



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 15(1) 2022: 323-329

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v15i1p323

Published 15 March, 2022

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

BOOKS REVIEW

Francis O'Connor (2021), *Understanding Insurgency: Popular Support for the PKK in Turkey, UK*: Cambridge University Press.

Michael M. Gunter

Tennessee Technological University

This is a very well written, richly documented analysis that «asserts that the primary reason why the PKK [Kurdistan Workers Party] has for decades succeeded in resisting the Turkish state is because it has never lost the support of a large portion of the Kurdish people» (p. 2). Thus, O'Connor's «central argument is that the PKK's relationship with its constituency has shaped its mobilisation from its foundation in the mid-1970s. [...] Importantly, PKK support is not something it has simply extracted or coerced from a passive population but rather the outcome of the PKK's mobilization strategies, civilian responses» (pp. 2-3). The resulting narrative is based on «a rigorous empirical analysis drawing on the qualitative interviews with PKK militants and supporters, primary sources from the movement and some of its contemporaries, embedded in the growing secondary literature on the conflict» (p. 4).

Although the author acknowledges that «this book is based on my PhD, which I began in 2010 at the European University Institute in Italy» (p. ix), he admirably succeeds in producing a very readable, scholarly analysis that demonstrates his mastery of much of the burgeoning academic literature on the PKK and other worldwide insurgencies. He freely and frequently cites his sources, usually eschewing single examples, while often noting various contradictory explanatory factors supported by further citations from both the secondary literature and his 56 interviews.

Although O'Connor frequently cites the work of Aliza Marcus (2007) as «ground-breaking» (p. 14) as well as that of Ali Kemal Ozcan (2006), O'Connor's book in some ways reminds me more of Sakine Cansiz's (2018) autobiography. On November 27, 1978, "Sara", Cansiz's nom de guerre, was one of two female founding members of the PKK. However, Sara's bibliography is largely about her personal experiences, important aspects of which were influenced by her being a woman, while O'Connor's book is not about his own experiences, but an academic tour de force weaving together a large academic literature to witness and interpret much of the same spatial and temporal milieu Sara experienced. In circumstances still not fully understood, Sara was assassinated in Paris on January 9, 2013 by an apparent Turkish agent who might have been acting on behalf of rogue or "deep state" orders, not official ones. But alas, the assassin conveniently died

of brain cancer on December 17, 2016 in a French prison before making any meaningful disclosures if he even had any to offer. Almost a decade later we still do not know the full tragic story.

Two possible weaknesses I noticed throughout O'Connor's book is his limited and thus arguably dated time frame «from its [the PKK's] foundation in the mid-1970s until 1999» (p. 3). However, he partially makes up for this by bringing events quickly (although very partially) up to date in his conclusions. Suddenly, at the end of his book, one is reading briefly about Ocalan's new ideas on a «deterritorialised nation» (p. 225) or grass roots, democratic confederalism; the PKK supposedly submerged into a new umbrella organization called the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK); and what O'Connor boldly terms «the most significant development in recent years [...] the emergence of the Democratic Union Party [...] PYD [...] as the most prominent Kurdish party in Syria and the military achievements of its armed wings, the People's Protection Units» (p. 227). This latter event, of course, involves the PKK, which largely established this new Syrian Kurdish entity, its epic struggles against ISIS with considerable aid from the United States, and the establishment of Rojava, later broadened into the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, potentially another Kurdish state.

Further explaining this matter of a possibly too short of a time frame, O'Connor's book is not intended to cover events up to the present. Rather, it is supposed to show how the «the PKK's longevity is rooted in its flexibility in its relations with its constituency» (p. 3), a matter that can and is well analyzed as it is in this volume. Despite admitted acts of terrorism, murder of its own suspect members, and strategic errors such as attempted unwanted constituency conscription, O'Connor succeeds in his task despite his limited time frame. Or as the author himself explains, «I have focused on the three earliest decades of the PKK in Turkey until 1999 [...] to contribute to a richer empirical and theoretical foundation upon which more recent studies of the PKK can build» (p. 65).

