully understand the women's inclusion into the PKK and the level of equality practiced by men and women in the guerilla group.

Introduction



Female Kurdish Fighters Take Arms Against Islamic State Extremists.
Photo by Jan Sefti¹

Mitra spent her formative years feeling oppressed by a culturally and religiously male dominated society prior to abandoning her family to join the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) as a guerilla fighter. Consequently, Mitra decided that she would rather dedicate her life to the danger of the battlefield than to live a lifetime of oppression, welcoming and embracing the possibility of death. Currently, Mitra is a PKK commander residing in the desolate Qandil Mountains near the border dividing Iraq and Kurdistan. Here, she commands and trains a unit consisting entirely of women at a camp that holds approximately one thousand Kurdish rebels, of which forty percent are women. Soon these women will be sent to fight on the frontlines of Syria, and potentially Turkey, if peace talks with the Turkish government fail. However, there is a major stipulation to joining the PKK - both men and women are equally

¹ Jan Sefti, "Female Kurdish Fighters Take Arms Against Islamic State Extremists," August 21, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/female-kurdish-fighters-take-arms-islamic-state-extremists/>. Photo courtesy of Jan Sefti, PBS Newshour (NPR), accessed May 10, 2015.

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prohibited from having romantic encounters. As an unwritten rule, women fight harder than men to maintain freedom. But this does not bother Mitra. By not thinking about men, love, or passion, more time and energy can be dedicated towards the struggle to create an independent Kurdish state.²

The above narrative is common among Syrian and Turkish women who join the PKK. The PKK has been charged with spearheading a vast movement towards gender equality that has become popular among other Kurdish guerilla groups. Furthermore, the female acceptance of the PKK has grown increasingly throughout the Kurdish communities. Today it is common for women to openly speak about gender egalitarianism in public. On March 20, 2014, at the celebration of International Women's Day in Syria, Sharmiran Sham'un, the Christian deputy of Cizire Canton Foreign Office, spoke to a massive, primarily female crowd. Sham'un pointed out that a nation is not truly free unless the residing women are equally free. She continued, "We must follow Kurdish women as models, who have taken up arms to defend their gender rights, land and honour."³ Though Kurdish gender equality for women has spawned somewhat from the PKK, Kurdish women were not originally considered equal to men with the creation of the party. Mitra, for example, explains that she had to fight harder than men in order to prove that she was worthy of maintaining her place in the party.⁴ In theory, men and women are considered equal in the PKK, but a question remains about what extent the PKK actually practices gender equality.

This paper will seek to uncover what gender equality truly means for female cadres within the PKK, and to what extent equality is practiced. As we will see, the motives for promoting gender equality were not based on benevolence or fairness, but rather on the party's own ulterior motives. Gender egalitarianism

² Jihar Gol, "Who are the Female Fighters of the PKK?" January 5, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25610424>.

³ "Celebrating International Women's Day in Syria Kurdistan," March 20, 2014, www.liveleak.com/wiew?i=450_1395352310.

⁴ Gol.

evolved out of political necessity, as well as the desire for ethnic and cultural preservation. The creation of gender reform under the PKK is overshadowed by traditional Kurdish values giving the PKK the appearance of being a liberally progressive party. The promise of gender equality is not the only incentive for Kurdish women to join the PKK. Kurdish women claim that there are a multitude of factors that called them to leave their families and join the PKK as guerilla fighters in the mountains. By offering women an outlet from the culturally restricting customs it allows them to continue education seemingly without gender discrimination and the apparent freedom to enjoy equal gender and social status within the party.

This paper will seek to assess the common narrative of gender equality and shed light on the many restrictions women face in comparison to their male counterparts within the PKK. It will examine the influences and motives for women's participation in the movement, as well as the impact it has had on gender egalitarianism. The research will explore if there is a lasting impact for women rights within the Kurdish and Turkish societies and throughout the Middle East. In doing so, this paper uses interviews, primary and secondary documents, news articles, books, journal articles, and documentaries to enable a historical narrative that will determine the impact of the PKK. The guerilla movement is constantly evolving, partly in response to outsiders' labels of them as a terrorist group, but their goal of autonomy remains the same. The various Kurdish groups have been misunderstood throughout the 19th century and this research attempts to bring an understanding to this vast group of people. Indeed, this paper argues that despite restrictions within the movement, the women have interestingly learned to use the male dominated political game to their advantage for their egalitarian ends. They seek to use the grassroots methods to patiently spread the equal rights for women within a group to their Kurdish society and ultimately to women throughout the Middle East. The women of the PKK have begun a concise movement to legitimize female

rights that if successful could change the societal structure of a male dominated world.

The Kurdish Historical Background

A background of the Kurdish people is needed to fully understand the discrimination of the Kurdish culture and its foundation as a specific group of people without a home. The Kurdish people are one of the oldest cultural groups to inhabit the Middle East and have co-existed with various peoples throughout their history. During the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds were considered independent with the authority to run their own government and practice their culture. Complications for the Kurdish people began during the fall of the Ottoman Empire, when the partitioning of the empire and conflicting backdoor agreements by European imperialists created a cultural, ethnic, and ideological self-awareness throughout the Middle East. As a result, the Kurdish people were inexplicably denied their own independent Kurdistan. Thus, the Kurds became displaced in their own land, stretched across a vast amount of space that includes parts of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. These countries in their own nationalist fervor refuse to recognize the cultural and linguistic values of the Kurdish people, resulting in constant prejudice and persecution.

The Kurdish mobilization towards nationalism, like all nationalist movements, is extremely complex and full of international controversy. There is not a single time frame in history where the Kurds flipped the proverbial light switch to illuminate Kurdish nationalism; the movement was gradual and took place over a long span of time. Despite the fact that Kurdish history can be intriguing, the totality of Kurdish history is not necessarily relevant to understanding the purpose of this paper. A brief background to the Kurds does however; shed light on the progression of history in Kurdish society. This in turn will serve as a guide to understanding the current conflict and illustrate the

reasons as to why and how women came to be involved in the Kurdish national struggle.

The Kurds can be dated as far back as 3000 BCE. There is little if any doubt among scholars of Middle Eastern history that the Kurds are one of the most ancient ethnic groups in the Middle East.⁵ Written and oral historiographies indicate that a majority of the Kurds typically date themselves to the Median Empire of the sixth century BCE.⁶ Strangely, however, the Kurds share a similar genealogy with Persians and are often credited for being the purest Iranians.⁷ However interesting this may be, Kurdish identity (Kurdî) is not ethnically specific, but also takes into account religion.⁸ The development and spread of Islam throughout the Middle East caused the Kurds, as well as many other people groups in the Middle East, to relieve themselves of their old religious identity and traditions and convert to the new monotheistic religion.⁹

The conversion of the Kurds to Islam is not only significant for understanding their culture and distinctiveness in the Middle East, but also sculpts new intrinsic values within Kurdish society. Understanding plurality in values is essential because, in general, the Kurdish absorption of Islam may seem like a unifying phenomenon that would fuse tribes together. On the contrary, the Islamic movement in Kurdistan sub-fractionalized Kurdish groups due to the complexity stemming from the interpretation of the Quran. In other words, despite the fact that the Kurds are a single ethnic group under one religion, there is a differentiation among their affiliation with various Islamic sects, namely Sunni and Shi'a. Furthermore, Islamic traditions also define gender roles in which women are seen as relatively unequal to men. Therefore the

⁵ Lokman I. Meho, *Kurdish Culture and Society* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 11.

⁶ Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), xvii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

⁹ *Ibid.*

redefining of gender and gender roles in Kurdish society, which will be discussed later, is revolutionary, and quickly stirs up controversy throughout Kurdistan. This is one of many causes for the formation of ideologically mismatched jigsaw pieces in the otherwise potentially contiguous and independent Kurdistan. Culturally, Shi'a Kurds and Persians hold a relationship of relatively mutual respect for one another, while Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arabs West of Iran have a turbulent and volatile relationship.¹⁰ Religion also paved the way for the political identity which was mainly impacted by the Ottoman Empire. This is to say that religion and specific groups were given higher status in the empire and eventually the religious sectors in the Ottoman government would undermine the ruling power of the caliphate system since the empire was partially dictated by religious law. There was no separation of religion and state.

