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Analysing the PKK's Rebel Governance: Data Limitations and Some Potential Solutions

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Abstract

The content of insurgent movements' publications can be telling, yet the issues which they exclude or deny can be of even greater illustrative value. Downplaying violence against civilians or sources of illicit funding can be expected, but what of movements who ignore practises of rebel governance, which are not only popular with their supportive constituencies but also bestow legitimacy with the international public? This paper looks at the puzzling case of the PKK whose publications systematically neglected forms of governance – in particular its alternative justice systems - it implemented at the height of its insurgency in Turkey through the 1980s and 1990s.

Introduction

The puzzle of the PKK's omission of its governance in its publications through the 1980s and 1990s arose as part of a Marie

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Curie post-doctoral project at the Rural Sociology Department in Wageningen University and Research, titled *The Spatial Dimension of Insurgent-Civilian Relations: Routinised Insurgent Space.* The project aimed to comparatively track patterns of rebel governance in the case of the M-19 in Colombia and the PKK in Turkey, identifying instances of spatial variation and their chronological evolution. The conceptual premise of the project was based on years of research and fieldwork on the PKK's relationship with its supporters, which had culminated in a book *Understanding Insurgency: Popular Support for the PKK in Turkey* (2021) and more recent fieldwork on the M-19 in 2018. The current project was to build on this existing data, supplementing it with systematic analysis of the movements' own archives, which was conducted by Kamuran Akin for the PKK case in Kurdistan/Turkey and by Francis O'Connor (and previously Jakob Meer) for the M-19 in Colombia.

The analysis of recent historical insurgencies has many practical advantages over that of working on ongoing conflicts. It is often safer, some of the ethical challenges vis-á-vis research participants and collaborators are less acute, and in contrast to older historical cases, there is still the possibility to conduct interviews and gain first-hand accounts of the conflict with survivors. Nevertheless, oral accounts of events that occurred decades ago tend to sometimes be less dependable, due to forgetfulness, suppressed trauma and a need to retrospectively justify past events (see Blee and Taylor 2002, 105; Della Porta 1992, 182; O'Connor and Celik 2018). According to best methodological practise, to achieve greater credibility interview data are best triangulated with other primary sources such as state documents, human rights accounts, as well as movement publications, all contextualised in existing secondary literature. In contrast to acts of violence or displacement, forms of rebel governance tend to only appear in movement sources, as promoting or even recording the 'collective good' realised by insurgent movements is not a priority for the state or other actors. So, what can be done in cases where movements' do not emphasise or record

their efforts at governance? How can one triangulate data with limited sources?

Rebel Governance

For the purposes of clarification, rebel governance is a pioneering approach in the field of civil war studies. It looks at "... the set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war" (A. Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 3). In short, it addresses how insurgents interact with civilians and other political groups: what they do beyond fighting. Rebel governance can range from 'state-like' institutions providing alternative justice local policing systems, setting up education and medical services or in less formalised situations, insurgents can intermittently intervene on behalf of communities to coerce or inveigle the state to provide access to municipal infrastructure like electricity networks or directly provide ad hoc services. Much of the early research in this field focused on contemporary conflicts and was based on qualitative fieldwork in countries like Colombia, Sri Lanka, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Thus, participant observation and relatively contemporary interviews and surveys formed the data foundations of the approach. The historical focus of the *Routinised Insurgent Space* project (see textbox below) from the 1970s until at the latest, the 1990s, presents distinct methodological challenges. Notably the evident impossibility of conducting participant observation, thus leading to a pronounced reliance on movement archives and interviews. To date, there has been surprisingly very little explicit analysis of the PKK's rebel governance in the 1980s/1990s, although, some work addresses the subject indirectly by focusing on the PKK's practises of legitimacy building (Akcinaroglu and Tokdemir 2020; Schoon 2017; 2015; Unal 2012).