The other possible weakness in this book might be the author's reticence to criticize his sources, preferring simply to bring in other sources and interpretations for the reader to peruse. Perhaps this is his way to make his criticism subtle or even polite. A rare, surprising exception is his blunt assertion that «Marcus' depiction of them [PKK fighters] as cosmopolitan, critical-minded city youths is arguably oversimplified» (p. 205). This comment regarding Marcus is all the more interesting given how often – too often in my opinion – O'Connor cites her authoritatively. As a journalist, Marcus writes well, but there are numerous other sources that equally delve into the same details she does. She does not need to be cited so often. On the other hand, perhaps inspiring to other authors having difficulty writing a long enough narrative to publish as a book rather than a mere article, Marcus long wrestled with her incomplete manuscript before finally mastering it. I know this because as its main reviewer I kept encouraging her eventual publisher to stick with her problematic project until finally it prospered.

Two more comments from the author's very useful and readable Introduction impressed me. 1. «The PKK is the most controversial of all subjects in the field of Kurdish studies. A large body of counterterrorism literature exists which is, of course, intent less on studying the movement as a sociological phenomenon than serving as the ideological legitimation for the forces of the Turkish state which militarily and judicially combat the PKK» (p. 23). O'Connor's reply is to the point when he cites James Kapitan, (2003, p. 52) that charges of terrorism can be «simply the current vogue for discrediting one's opponents before the risky business of inquiry into their complaints can even begin» (p. 10) or that (admittedly too strong) in citing Charles Tilly (2003, p. 19) «terror always refers to someone else's behavior» (p. 10). 2. When searching for knowledgeable interviewees, O'Connor tellingly comments, «the PKK seemed to be 'nowhere' while practically being 'everywhere'» (p. 17).

Six chapters and a Conclusion follow O'Connor's opening Introduction. In the author's own words, the first chapter constitutes a «superfluous [...] overview for readers less familiar with modern Kurdish history» (p. 23). Here he reviews sociocultural and historical attributes relevant to the current PKK struggle such as earlier

Kurdish rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s, the Kurdish revival of the 1950s and 1960s, and the ethno-religious and linguistic characteristics of the people whom he wrote in his Introduction lived in the “homeland” (p. 8) of Kurdistan, which he aptly terms an «overlapping, but occasionally mutually exclusive, smorgasbord of ethno-religious and linguistic identities in a state context characterized by Turkish nationalism» (p. 29). He heuristically closes this chapter by reiterating how «the Turkish state’s unwillingness to tolerate the claim-making practices of institutional political parties such as the TIP and moderate organisations like the DDKO ensured that subsequent Kurdish movements would be of a much more radical and violent disposition» (p. 38).

Chapter 2 is a theoretical one that calls upon the existing literature regarding political violence and social movements to analyze the relationship between armed groups and their constituency support networks. The author also examines the rebel governance approach that has been described by (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, p. 3) as «the set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war» (p. 39). The final part of this theoretical chapter more specifically surveys «the spatial elements of constituency building, the role of networks in constituencies, especially regarding recruitment, and finally the structuralizing power of the state on how constituencies are shaped» (p. 40).

Chapter 3 moves the author’s narrative for the remainder of his journey onto an empirical path here detailing «the PKK’s ten-year pre-conflict gestation period, which traversed arguably the most tumultuous period of modern Turkish history, characterized by unprecedented social upheaval, violent street politics and the sadistic brutality and radical political transformation of the 1980 coup» (p. 105). Evolving «from an introspective and rather unremarkable leftist student group in the university milieu of Ankara to a small rural-based guerrilla army» (p. 105), the PKK «adopted a dual framing strategy whereby it emphasized its Marxist credentials to better-educated and politically mobilised elements of society and its Kurdish nationalism to its largely rural and less politically literate audiences» (p. 105).

The nascent organization argued that «Kurdistan was a colony of the Turkish state and that only an armed struggle would bring about self-determination and national liberation» (p. 91). It also often protected its supporters from right-wing attacks and «proactively conducted armed campaigns against certain asiretler or tribes. In principle, the PKK viewed them as an enemy because in most cases they functioned as the de facto representatives of the state» (p. 88), «and [were] guilty of traitorous exploitation of their fellow Kurds» (p. 91). On the whole this proved to be a successful appeal to the PKK’s putative constituency. However, showing its flexibility, in time the PKK distinguished patriotic tribes from where recruits could be drawn.

Furthermore, «they set up communal houses where party militants would live together in order to be best able to organize movement activities. These houses became key nodes in the organization of solidarity networks throughout Kurdistan» (p. 90). «The PKK had successfully mobilized large swathes of Kurdish society. Unlike other Kurdish movements [...] it breached class barriers to create a movement that encompassed all societal groups» (p. 91). This successful foundational labor proved key to successfully reestablishing itself after the coup in September 1980 had largely destroyed its Kurdish and other leftist opponents. Interesting also was «the notable presence of non-Kurds in the movement [that] distinguished it from rival Kurdish groups which for the most part had exclusively Kurdish members» (p. 77).