Though the Kurds have endured centuries of various fluctuating empires, none impacted the modern Kurds as much as the Ottoman Empire and the nations that subsequently inherited them following the empire's fatal collapse. Early Ottoman history with the Kurds may initially seem mundane in relation to the modern Kurdistan, but Ottoman policies actually laid the groundwork for the future of the Kurds and their persecution. The Ottomans divided their empire into sub-regions under what is known as the *millet* system. Instead of strictly dissecting the empire on an ethnic basis, the Ottomans primarily focused on subdividing the land on religious affiliation, Muslim, or non-Muslim. In addition, it should be noted that the Ottoman government also put into consideration the complex linguistic and tribal entities of the empire to inhibit conflict. Since the Kurds were Muslim, they were at a political and societal advantage under the millet system, and were referred to as *boz millet*, "the gray nation,"¹¹ while non-Muslim groups were *millet-i mahkume*, or "dominated people," and given less autonomy in their millets.¹² On

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 1.

¹² Ibid., 2.

the other hand, Muslim groups such as the Kurds were *millet-i hakime*, “dominate people,” and enjoyed a greater autonomy within their millets, and a less discriminatory integration into Ottoman politics.¹³

However, the Kurds lost some of their autonomy when the *Porte* (Ottoman parliament) began establishing the *Tanzimat* reforms (reorganization) beginning roughly around 1839 and lasting until 1876.¹⁴ This was an overhaul of the outdated political system in an attempt to prevent the empire from collapsing. The economy in Western Europe was expanding due to colonialism, and the Ottoman Empire was closely watching the successful European nations in order to gain some insight on how to preserve the empire. Ultimately, the Ottoman Empire attempted to become more “European.” Many empires during the colonial era used the European model of westernization in order to survive and keep up with the new demands of a beginning globalized economy. For example, the *Tanzimat* period included a revamping of the Ottoman legal system, *Mejelle*, by emulating the French civil code while still maintaining Islamic principles upheld through *shari’ah* law, a legal system based on the ethics within the Quran.¹⁵ The destruction of the millet system also directly affected the Kurds. In 1839 Rashid Pasha issued a decree, the Hatt-i Sharif of Gülhane, which stated reforms for all of those living within the Ottoman Empire regardless of religion.¹⁶ Then in 1856, the Hatt-i Hümayan decree greatly emphasized that all Ottoman subjects would be made equal.¹⁷ Finally in 1869, the Nationality Law was enacted which granted equal citizenship to all Ottoman subjects.¹⁸ This was done by way of giving control to governors who were elected by

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ William L. Cleveland and Martin Burton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 4th edition (Westview Press, 2009), 84.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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the Porte.¹⁹ The Kurds only lost little autonomy, and were still able to maintain their local political systems under Kurdish shayks and *aghas* (chiefs).²⁰

Following the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire was disassembled which created a domino effect of nationalism throughout the Middle East that greatly affected the Kurds. Nationalism spread throughout the Middle East after WWI for many reasons. One factor had been the world powers and their ideological influences in each area of the Past Ottoman Empire. Each group that fought for a side was promised their own autonomy away from the Ottomans and had been influenced by ideologies from Russia, Great Britain, America, France, and Greece and the other colonial powers. Another factor was that many leading figures from the Middle East after WWI had a western education and learned about the ideology of nationalism. They noted how uniting a state could be achieved if everyone in an autonomous state were bound by borders and a common national identity. A rising power needed the acceptance of the western world for protection and legitimacy. Specifically, the establishment of Turkey created a new world of uniformed identity that all citizens were required to adhere to the Kemal Reforms which were successful because the Tanzimat Reforms had set a precedent. Since the 100 years of Tanzimat Reforms weakened the religious sects of government, Muslims and non-Muslims gained equality in an empire that was losing control to the invading colonialists. The Ottoman reforms allowed for a Western shift in the empire that set the foundation for acceptance of future reforms in Turkey.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Establishment of Turkey²¹

The fall of the Ottoman Empire resulted in a profound sense of cultural, ethnic and ideological self-awareness throughout the Middle East. When the victors of World War I divided the Middle East into distinct regions, the Kurdish people were inexplicably denied their own independent Kurdistan. Thus, the Kurds are spread across a vast amount of space that includes parts of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. These countries have their own idea of nationalism and refuse to recognize the cultural and linguistic values of the Kurdish people. As such, the Kurds are under constant prejudice and persecution by the country in which they reside. The Kurdish people formed several resistance groups in response to this on-going struggle for nationalism. The establishment of Turkey specifically altered the lives of the Kurdish people under their control.

The nineteenth century, consisted of European powers meddling within areas of the Middle East to control resources by establishing colonies which weakened the Ottoman Empire. The Allied powers continued to influence the Middle East post-World War I by dismantling the Ottoman Empire through the Treaty of Sèvres granting the Allied forces self-determination for some and allowing western powers to claim territories for their strategic influence. The Secret agreements had been circulating among Britain, France, Russia, Greece, and Italy and were defined in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. The agreements would distribute borders to the allies and form a divided Middle East in search of various nationalisms. The Treaty divided Anatolia between Italy

²¹ The history of Turkey has directly affected the fundamental actions of the PKK and contributed to the issue of gender equality. For this reason, Turkey will be the focus of the research as it is in direct conflict with the PKK. Mustafa Kemal or “Ataturk,” the leading figure for significant reforms within Turkey, was also the main contributor of opposition towards the Kurds. The Kemalist Reforms were intended to secularize Turkey and were initiated by Ataturk. Ataturk’s reforms attempted to create a loyal and uniformed state by creating only Turkish citizens. This prohibited the practice of any other culture that could possibly undermine a uniformed Turkish state.

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and France, creating an independent Armenian state, and granted Greece territory that neared Istanbul. Among the agreements was the promise of a sovereign Kurdistan for the Kurdish population of the Ottoman Empire. The Society for the Ascension of Kurdistan (Kurdistan Teali Cemiyeti) sent Serif Pasha²² as their representative at the conference to discuss their claims to a bordered territory. The Kurdish representatives were divided as they could not agree on where Kurdistan should reside. However, the Treaty of Sèvres in Section III Articles 62-64²³ defined Kurdistan within the Mosul Province. The treaty outlined an autonomous state for the Kurdish people, but the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne nixed any hope for a Kurdish state in Turkey. Ultimately, the Treaty of Sèvres restricted what was left of the Ottoman Empire and put allied commissions and governmental finances under allied control. The Istanbul government signed the treaty in 1920 to cut bonds with Turkish and non-Turkish areas that were awarded to the European victors, but the European powers were met with opposition.

Turkish resistance groups comprised of militia units and guerilla fighters formed in an attempt to stop the division of Turkish territory. The rebel forces called themselves Societies for the Defense of Rights and formed to protect their land from the aims of the treaty and to begin their national war for independence in 1919, with the prior Ottoman field commander as their organizing leader.²⁴ The national movement for Turkish sovereignty was led by Mustafa Kemal who easily asserted his leadership. The Istanbul government, aware of Kemal's plans, revoked his official stance as an army officer in 1920, making him a rebel leader who opposed the legitimacy of the Istanbul

²² Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 112.

²³ "The treaty of peace between the allied and associated powers, 1995-2012," Hellenic Resources Network, accessed May 19, 2014, <http://www.hri.org/docs/sevres/part3.html>.