In accomplishing all this given the protracted and more cautious Maoist strategy it supposedly tried to implement, somewhat contradictorily, the PKK also followed Che Guevara’s less prudent foco strategy. This argued «that armed groups need not wait for propitious structural conditions but that an armed vanguard, through its actions, can bring about the conditions favourable to weaken and eventually defeat the state» (p. 82). Guevara failed, but Ocalan partially succeeded.

Chapter 4 narrates the PKK’s move to rural Kurdistan and launching of its insurgency on August 15, 1985 with its famous attacks on Eruh and Semdinli in isolated areas of southeastern Turkey. The author also

examines how the PKK established its support networks in the countryside and describes the state-supported Village Guards of Kurdish militia who «proved to be advantageous to the [Turkish] military for a number of reasons» (p. 122) because of «the state's incomplete penetration in Kurdistan» (p. 127). Thus, «the presence of large numbers of Kurds mobilised against the PKK to some extent delegitimized the movement's status as representatives of Kurdish society, thus undermining the external perception of the PKK as a national liberation movement» (p. 128). The author apprises his reader, «armed groups are most vulnerable in their early periods of mobilisation. Guerrillas' inexperience, the absence of geographically and socially proximate constituencies and the unpredictability of state responses render it the most dangerous phase of an armed group's existence» (p. 107). In the end, the PKK only dealt successfully with the much larger Village Guards because their motives were much more personal and thus for the PKK easier to satisfy.

O'Connor also most importantly analyzes how Abdullah Ocalan established his role as the «almost-uncontested control of the movement» (p. 109), to become known as the «Party Leadership or *Onderlik*» (p. 119). Ocalan achieved this Stalin-like cult of the personality despite his actual detachment from guerrilla operations on the ground through his positive personal charisma as well as the apparent outright murder of some of his rivals. For example, Marcus (2007, 94) writes that between 1983 and 1985, «Ocalan ordered or encouraged the murder of at least eleven high level former or current members who abandoned the group and publicly criticised it» (p. 118). Elsewhere Marcus (2007, p. 135) also reports that «a directive apparently sent by Ocalan that warned of infiltrators and spies in their ranks» led to «at least twenty-four of these [young] recruits and maybe even up to one hundred [...] [getting] executed by the PKK in 1989 and 1990» (p. 205).

«Ocalan seems to genuinely believe that he possesses qualities beyond those of other members of the movement and Kurdish society» (p. 119). However, «the application of these strategies on the ground was necessarily far removed from Ocalan's idealised plans whose complete lack of experience as a guerrilla fighter led him to impose unworkable demands upon his field commanders» (p. 121). «In admittedly simplified terms, strategic developments which led to positive outcomes are attributed to Ocalan and other strategies which were less successful are blamed on others within the movement or on their incorrect implementation of his instructions» (p. 221). Even before the PKK insurgency actually began, «Ocalan was based in Syria while the PKK guerrillas were located inside the borders of Turkey, often in isolated rural areas» (p. 221). As O'Connor notes, «this emphasizes the distinction between how conflicts are idealised at the centre and realised in the periphery» (p. 126). The strategic implications of this on the PKK's success since Ocalan's capture in 1999 will be considered near the end of this essay, where one might make a strong case that the PKK has proven more successful with Ocalan removed to the role of only a titular leader. His everyday return might jeopardize actual continuing success now implemented!

Nevertheless, O'Connor importantly reminds us that «due to its systemic focus, the social movement literature often downplays the role of leaders and their effects on movements» (p. 113). Here the author cites Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone and Elizabeth J. Perry (2001, p. 127), to explain how leaders have been merely seen «as intermediaries, facilitators, and motivators, as tacticians and foci of events, rather than as independent shapers of the course and outcome of contention» (p. 113). However, citing Aminzade, Goldstone and Perry (2001, p. 138) again, «between environmental pressures and individual responses there lies a good deal of latitude for personal ingenuity and agency» (p. 113). Here then was Ocalan's opening.

Chapter 5 continues O'Connor's narrative by analyzing the urban-rural interplay. It delves into considerable detail about how the state's forced evacuations from the rural areas not only destroyed much of the historic Kurdish countryside, but also led to a stunning buildup of urban Kurdish society both in the southeast (Diyarbakir, for example) and in the west where Istanbul became arguably the largest ethnic Kurdish city in the world! As the author observes, «the common misconception that the PKK had little or no presence in the cities of Kurdistan – that is was simply a 'Maoist' rural phenomenon – has been brought into question» (p.

181). Far from extirpating the Kurdish revival in the southeast, «the state's policy of draining the sea to isolate fish was an utter failure. It simply relocated the fish into the far more dangerous position of Turkey's urban heart» (p. 218). Indeed, «cities served as platforms to address the wider world in a way that rural villages and towns never could» (p. 182).

On the other hand, the PKK's brief military venture into southeastern urban areas of Turkey following the collapse of the peace process in 2015, «was a military failure and ended in the militia's defeat [and] the destruction of a number of cities» (pp. 148n-149n). However, even this military defeat ironically contributed to «a renewed wave of massive population displacement» (p. 149n). «The growth in the PKK's urban support was also evidenced in a number of serhildans or popular uprisings from 1990 onwards, and the mass demonstrations on the occasions of Newroz celebrations and other symbolic dates as well as the funerals of guerrillas» (p. 146). These existential urban developments demonstrate the misperception that «the advantages of rural insurgency implicitly suggest that these factors are for the most part absent in urban contexts» (p. 147).

Chapter 6 continues this urban focus on what has become an internal Kurdish diaspora out of the traditional homeland in southeastern Turkey, «the millions of Kurds who have migrated – or were forcibly displaced – to the urban centres of western and southern Turkey in search of economic prosperity or refuge from the conflict» (p. 24) or what sometimes has been characterized as «long distance nationalism» (p. 191). This internal diaspora «dwarfs even the largest estimate of the Kurdish diaspora across Europe but receives disproportionately less academic attention» (p. 183).

However, it is important to remember that this internal Kurdish diaspora is far from being homogenous. «It is marked by linguistic differences (Kurmanji, Zaza and Turkish) and characterized by strong sub-regional identities. Religious divisions between Alevi and Sunni Kurds and the intensity of religious belief within these groups are also relevant features. The communities are also diffused spatially in different cities and neighbourhoods according to class divisions, regional provenance and the period of migration» (p. 199). Helpfully, hemsehri or hometown associations can alleviate these disharmonies and «unite immigrants from the same territory in their place of immigration» (p. 189).

«Shared experience of discrimination, from casual racism on the streets to institutionalized discrimination, particularly in school» (p. 192) contribute to the internal diaspora's exclusion. «The speaking of Kurdish on the street often provoked angry responses from passers-by, which not infrequently would lead to scuffles» (pp. 192-193). Citing Yukseker (2006, p. 45), O'Connor drily relates how «a female migrant pithily summed up the [negative economic] situation by remarking that back in Kurdistan 'one person worked and fed many people; here many people work and cannot feed even one person» (p. 197).

The PKK viewed the legal pro-Kurdish HEP and its current HDP successor «as a potential way to mobilize those who were unlikely to be mobilized by the clandestine PKK» (p. 215). These legal pro-Kurdish parties «catered to the middle classes and bridged social divisions that the PKK could not [...] and once individuals started to engage at any level with Kurdish politics, they were consequently easier to mobilise than politically inactive Kurds» (p. 215). On the other hand, citing Nicole F. Watts (2010, p. 169) and Mustafa Cosar Unal (2012, p. 443), O'Connor notes that the legal Kurdish parties «have not performed as well as one might imagine in Kurdish populated areas, leading some to suggest that the PKK and the [Kurdish in a wider sense] movement 'were unrepresentative of many ordinary Kurds'» (p. 214).

The rather brief Conclusion summarizes the book's main empirical findings, reiterating «that the PKK's caution to avoid alienating its constituency has been a central contributing factor in its longevity and relative successes» (p. 219). Thus, «in light of the recent demobilisation of the FARC, the PKK is perhaps the most significant persistent insurgent group in the world» (pp. 219-220). Further, «the arguments outlined in this book are not specific to the PKK and can indeed be applied to the analysis of almost every insurgent group,

past or present» (p. 220). Finally, as noted earlier in this review, the author also briefly mentions several recent PKK initiatives in his Conclusion.