²⁴ James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 179.

government. Kemal was dismissed as an army officer because he wished to protect Turkish land from the encroaching Greeks which went against the government and only heightened the fact that Istanbul no longer protected Turkish interests. This in turn, motivated the unification of Turkey, led by Kemal, and the overthrow of the Istanbul government. Kemal understood that he needed to legitimize his movement for Turkish sovereignty by creating a new Turkish government to replace the Istanbul government with proper representation in 1920. The process of establishing a government took place in Ankara, where the rebels chose their body of representatives that included members from the prior Ottoman parliament. The newly formed government was known as the Grand National Assembly, who then nominated Mustafa Kemal as their president. The National Assembly idolized Kemal and renamed him Ataturk which meant “the father of the Turks” in 1935.²⁵ The national assembly adopted the Western principles of popular sovereignty accompanied with a constitution. The establishment of a constitutional Turkish government and the invasion of Armenia, with aid from the Soviet Union, was the first step towards disassembling the Treaty of Sevres.²⁶ Ataturk considered the newly independent Armenia to be Turkish land and therefore invalid as an Armenian state. The territorial gains allowed Turkey the advantage to fight off the Greek invasion. The Greek forces became a threat to the new government as they invaded the prior Ottoman capital of Bursa and breached Anatolia in 1921.²⁷ In the same year, France and the Soviet Union acknowledged Turkey as a legitimate state leading to the Italian withdrawal from Anatolia. The second strike to the treaty was the Turkish nationalist defeat of the Greek troops in a three week battle at Sakarya in 1922, which left Ataturk victorious with his goals nearly achieved.

²⁵ Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

²⁶ Gelvin, 179.

²⁷ Ibid.

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The achievements by Ataturk's forces led to a renegotiation of the Treaty of Sèvres in the Lausanne Conference of 1922. In the conference, Ataturk demanded recognition from the British for complete Turkish Sovereignty and to abolish the Sultanate, which would eliminate the caliphate's role as a source of political power. That strategic act would completely eliminate the Ottoman past and authority, allowing the National Assembly full legitimate control of Turkey. The Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923, officially recognizing Turkey as an independent nation state by the international community.

After Ataturk accomplished his goal of a sovereign Turkey, the next step was to establish Turkey as a uniform nation. He achieved this by carrying out a series of reforms that would result in a controlled and lasting state with a common Turkish identity. The Kemalist Reforms (Ataturkism) of Turkey were a set of reforms that were based on European nationalism and are seen in six distinct sections to unify the state under a sole Turkish identity. Understanding the cataclysm of the reforms is vital to comprehending the current conflict between the Kurdish rebels and Turkey. Ataturk's reforms contained two purposes for Turkey; one was to Westernize Turkey for its future inclusion into the European world stage for legitimacy and to unify the country through a common identity known as "Turkification" which took on the form of nationalism. The Kemalist reforms had drastic effects on dual populations that existed in the land before the establishment of Turkey. The reforms of Ataturk were successful because of the constant state of reforms of the Ottoman Empire (Tanzimat Reforms) during the nineteenth century. The prior reforms allowed the Kemalist Reforms a precedent to follow and allowed for a large acceptance of the changes being promoted in Turkey. The establishment of secularism, through the reforms, brought by far the most significant change in Turkey.

The introduction of secularism tremendously impacted Turkish society and entailed multiple changes for the state. Ataturk's policy of secularism was passed by the National Assembly's vote in 1924 to abolish the Caliphate system. Ataturk

understood that by exiling the Ottoman royal families (Caliphs) that generational Islamic traditions would be exiled with them. The reforms also dismantled the religious organizations that protected, taught and aided the Islamic traditions. In 1926, the Swiss Civil Code outlawed the Mejlle and the Shari'ah authority, replacing it with new penal and commercial restrictions. The legal codes banned polygamy and granted women access to divorce, which extinguished the Ulama's elitist stance in government matters. The civil codes embodied Western values of secularism to replace the traditional laws of religion, as interpreted from the Quran, which shifted the power base to the secularist state officials and away from the religious authorities.²⁸

The reforms also dissolved the Sufi orders by prohibiting their worship at shrines and tombs, making it a criminal offense in 1925. The tradition of wearing a Fez in public areas was a link to the Ottoman past and, to destroy the Ottoman hold on Turkey, the Fez was made illegal to wear in public. Instead, the Fez was replaced by Western hats in 1925 to symbolize Turkey's 'civilized' Westernization. The reforms of Ataturk went further to resemble a Western nation by replacing the Muslim lunar calendar with the Western Gregorian calendar in 1926. In order for Turkey to keep up with the world markets they implemented a Western calendar, which included the adoption of Sunday as a day of rest instead of their traditional Friday. To further secularize, the state commissioned the translation of the Quran from Arabic to Turkish in 1932. The translation of God's direct words was highly controversial and seen as altering its important meanings. The reforms also stated that public prayers would change to Turkish instead of Arabic. The main purpose for the secularist section of reforms was to rid Turkey of the Islamic power base that could compete for control in Turkey, as it did during the Ottoman period. The second was to eliminate the Ottoman past to create an all-encompassing Turkish identity.

²⁸ Ibid.

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For Ataturk, the promotion of nationalism was an attempt to unite the people. In doing so, he would create a sense of loyalty to the state by implementing complete “Turkification” through symbols of one cultural identity for citizens of the state. To further the unification of Turkey, language reform was implemented in 1928. Ataturk commissioned an organization to produce a Turkish alphabet using Latin to replace the existing Arabic alphabet. The aim was to completely disassemble the Ottoman past from future generations by only promoting a Turkish past and a Turkish identity. In a way, the reforms emphasized Turkey as a completely united nation. This was in stark contrast to the instability of the region under Ottoman and Islamic rule, and gave leaders the legitimacy to claim it as a sovereign state. The unification of Turkey was achieved through influence, education, and the opportunity for social and governmental involvement.

The populist reforms created establishments of “People’s Houses” throughout Turkey which promoted adult education and political ideology to inform the citizens of the reforms that would better the country. The grassroots efforts to inform the Turkish citizens through state institutions created feelings among citizens of equal participation in government affairs.

The mixture of populism and nationalism went further with the reforms in education. Ataturk saw education as an important foundation to create a lasting state. The literacy and knowledge of a state was gained through education and would be essential for a strong Turkish Republic. The main idea for education was again to break away from the Ottoman past by dissolving the tradition of an elitist education system and implementing a free mandatory elementary schooling system throughout Turkey. In the rural areas, educational efforts would prove difficult for various reasons. Nonetheless, between 1923 and 1940, schools and teachers doubled and the number of enrolled students increased by 300 percent.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid.

The reforms also affected the social roles of Turkish women through gender equality. The aim of the broadened equality between the sexes was to resemble the freedoms that European women possessed. The reforms advanced women on the social sphere by allowing them mandatory access to education to acquire the skills to work in Turkish society alongside men. The snowball effect allowed for thirteen female judges by 1933, women were also granted the right to vote by 1934, and there were seventeen female delegates in the national assembly by 1935.³⁰

The reforms greatly aided the state economically and are important to the history of Turkey, but the above reforms mentioned specifically affected the Kurds in Turkey. Ataturk's reforms helped to establish a uniform Turkish state, whose drastic changes directly affected the Kurdish people. The new borders of Turkey as defined by the Treaty of Lausanne served as a direct antithesis to the Treaty of Sevres as the Kurds were not able to obtain an independent Kurdistan. With the promise of their own independent state squashed by yet another foreign influence, the Kurds were left desperately grasping for a solidified identity in the region and so formed oppositional factions within the newly formed Turkey.

The first Kurdish nationalist movement arose against the Turkish Republic in 1923 and another in 1925. The uprisings were a mixture of Kurdish protest along with Islamic revivalism.³¹ The rebellions were severely dealt with and ended with Ataturk attempting to cleanse the Kurdish ethnic history from Turkey. The reforms were intended to create one national group that consisted of only a Turkish population and left no room for any other identity. The intention was to strip the Kurds and others of their ethnic cultures by outlawing their languages, clothes, practices and subsequently placing them among the lowest class in the Turkish society. It was against the law for the Kurds to practice their own culture. In the new democracy, it became mandatory for all young

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

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citizens of Turkey to attend school in efforts to re-educate the masses. The schools preached a Western curriculum and promoted Turkish nationalism. Ataturk believed education that promoted Turkish history and vernacular would lead to faster assimilation of nationalism. Unforeseen by Kemal was the outcome education would have on the population who learned about ideology and how the legality of a republic should work.