Although O'Connor penned his final remarks well before the Taliban finally, but quickly regained Afghanistan in August 2021, it would be interesting to see how he would compare this seemingly greater success with the PKK's lack thereof. The answer clearly lies in the continuing prowess of the Turkish government compared to the ineptitude of Afghanistan's. This would suggest that the PKK strategy must consider and respect the staying power of its state opponent and seek some ultimate solution less than a traditional guerrilla victory. In addition, he PKK's continuing blame for Ocalan's capture in February 1999 on an international conspiracy led by Turkey and the United States is an unconvincing attempt to delegitimize what occurred. Any state challenged by such a dangerous insurgency would surely have acted similarly and legitimately. On the other hand, Turkey's continuing attempt to delegitimize the PKK as a terrorist organization does not contribute to the peace process either (Gunter, 2018; Gunter, 2022). Given the PKK's proven persistency, Turkey cannot anticipate a Sri Lankan solution.

As already broached above, the PKK's continued persistence and relative success may ironically depend on Ocalan's continuing incarceration. If freed, would the current PKK leadership really accept his renewed leadership? I doubt it. Indeed, an imaginative Turkish state policy might be to free the titular PKK leader and cause a leadership rift in the party. Continuing with these speculations, would the PKK have come as far as it now has with Ocalan as its actual rather than imprisoned titular leader? Probably not. Would today's China be in its present strong economic and therefore military and political position if Mao Zedong – still spelled for some reason by O'Connor as Mao Tse-tung – had somehow continued to rule after his death in September 1976? I think not. It took Deng Xiaoping to bring China into the modern era and so it has with the PKK although I do not know if I can identify just one PKK leader among the several who did it. Maybe what we have here is an example of a rare, successful collective leadership more dedicated to the Kurdish cause than their own personal glorification and furthered by the principle of dual gendered leadership so foreign to most Middle Eastern societies.

Yet today, the PKK ultimately still suffers from what elsewhere I have called “the bane of Kurdish disunity” (Gunter, 2001), manifested today by the deadly fighting in northern Iraq between it and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This situation clearly allows Turkey to play the two Kurdish entities off against each other with divide-and-rule tactics. What kind of future is this? What should we make of the continuing disunity? Pan-Kurdish unity would seem unlikely. If there are 22 Arab states in the world, why not at least two Kurdish ones? Given their common Ottoman past and maybe even the more relevant fact that many Syrian Kurds originally arrived from there following the failed Sheikh Said rebellion in Turkey in 1925 and thus still have strong roots in Turkey (the famous Syrian Kurdish scholar Ismet Cheriff Vanly is an excellent example), one Kurdish state might be created by the leftist Turkish PKK in Turkey (Bakur) with its allied PYD, the ruling Kurdish party today in Northeastern Syria (Rojava). However, the entire question of a PKK state continues to run aground on existential Turkish opposition. The other Kurdish state is clearly the more politically traditional, Barzani-led KRG (Basur). Finally, Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat) constitutes yet another factor in this speculation.

This book includes a hefty bibliography – although even it missed some important sources – but a more modest index. The days of an extended, multi-referenced index are gone, a victim of mere computer-generated models. There also is a useful List of Abbreviations in the front of the text and an appendix listing the details of 56 interviews cited throughout the text. A modest map appears on p. 9. This eminently readable book will richly reward scholars, government practitioners, and interested members of the intelligent lay public.

References

- Aminzade, R., Goldstone, J., & Perry, E. (2001), *Leadership Dynamics and Dynamics of Contention*, in R. Azinzade et al. (eds.), *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 126-154.
- Arjona, A. Kasfir, N. and Mampilly, Z.C., (Eds., 2015), *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cansiz, S. (2018), *My Whole Life Was a Struggle*, London: Pluto Press.
- Gunter, M. (2001), “The Bane of Kurdish Disunity”, *Orient: Zeitschrift Des Deutschen Orient-Institut*, 42(4), pp. 605-616.
- Gunter, M. (2018), *Delisting the PKK and the Resulting Benefits*, in Milley, T.J., & Venturini, F., *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdogan’s Turkey*, Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Gunter, M. (2022), “Delisting the PKK as a Terrorist Organization”, *The Commentaries*, 2(1), pp. 25-38.
- Kapitan, J. (2003), *The Terrorism of ‘Terrorism’*, In J.P. Sterba (Ed.), *Terrorism and International Justice*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 47-66.
- Marcus, A. (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York: New York University Press.
- Ozcan. A. (2006), *Turkey’s Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan*, London: Routledge.
- Tilly, C. (2003), *Collective Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Unal, M. (2012), “The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and Popular Support: Counterterrorism towards an Insurgency Nature”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 23(3), pp. 432-455.
- Yukseker, D. (2006), “Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Slum Areas of Large Cities in Turkey”, In *Report for European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities DG*.
- Watts, N. (2010), *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.