Formation of the PKK³²

The Turkish education system limited its participants primarily to those who were Turkish which created a class of wealthy elites. These elites eventually became aware of the political ideals of democracy and its promotion of certain humanitarian rights that the Turkish government denied. They learned how to protest on a legal basis and soon began to oppose the unjust treatment of specific groups by the government, which in turn ignited sparks of nationalism bolstered through the creation of various political parties. The educated elites gave backing to the military coup of 1960 and created a liberal period with a new constitution. Aliza Marcus in her book, *Blood and Belief*, wrote that the contents of the newly drafted constitution manifested “Freedoms to form associations, publish, organize trade unions, and the ability to call strikes.”³³ These new values gave rise to the many political parties controlled by Turkish and Kurdish activists. Kurdish activism now consisted of a new generational wave that did not experience the punitive end of the first Kurdish nationalist movement of the

³² Not all Kurds agree on the approach for independence nor do they agree on the end product. These Kurdish factions each have varying ideologies in their respective countries. The Yekêtiy Nîştîmanîy Kurdistan, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Iraq, the Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq and the Turkish group Devrimci Yol (DEV-YOL) which translates to Revolutionary Path were some of the major regional opponents of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanî, PKK in Turkey also known as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.

³³ Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief The PKK and the Kurdish Fight* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 17.

1920s. The new generation differed from the old as they were better educated with redefined notions of freedom and new avenues by which to obtain it. At the same time, the poverty stricken Kurdish populations in rural areas began to migrate into urban areas in hopes of creating a better livelihood. The move to cities then created a surge of activists from various political arenas.

In 1961, the first legally organized political party that caught Kurdish attention was the Turkish Workers Party (TIP). The socialist ideology of the party promoted social and economic equality of the classes. The Kurds soon involved themselves within TIP, and paper media based on cultural aspects, in addition to the Kurdish language, began to be distributed. Unfortunately for the activists, the newly ensconced liberal leadership of the Turkish Workers Party was shut down after being charged for being a separatist party. One after another, legal parties began to be shut down or closely monitored.

During the 1960s, a rebellious Kurdish identity swelled and became a major influence on the preeminent Kurdish independence champion, Abdullah Öcalan, endearingly referred to by his followers as Apo. In the late 1960s, students and workers called meetings to demonstrate their democratic rights by protesting the oppression of their cultural identity. Many of the young groups had been influenced by their teachers, who were Kurdish nationalists and were well immersed in the Kurdish culture since their youth and thus viewed the suppression of their culture as cruelly unfair. Some Kurds, on the other hand, fell under the influence of the radical leftist movements of the 1960s.

Öcalan was raised in the primarily Kurdish, rural and impoverished city of Şanlıurfa, inside Turkey's borders. His family was poor, and his mother would often times publicly humiliate his father for not being able to sufficiently support his family. While attending school, Öcalan had to walk an hour to and from school. His childhood dream was to become a Turkish army officer, but he later failed the military school exam. Instead, he went to vocational school in Ankara and studied work related to the state land registry in 1966. This move influenced Öcalan as he saw the Kurdish

identity through speeches at meetings. By 1969, he worked in a government office that oversaw the measuring of land for deeds. During this time, Turkey had been in turmoil politically and, though hesitant, Öcalan knew something had to be done. Coincidentally he turned to a book with new ideas entitled, *The Alphabet of Socialism*.

Öcalan began to understand the issues through socialist ideology and proclaimed himself as a socialist.³⁴ Later in 1972, he would be arrested and spent time in prison for attending a demonstration. While incarcerated, Öcalan listened to a wide span of political ideologies in regards to the causes, effects, and actions needed for a revolution. He remained silent, while listening to assessments made by imprisoned activists, and was able to realize that various organizations went through legal means in order to reach their goals. They believed hostile action could be useful, but only after gaining sufficient legitimacy and wide support. Öcalan did not understand their views as he felt the legal avenue in Turkey was corrupt. The political parties throughout the 1960s and 1970s had been monitored and shut down each time to take away their legitimacy. Öcalan's assessment of prior attempts through the legal system in Turkey inspired an ideological shift on how to attain Kurdish independence.

The primary facets of Öcalan's path to Kurdish independence consisted of ridding the region of all remnants of colonialism, terrors of imperialism, and the implementation of the socialist ideologies from figures such as Marx, Lenin and Mao. His speeches tended to be long-winded and passionate. He engaged in debates about which socialist revolution to imitate; Lenin or Mao. He believed that debate on the economic and social position of Turkey should be relevant and that aggressive socialist action would inspire a concurrent nationalist element.

While trying to figure out which revolutionary model to follow, one idea still remained constant among those of Lenin and Mao; there was a need for an armed coup, the question was its

³⁴ Ibid., 18.

timing. The parties differed on which stage the fight should be used. Öcalan believed that an armed struggle would legitimize the Kurdish stance and would allow them to gain followers. Though Kurdish nationals agreed on creating an independent Kurdistan, they did not agree on a single political dogma. They were divided over which leftist ideology to follow, not just in regards to Maoist, Leninist, but also on other fundamental leftist groupings. The division of ideology was useless in Öcalan's eyes but, rather than let ideology divide the movement, Öcalan believed it was better to unite in an armed coup. "If a people embraces its own tradition, uses its own language and makes it [sic] culture come alive, this too is a rebellion,' ... 'but the highest form of rebellion is armed rebellion.' said Öcalan in his 1977 speech in Elazig, a speech which became the basis for the group's first published pamphlet on its ideology."³⁵

Öcalan could not gain support from the wide range of Kurdish independence parties as they disagreed that an armed coup was the necessary first step to legitimacy. This problem created a division that prolonged gaining support. The remedy to the problem, in regards to Öcalan and his followers, was to eliminate the various Kurdish parties. Attacking other groups was the first armed struggle for the PKK. They believed by eliminating their political rivals, the PKK would be the lone and unopposed Kurdish independence party. This strategy was based on the Leninist rule and the Maoist philosophy of eliminating other factions to create a single imperative party. The PKK's decision to attack and eliminate other Kurdish independence movements would prove to be a major thorn in the side of the PKK moving forward. It developed into a major diplomatic hurdle in garnering support from outside of Turkey.

The formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) became official on November 28, 1978. They formed a central committee that contained three people; Abdullah Öcalan, Sahin Donmez, and Cemil Bayik. The party also included a Regional

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

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Preparations Committee with members spread out across Turkey. They were asked to stay employed by the state for information, while also acquiring new recruits. Some members quit their jobs to penetrate trade unions and attack other parties.³⁶ The beginnings of the PKK came to a halt following the economic collapse of Turkey. This led the military to go on a rampage and cleanse any opposition to their power. Öcalan fled from Turkey to Syria, leaving the PKK without a leader. The location was initially used as a gathering spot for ideas and PKK members. In Syria, Öcalan played the old Kurdish card of pitting neighboring states against each other for Kurdish preservation.

At this time, Syria was a location where various groups could escape oppression. Once in Syria, Öcalan encountered many leftist Palestinian groups whom were sympathetic to his socialist agenda. In Damascus, the groups agreed to help the PKK, but informed Syrian intelligence services of the PKK's arrival. The Syrian government was fully aware of the continued arrival of the Turkish Kurds into their country and distributed fake identity cards with Arab names. The acceptance of fake identification by the government was their protection against questions on allowing Turkish PKK members into Syria. That concept would eliminate evidence linking Syrian aid to the Kurdish rebels. The government allowed the Kurdish Turks into Syria because the two countries had ongoing complications. For example by harboring Turkish Kurds, Syria was able to use the PKK as a distraction against Turkey. One factor for the tensions were that both countries claimed the former jurisdiction of Alexandretta as their own, but officially it was absorbed by Turkey in 1939 after a referendum. Syria was distressed about Turkey's GAP dam project. The dams harnessed water from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers for domestic purposes. Originating in Turkey, the rivers stem for miles, streaming through Syria and Iraq. The dam project would give Turkey's capital, Ankara, abundant control of the water before reaching the arid Syrian climate. It was believed Turkey had been

³⁶ Ibid., 47.

harboring an opposition military group, the Muslim Brothers, who launched attacks against Syria. In size, Syria is five times smaller than Turkey and bordered at that time by the Soviet Union. Turkey was a member of NATO and an ally to the United States, as such, the Western powers would align with Turkey militarily and Syria was painfully aware of this. Thus, the arrival and militant training of PKK members was encouraged. Syria used the PKK as a proxy to cause regional conflict for their problematic neighbor. The Kurdish party held similar notions about Turkey and their operations matched Syrian interests. In this instance, the Kurds used the disputing neighboring countries for their preservation.³⁷ The Kurdish people have a long-standing history of using their enemy's enemies for their advantage and self-preservation.

The admittance of Turkish Kurds into Syria was conditional. This is to say that the Turkish Kurds could not advocate uprisings regarding the Syrian Kurds. The conditional allowance of the PKK into Syria was followed with care because Öcalan had discovered his long-term goal in Syria for the PKK. While in Syria, the PKK met with another occupied people fighting for their independence, the Palestinians. The Palestinian groups in Lebanon and Syria received the PKK members with open arms and even trained them in guerrilla warfare.

The DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), during the 1980s, was one of the largest Palestinian groups under the umbrella of the greater PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization). Mamdoh Nofal, the former military leader in the DFLP explained, "We accept the Marxist-Leninist groups because we are Marxist-Leninist, we are revolutionaries and we support the revolutionary movement."³⁸ Nofal met with Abu Laila (Qais Abdul-Karim) a political leader in the DFLP. They agreed to take a small number of the group to train. The training started during the 1980s in Helwe. The PKK learned about explosives, military tactics, topography, artillery, and guerilla

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁸ Ibid., 53.

tactics.³⁹ Unfortunately for the PKK, funds ran too low for the DFLP to continue fully supporting the group. The PKK then sought help elsewhere. Aid came from a plethora of Palestinian and communist groups: Yasser Arafat of Fatah, George Habash of the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), Samir Ghoshesh of the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF or PSF), and the Lebanese Communist Party.⁴⁰ In return the Kurds helped build fortifications and agreed to fight on the front line to defend against potential attacks from Israel. The PKK and other militants were pushed north following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Öcalan's interest then shifted to Northern Iraq as it was the ideal location for the PKK to set up camp. The territory, known as Üçgen (Turkish for triangle) was a long stretch of land that saddled the Iran, Turkey, and Iraq borders. The location was ideal for the members to enter into Turkey freely, stage attacks, and then exit when needed. Syria offered a great safe haven for the PKK, but not for attempting attacks. The path from Turkey to Syria was on flat land and party members did not want to draw attention to Syria, by aggravating Turkey. The geographical location borrowed by the PKK could easily be compromised and Syria, through harboring the PKK, could be seen as provoking Turkey. To achieve the goal of launching attacks in Turkey, Öcalan needed to make peace with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) who controlled the coveted area in the mountainous region bordering Turkey. The KDP and surrounding parties were in a constant state of competition and disunity with one another in an attempt to obtain control of the region. Thus Öcalan reached out to Massoud Barzani, leader of the KDP. Massoud Barzani's father, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, was too conservative in Öcalan's eyes. He held on to old feudalistic ideas, and Öcalan harshly criticized Mulla Mustafa Barzani because of this. In November 1979, Massoud Barzani inherited control of the KDP following his father's death. Öcalan put priorities ahead of ideology, which proved to be

³⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60-61.

diplomatically advantageous. Barzani agreed to put aside Öcalan's past criticism of Barzani's father and allowed Öcalan to enter KDP territory. By 1982, Iran and Iraq were at war and the KDP turned on Saddam Hussein, which in turn forced many to relocate and left new alliances open for consideration.

Öcalan used the situation in Iraq to his advantage and moved to form an alliance with Barzani. The intentions for the location were not seen as temporary for Öcalan, but as a permanent spot for the PKK. In 1982, an agreement was reached with Barzani to allow the PKK to use the bordering territory. The PKK was granted space to build camps in Northern Iraq and to freely cross the borders into Turkey. In Syria, the party learned to use and make weapons in guerrilla warfare, but in Northern Iraq the PKK became knowledgeable with survival in the mountains as a guerrilla power.

Turkey and the PKK

The establishment of Turkey and the creation of the PKK are interesting narratives that should be crossed examined for similarities. The two entities have been at odds with each other for more than three decades each trying to outwit the other by taking on the similar roles as a counterpart to become just as legitimate in their cause. Both leaders of each nationalist movement were rebels of the state. Ataturk's success of becoming a legitimate force of winning his sovereign Turkey can be seen as a product of that time. The atmosphere after WWI left many throughout the world in complete devastation leaving many world powers absent of the will to fight off Ataturk and his forces. Thus, Ataturk won Turkish sovereignty without much opposition. Apo created the Kurdish movement in a different time where Turkey now had international support, an established government, and an army to stop such a potential threat leaving Apo's goal out of reach.

Both leading figures of the movement were beloved by their followers, leaving a lasting impact on each community. Ataturk known as the father of Turkey and Apo known as the

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father of the PKK created a power base that left no room for oppositions in beliefs, ideology, and a cultural co-existence. Ataturk created a uniformed culture crushing any opposing system that threatened Turkishness, even to the extent of cultural genocide. Apo created an absolute power base by manipulating situations to create beneficial circumstances for his goals that include his switching alliances with various Kurdish resistance groups, murder of opposing groups and PKK party members that eventually showed opposition to Apo's decisions, he altered their socialist ideology to a democratic system, and even the inclusion of women as we will examine later.

Apo states that he is against Turkey and all it inhabits, but uses methods that are vastly similar to his opponent. It would seem that Apo learned from Ataturk's methods to attempt the same goals that Ataturk gained from in 1923, essentially to "out Turk the Turks". As we learned and will further explore, the PKK has used and continues to use techniques similar to Turkey in order to gain international support and awareness to their goal of an independent Kurdistan. The interesting aspect is that the female PKK members are using the party methods to establish egalitarianism for women that will last long after the PKK is gone.

Öcalan's Views on Women

Öcalan harbored views on women differently from the culture around him. As a young boy, he remembered watching his mother humiliate his father. She was very harsh and critical of her son. He was also influenced by his sisters' marriage to a man from a neighboring village. His sister Havva was traded for wheat and money. Marriage arrangements did not contain aspects of love but rather the decisions were made by the parents who would profit from the arrangement. Aliza Marcus states in, *Blood and Belief*, "Öcalan later explained he saw such marriages as a type of death for women, and former PKK ideologue and scribe Mehmet Can Yuce cited Havva's marriage as a major influence on Öcalan's

theories on the need to liberate women from the repressive roles inherent in traditional Kurdish male-female relations.”⁴¹

The first emerging female within the PKK was Öcalan’s wife, Kersire Yildirim. They married in 1978, after meeting at a journalism school. He received much criticism from his party for the union. They did not agree with her family links and believed that any relationship with women would bring needless distractions that would take away from their fight. Author Aliza Marcus noted an interview with a leading member of the PKK on the subject of relationships and party members, “PKK supporters viewed marriage as a bourgeois undertaking that weakened people’s commitment to the fight. ‘From the beginning there was a rule against marrying, or maybe not a rule, but it was an idea, a way of thinking,’ said Selahattin Celik, a leading PKK member. “Love was something for the small bourgeois, something unnecessary.” None the less, a number of PKK’s first members were married – some, like Öcalan, married other supporters – but the pressures of illegal life made it hard to maintain.”⁴²

The whole party began to understand the idea of marriage as a distraction and became a rule for all later members of the party both male and female. It was believed that if a member was married their focus would shift on family instead of the struggle. Öcalan attempted to justify his marriage in terms of helping her independence. He explained their marriage would allow her freedom to move around Kurdish regions freely, since unmarried women were not permitted to travel alone. He also alluded to the idea that it would free her from family because they were linked to the state.

Much of the PKK’s ideology came from Öcalan and integrating women into the party was one aspect they adopted. If we analyze the leader’s view of women it becomes clear as to why he allocated women into their movement. Throughout Öcalan’s life, he had been influenced by strong women and admitted to

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² Ibid., 42.

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being afraid of them at times. He felt this was exemplary leadership material to cause fear and believed that women were more organized than men as members. The three impacting women in his life had been; his mother, his wife, and his beloved sister. He viewed his mother and wife as strong and capable of making an impact with their actions, he also saw his sister as a woman needing to be liberated. He detested the property theme of women and wanted to empower them away from a feudal hierarchy. He associated feudal life as a western approach to stay in power by keeping the rural population embedded in past ideas. His Maoist and Leninist approach needed a one party rule with everyone at an equal level. The ideology did not leave room for inequality and opposition of old cultural and religious practices. He had many thoughts on the subject but never attempted to put them in use until it was needed. Apo essentially brought women recruits into the PKK as a way to fill positions and to keep Kurdish women from changing their cultural identity to a Turkish one. The state of Turkey, through their reforms, was able to gain female support since it allowed gendered freedoms which were denied to them living in their Kurdish villages. The Kurdish women were granted the ability to enjoy a form of equality through activism in the PKK.

Formation of Women Activism

Women from various ethnic sectors in the area of Turkey served an important purpose during the World Wars and the War for Turkish Independence. They joined the fight as nurses on the battlefield, suppliers of materials, seamstresses for the men's uniforms, and the economic base during the wars. Women became the economic foundation for society as they took on the position of the male role in domestic life during the wars aiding the nostalgia of equal gender roles. Kurdish women in Turkey have been influenced by the 1923 decision to remodel the Turkish republic. Ataturk implemented reforms, as stated earlier, that would modernize Turkey to resemble Western Europeans. The end goal was to be recognized as an independent state in Western eyes, which meant

adopting democracy. One aspect of becoming a sovereign Turkey was to make all males and females equal under law. Kemal decided to establish women's rights through law which included social, legal, and political rights.

Only few women from elite families were chosen to receive equal education as men did and they competed for the same job opportunities. This emancipation created more difficulties for women because it gave the impression that all women were liberated, when most were not. In the article by Meltem Muftuler-Bac entitled, "Turkish Women's Predicament," the author states: "This created two types of women in Turkish society: the open, western, emancipated woman and the closed, traditional, "unliberated" women."⁴³ This is directly relevant to the study of outside ideas that had influence on the Kurdish culture in reference to true gender equality within the female gender as seen from a male perspective. The vast majority of Kurdish women resided in the underdeveloped Kurdish villages in Southeastern Turkey. The social structures of the various societies and cultures within Turkey create multiple inequalities and prejudices that influence their gendered identity.

The Kurdish society contained disadvantages for their women with male dominated customs, methodical economic advances to men, political violence, and danger from living in conflict zones overtaken by PKK and the Turkish forces. As Zeynep Sahin states in her dissertation, "The Political Representation of Kurdish, Kemalist, and Conservative Muslim Women in Turkey (1990-2010)," Kurdish women have been placed within, "systematic inequalities resulting from a lack of access to education, legal services, and health services. Worsened by language barriers, low levels of education, as well as low levels of employment outside of their homes among adult women in Southeastern Turkey, leave Kurdish women more vulnerable than other women in Turkey."⁴⁴

⁴³ Meltem Muftuler-Bac, "Turkish Women's Predicament," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22, no. 3 (1999): 303-313, 304.

⁴⁴ Zeynep Sahin, *The Political Representation of Kurdish, Kemalist, and*

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Oppressive policies of marital law between 1980 and 1987 in Turkey had especially affected the Kurdish people which called Turkey to a state of emergency within the states lawmaking procedures from 1987 to 2002.⁴⁵ The legislative procedures were enacted due to the high levels of domestic violence and honor killings in the private sphere of Kurdish provinces.⁴⁶

Kurdish women questioned the restrictive actions by the Turkish government through various forms of resistance that did not always include an armed struggle. Many Kurdish women formed levels of resistance through their political positions. They formed organizations that protested the lack of human rights for Kurds in Turkey in order to bring awareness to the “Kurdish question” from the international community. Sahin states that “forms of state violence against women have included sexual assault, rape, and torture exercised by state agents such as security forces, police, and village guards. Sometimes women were forced to witness the torture or murder of male relatives. Ill treatment of women by state agents was used as a strategy of demoralizing the Kurdish community.”⁴⁷ Female Kurds experienced a “double oppression” that shaped the Kurdish response of resistance of the 1980’s to the modern day.⁴⁸

The Turkish state during the military coup in 1980 to 1983 attempted to stop the Kurdish resistance at all costs which left Kurdish women vulnerable. Sahin described an interview she had with a Kurdish woman named Hafize Ipek on July 21, 2009. Ipek, “a member of the Municipal Council of Yenisehir, Diyarbakir, was a university student in the 1980s and was detained for 36 days. ‘I was humiliated because of my gender and my ethnic identity. I was tortured with beating and electric shocks. I was abused

Conservative Muslim Women In Turkey (1990-2010) (PhD Diss. University of Southern California, 2011), 101.

⁴⁵Ibid., 101.

⁴⁶Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2009.

⁴⁷Sahin, 101.

⁴⁸Ibid., 101.

psychologically’.”⁴⁹ The experiences of the state and the Kurdish cultural oppressions influenced the women into action by legitimizing Kurdish ethnic nationalism. The result of liberating gendered customs of their experienced “double oppression” was the belief that by “emancipating themselves through collective action and mass mobilization in the Kurdish nationalist movements, such that, the Kurdish nation and women would be liberated simultaneously.”⁵⁰ The experienced double oppression refers to the cultural or religious oppression and the state or village oppression. The Kurdish female movement was a way to legitimize their rights as equals in gender relations through acceptance within their involvement of activism.

Women began to assume the role of activist by joining the PKK out of necessity for numbers in recruitment as Kurdish women traditionally had many restraints within their villages. For the reason that PKK members were being jailed and killed in high numbers, they were not allowed to roam the villages alone or to socialize with men without a guardian. This made it difficult for the women to meet the PKK fighters. The PKK was not active in the cities, thus resulting in the lack of women recruits in the 1980s. The change occurred in 1989, when the PKK created roads into colleges and urban areas. The Kurdish group began to publish on politics in the 1990s, and gained the attention of women. This activity was seen as socially tolerable to family members with reference to office work being preferred to mountain fighting. The Kurdish community was astonished to find women guerrilla fighters carrying guns into villages at night to create propaganda and assemble goods.⁵¹

The allowance of women to join the Kurdish nationalist struggle was intended to enable Kurdish independence whereas women egalitarianism for the PKK came second. The Kurdish locals in eastern Turkey linked female modesty to the honor of the land by producing more Kurdish people to expand and honor a

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Marcus, 42.

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Kurdistan to justify sending daughters to fight. In turn, the combination created a wider nationalist situation for the Kurdish people, specifically the women. Many Kurds in Turkey view the Kurdish populations in terms of kinship. As seen in the examples above, mothers are known as mother of the nation, and PKK members are seen as sons and daughters of the nation. The control of female cadres by male party members can be seen as a “framework of nationalist forms of kinning,” which is essential for young unmarried women joining the party.⁵² Weiss writes about an interview with a party official who spoke of the strict rules regarding modesty of female recruits:

If we do not make sure that we respect local values and show that we protect the women and their honor, parents would decline sending their daughters to us. ... Parents often agree to their daughters' political activities exactly because “the party is us” the community, where the same standards of modesty and honor are enacted as at home.⁵³

Many of the Kurdish people residing in their villages of Turkey still practice patriarchal religious structures in their communities linked to old tendencies of past tribal life when kinship was an important tool to survival.

In the 1990s, women's roles began to change after a military coup. “Tens of thousands of Kurdish men”⁵⁴ were put in prison and forced women to take charge of the societal familial role. They became responsible for feeding their families and dealt with a challenging government in regards to Turkey's legal and jail systems. This meant that the women were often times brutalized

⁵² Nerina Weiss, “Falling from Grace: Gender Norms and Gender Strategies in Eastern Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 42 (2010): 55-76.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

when dealing with guards or police. This helped to foster the revolutionary ideals growing within the Kurdish women.

Three interviews of women involved with the PKK had different experiences in reference to Turkish treatment in prison. The article by Nerina Weiss entitled, "Falling from Grace: Gender Norms and Gender strategies in Eastern Turkey," outlines the experiences and how the experiences interact with the idea of gender equality. The first woman, Fatma was a young woman married to a male Kurdish activist. She attended special political events but the responsibilities and expectancies of marriage generally mark an end to a woman's political career. At this time, Fatma had two young children and was pregnant when her husband was arrested. She had to watch her husband beaten and was not allowed to get properly dressed. The soldiers' were able to see her exposed in her nightgown and she felt this was as violent as her husband's beating. Her husband was taken away and sentenced to multiple years in prison. She went to visit him but, was disgraced by male guards who strip searched her. After the birth of her third child, she resumed visits and used the baby's diapers to smuggle through letters about the Kurdish movements.⁵⁵

The Turkish soldiers used sexualized acts as transgressions in the way of demoralizing or to humiliate the Kurdish society as a whole. There were many reports of women being targeted by removing their respected female status and violating their moral code and conservative manner. The tactic not only afflicted the husband and wife, but also the Kurdish people. Kurdish and Turkish women share the same societal attitudes, as Muftuler-Bac states: "Mediterranean culture...is based on male superiority and female inferiority. This is reproduced by women themselves as mothers and mothers-in-law."⁵⁶

The Turkish soldiers as noted used the sexual defilement of Kurdish women as a weapon of war to symbolically demoralize and degrade the Kurdish society. It is through this narrative that

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Muftuler-Bac, 303-314, 304.

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one might better understand the PKK's control over the women by allowing the women agency to protect themselves and end Turkish attempts to humiliate Kurdish society. Weiss perfectly connected the symbolic meaning of sexual violation to the act of war when she states: "The physicality of the ethicized body can hardly be separated from the symbolic meanings vested in it. In Kurdish communities, military and the police often very consciously violated local perceptions of good and evil, codes of modest conduct, and purity and pollution. As in most conflicts, these violations were highly gendered and sexualized."⁵⁷

The second interview of a female activist was of a mother who was treated radically different than Fatma. This provides great insight to the gender role hierarchy. Handan is an older woman with grown children. Her daughter became involved with the PKK, which led to her home being searched regularly. Handan and her husband were taken into interrogation many times. She was interrogated as a parent and not a wife. She did not experience humiliating situations; rather her elderly position demanded her respect from the interrogators. She enjoyed more societal freedom because she was older. She was less likely to be sexually harassed and was seen as genderless. This allowed older women a higher familial, political, and social status. Handan later went looking for her daughter in the mountains. When she found her daughter she stayed with her for a few days. While visiting, the young women began to call her mother. She became the mother of their unit. Handan stated describing her time with the unit that, "these guerrilla fighters were not strong heroes: they seemed far too young, fragile and longing for their mothers."⁵⁸

The third interview with the former guerilla fighter known as Zehra was a member of the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP). Weiss's study displays a female fighter that broke the rule of the party's ban on romantic relationships. Zehra grew up in a small Kurdish community in

⁵⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁸ Weiss, "Falling from Grace: Gender Norms and Gender Strategies in Eastern Turkey," 55-76.

eastern Turkey. Her village had been politically active in the Kurdish resistance, in turn influencing Zehra's involvement. She was imprisoned for ten years, but after her release became a high-ranking cadre in the DTP. In Zehra's position, the party enlisted her the task of reviewing the local political structure and to clean out the ranks of those who lacked the Kurdish cause. Her judgments were highly respected giving her the right to criticize the community and party officials. Zehra was respected but unpopular for her harsh reproach of many high-ranking party and community members accusing them of using the party for personal gain and in opposition to the purity of the Kurdish fight.

Zehra held a high position in the party structure and was known as the queen (*Kralice*) from her effectiveness in the party.⁵⁹ As firm as she was on the dealings of local officials she opposed the structure of the strict rules against romantic relationships of party members. Zehra believed that a member could be a committed to the party and have a personal life. She was also offended by her ascribed identity as an "*erkek-kadin*, meaning a man-woman."⁶⁰ Being a trusted member of the party, Zehra was able to socialize alone with male members without the start gossip. On one of the outings, the male member received a phone call from his girlfriend and became upset that he was out with a female cadre alone. The male member calmed his significant other by stating it was fine because Zehra was a *erkek-kadin*. The term meant there was no sexual desire for the male member because Zehra was basically seen as a man. The two terms ascribed to female members in the Kurdish parties are defined as, "while a women addressed as an *erkek* has the male characteristics of bravery and self-control, an *erkek-kadin* transgresses gendered boundaries and imitates men without having internalized the necessary (positive) characteristics of a man."⁶¹ The term surprised her and created the need to discredit that ascribed identity because Zehra saw herself as a normal woman who wanted marriage and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁶¹ Ibid., 72

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children at some point. She challenged the gender roles of the party structure by frequently claiming her right to familial normalcy while still maintaining a dedicated role in the party. Zehra differed from other female fighters who disclaimed a “normal life” of cultural customs for the contextual gender equality in the Kurdish resistance. Other female cadres feared the punishments for resisting the structural identity of asexuality and the rule against relationships.

The former guerilla fighter organized her marriage to a prominent political activist in the party to begin her family. The marriage created a major disturbance within the party and led to the removal of both Zehra and her husband from their positions in the DTP. The former queen “was accused of disloyalty, betrayal, and treason.”⁶² She was initially sentenced to death for her offense, but the decision was altered to her expulsion from the party and society. However, Zehra’s husband received less scrutiny and punishment as he was welcomed back into the party, but denoted in rank.

The three experiences begin to explain why the Kurdish women join the PKK. Many join to escape the repressive life of their Kurdish villages, but are stripped of their gender identity and given a new form of an “emancipated gender.” Once a woman is involved with the PKK they are no longer seen as a woman, but referred to as a man. They lose all ties to femininity and are seen as asexual. If captured by Turkish soldiers the female fighters no longer had the gendered title as female. If Turkish soldiers attempted to humiliate or demoralize the Kurdish culture with the captive, it would no longer work. To diminish the sexuality of female fighters to that of no gendered identity strips their worth as a reproducing mother of the Kurdish people and in a sense lose their importance to the Kurds as someone that needs protection.

Overtime the Kurdish women filled positions of branched organizations of the PKK such as the ERNK (The Kurdish People’s Liberation Front), political networks, and the Kurdish

⁶² Ibid., 56.

Parliament in Exile military activities. The membership offshoots that aided the PKK worked in and around European countries to establish awareness for the Kurdish problem in Turkey by creating propaganda and intelligence activities, street demonstrations, and media support. Many women joined the armed struggle and were openly accepted. The female fighters were instrumental to the PKK because women were able to bypass the security inspection points in Turkey with ease. Sahin in an interview with Ali Kemal Ozcan in 2007, received the following answer to why women were accepted into the armed fight, “female militants often have better access to certain targets, such as police control points, public gatherings, and parades. In addition, women launched suicide attacks more easily than men. During the 1990s, the PKK launched 15 suicide attacks, 11 of them by women.”⁶³

Conclusion

The brief background to Kurdish history set the foundation to the understanding of Kurdish people’s right to exist as their own nation and culture. The Kurdish people are one of the oldest ethnic and cultural groups to the Middle East. The Kurds have co-existed for centuries with various civilizations and received little opposition to how they should live. It was the entrance of European imperialism that altered the Middle Eastern inhibitors and the Kurdish way of life. The alterations of the old practices to the western principles of economy, ideology, racism, secularism, the false promises of the world wars, and nationalism vastly changed the Middle East and are directly responsible for the current conflicts. The history also displayed the religious background that divided the Kurds and assisted in the inequality of women in their societal structure. The female fighters of the PKK and other Kurdish factions state that they fight in the resistance to gain a sovereign Kurdistan, but to also bring gender egalitarianism in the Kurdish communities. Many Kurdish communities follow

⁶³ Sahin, 107.

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their religious or cultural customs of male dominance that restrict women in their societies. The young Kurdish women are subjected to be slaves to men as Mitra later stated in her interview. Females are restricted in their movement through the villages by needing a familial male chaperon, they have limited access to education, and many suffer from arranged marriages. The arranged marriages by male family members take away physical ownership and rights to the women's bodies. Many Kurdish women in Turkey and throughout the Middle East as noted, experienced abusive husbands, honor killings, and rape which clarifies the Kurdish females need to join the PKK and gain some equality or ownership over themselves.

The formation of Turkey by Ataturk was a monolithic alteration to the Kurdish people and their identity. Ataturk's reforms attempted to strip the Kurdish identity from Turkey through legal and violent force. A major key factor that pushed the Kurdish response was the reform of education and later gender equality. The educational reforms altered the thinking of the Kurds by granting them a western knowledge. The Kurds were able to implement western thought to evoke ideology and nationalism that they were now ready to effectively fight for because they understood the power behind both ideas. The gender equality reforms greatly affected the Kurdish women through legal gender rights. Many Kurdish women in rural villages were not affected by the new laws, but it set the standard that made a lasting effect on Apo's PKK by including women in the fight. The main goal for Apo was to gain numbers and to eliminate the backwardness of the patriarchal customs by becoming emancipated into a new form of women-hood. The PKK utilized the methods of stripping the past much like the Kemalist reforms attempted.

The formation of the Kurdish resistance in response to Ataturk's reforms that intended to create one cultural Turkish identity is essential to the female fighters. The PKK background allows for an understanding of Kurdish agency against their cultural genocide, but also sets the foundation for the inclusion of female fighters. Although, the female guerilla fighters are still

restricted by male dominance, they enjoy more freedom in the PKK compared to their life in the villages.

Female involvement in various Kurdish resistance movements allows for the possibility of liberation and empowerment from otherwise restrictive gender roles in rural Kurdish villages. Women that join the resistance gain self-worth and can negotiate their position within Kurdish communities. They are able to utilize their political positions to protect themselves from the daily constraints of honor and shame from their local communities and threats from Turkish forces. The party represents empowerment as a process for women to have control over their lives and decisions. Many interviews with the female fighters do not consider themselves at a disadvantage or in need of saving; instead they compare their old life of restraints to bolster the validation of their new social and political opportunities.

At first glance, the members of the PKK seem to share the same restrictions in the party structure of no sexual or marital relations. A closer view of the restrictions show that romantic relationships of male guerilla fighters is severely frowned upon and if caught, a demotion in rank is the punishment. On the other hand, the female guerilla fighters receive major repercussions for breaking the rules. The women's punishments vary depending on the area, but the most extreme is a death sentence. For many women cadres the punishments are more likely to be elimination of membership to the party and to be ostracized by the PKK and the Kurdish communities. The main contributor to the harsh punishments for females is to make the example that sexual relations for women will not be tolerated to keep families in the villages secure in trusting the PKK with their daughters honor. The female fighters within the party structure enjoy the freedoms of guerilla life even with their conditional equality.

Abdullah Öcalan was captured in 1999 and brought to Turkey. Öcalan was sentenced to death, but the sentence was altered to life imprisonment. The leading members of the PKK halted the violence to a low point. Attacks reemerged when the Iraqi Kurds obtained an Independent State in 2006. This echoed

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the long awaited achievement of a Kurdish fight for autonomy. The possession of cultural independent home drove the Turkish Kurds to hope for their own Independent Kurdistan.

Conflict between the Turkish Kurds and Turkey is an ongoing dispute. Determining a solution to the situation is difficult because the opposing sides use hostile actions to gain control. In a recent development, On March 21, 2013, Öcalan called out to the PKK to cease fire. According to the Turkish Government, Öcalan and Turkish leaders have been in negotiations to give the Turkish Kurds cultural rights in the upcoming constitution. Since 2013 to the present there has been a cease fire for peace talks with Turkey about Kurdish rights. From July 30th to July 5th, 2013, the PKK changed its leadership remarkably choosing a male and a female leader to head the PKK. The dual gendered power base is meant to create an illusion to the Turkish community that Kurdish women do receive the same rights and power that male members enjoy. Both members along with the conference members elected Öcalan as president and commander of the PKK.⁶⁴

The gendered violations experienced by the females of the PKK are doubled by the Turkish military and the unequal structures of the PKK. The Kurdish women are willing to die to enjoy a form of freedom in the PKK that they otherwise would not experience in their Kurdish villages. The Kurdish women around the Middle East are using their role within the Kurdish resistance for a new conflict that is unrelated to the sole cause of Kurdistan. The Kurdish inclusion of women to the fight has allowed for the opening of a new social setting for women as feminist. As Weiss stated, "The Kurdish political arena had opened a context for women to appropriate new space. Women have taken up political offices and challenged the male dominance within the party itself."⁶⁵ The female guerilla fighters understood the PKK needed numbers and did not necessarily care about gender egalitarianism, but recently the women have gained the upper hand. They have

⁶⁴ Sherzad Shekhani, Asharq Al-Awsat, July 11, 2013, June 10, 2014. www.aawsat.net/2013/07/articles55309299.

⁶⁵ Weiss, 59.

learned to use the Kurdish card of self-preservation and using situations to their advantage. Male members of the PKK have also provided gender equality as a demand in Kurdish independence, subsequently giving Kurdish women legitimacy. The women have stepped into the public arena presenting to Kurdish society throughout the Middle East that they enjoy true equality in the Kurdish groups. By creating public legitimacy and rallying for women rights, society leaves an open space for the women to enjoy more freedoms when the Kurdish resistance is over. They have proven their right to gender equality by fighting alongside the men of the PKK and when the fight is over men will not be able to take female freedoms away. The Kurdish female guerilla fighters have thus successfully introduced a paradigm for their ultimate egalitarian ends.

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Author Bio

Meagan Muschara graduated from California State University San Bernardino with her Bachelor of Arts degree in History in June 2014. She diligently served her campus community as Vice President and President of the CSUSB History Club/Phi Alpha Theta. As a member of the club she participated in many youth outreach programs such as Upward Bound, co-authored a published review of the film *Lincoln* in the 2013 edition of *History in the Making* and served on the editorial board for *History in the Making* the following year. The process for “The Evolution of Female Fighters in the PKK” began in January 2013. As a member of Phi Alpha Theta, she was invited to present her work as a panelist for the Biennial Convention in New Mexico 2014. She believed the paper needed to be expanded therefore she continued to work on her research throughout 2014 with Dr. David Yaghoubian. She would like to thank Sean Sweitzer, Ricardo Elias, Lauren Kirschke, Dr. Tiffany Jones, Claudia Aros and Orland Urbina for their editorial help and support over the past year. In addition she would like to thank the History Department at California State University San Bernardino for the knowledge and learning experiences that opened her mind to view history and the world around her in a new light. Furthermore, she would like to thank Dr. Jeremy Murray and Dr. Cherstin Lyon for their continual support throughout her time at CSUSB and also her family for always believing she is capable of big achievements. Lastly, she would like to give a very special thank you to Dr. Yaghoubian who mentored her through the entire process of this article. He helped to hone and shape the subject in its early stages. He also remained a constant motivator throughout the re-writes by helping to create new ideas and focusing in to see the other sides of the conflict. She appreciated Dr. Yaghoubian pushing her to always improve, and for believing that the study was worth the many hours spent working on it. Meagan recently accepted a full-time time position as a CSUSB Gear Up mentor where she works to inspire the youth of San Bernardino to attend college. She was also recently

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