The Spatial Dimension of Insurgent-Civilian Relations: Routinised Insurgent Space

The EU-funded project addresses the question: How do insurgent movements spatially organise interactions with their supportive

constituencies? It identifies both how and where insurgents interact with their supporters through practises of rebel governance and commemorative processes. The project introduces the concept of Routinised Insurgent Space (RIS) to conceptualise movements' interactions with their immediate social environment. It focuses on two groups: the M-19 in Colombia (1974-1990) and the PKK in Turkey (1978-1999). These are very different cases in terms of ideologies, insurgent strategies, and success rates in consolidating RIS. The focus will be on four specific forms of RIS: insurgent justice and policing, insurgent service provision, insurgent prison organisation, and insurgent funerals. The project is hosted at the Rural Sociology Department at Wageningen University and Research, the Netherlands. The project's principal investigator is Francis O'Connor, it is supervised by Joost Jongerden and research assistance is provided by Kamuran Akin.

Methods

Importantly, in the context of this project the scarcity of movement data on governance is only applicable to the PKK case. The M-19 was renowned for its creative, communication strategies targeting the general public. Its governance efforts – not necessarily always comprehensive or successful – have been extensively documented and are available in digitalised archives of the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (National Centre for Historical Memory), movement blogs like *Oiga Hermano*, and through biographies and interviews given to sympathetic media (for e.g., *Alternativa)* during the conflict. The PKK on the other hand has also been a prodigious publisher, through its monthly magazine *Serxwebûn* (in Turkish), numbering between 20 to 100 pages, since the early 1980s. It also produced another magazine *Berxwedan* between 1983 and 1995. Perplexingly, coverage in these publications of the PKK's efforts to improve the situation of its supporters through its rebel governance, is exceedingly limited.

What have we been doing?

For the project, Akin digitally analysed all 134 issues of *Serxwebûn* between 1989-99, including two extended special issues. Additionally, he manually analysed fifteen more issues, including twelve from 1982 and one issue from 1983, 1985 and 1988. 1989 was taken as a practical starting point as thereafter all issues are fully digitalised, available in PDF format and Control+F searchable. Additionally, the early 1990s was the period of the PKK's greatest territorial presence, therefore the most likely period of rebel governance. The earlier issues were selected on the basis of specific events which we had (mistakenly) anticipated would likely have led to discussion of PKK governance. Akin searched for a list of specific keywords related to governance, (for e.g., *mahkeme*/court, *devrim* or *halk mahkemeleri* /revolutionary or people's court, *sağlık hizmetleri*/health services). These keywords were selected on the basis of known forms of PKK rebel governance previously identified in O'Connor's research such as people's courts (*halk mahkemeleri*) and documented in secondary literature on the topic (see amongst others Marcus 2007, 119). Accordingly, the keywords reflected acts of PKK rebel governance that did actually occur, rather than searching for potential or hypothetical instances of governance.

Due to the limited results in *Serxwebûn*, we extended our search to also include *Berxwedan*, a magazine more oriented toward the Kurdish diaspora and the PKK's initiatives in Europe. Initially published in Sweden it relocated to Germany in the mid-1980s. Interestingly, *Berxwedan* published five issues in 1983 and 1984 in Kurdish, thereafter they were in Turkish, with occasional individual Kurdish articles. Akin has analysed 83 *Berxwedan* issues between 1990-1995, again as it spans the period of the PKK's greatest territorial presence, and they were digitally available.

For a final validity check, O'Connor has been analysing another source close to the PKK, a magazine called *Kurdistan Report* published on a monthly basis since 1982. The magazine comprises articles translated into German from newspapers sympathetic to the Kurdish movement such as *Yeni Ülke,* human rights reports, and the accounts of fact-finding missions to Kurdistan as well as interviews with

members of the PKK. It was established with expressed purpose of informing the German public about the situation in Kurdistan. To date, only twelve issues have been analysed from 1992 and 1993, years selected as the apex of PKK's territorial presence. Similar search and coding methods (linguistically adjusted) were implemented as in the analysis of *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan.*

What did we find?

The short answer is, very little on governance. All keyword matches were screened to assess if they actually addressed rebel governance, excluding coincidental matches. Resulting in the meagre outcome of 12 matches loosely related to insurgent service provision and two addressing people's courts in *Serxwebûn* and no matches at all in the smaller sample of *Kurdistan Report*. In *Serxwebûn* (Issue 113, pg. 24, 1991), plans to establish secret revolutionary hospitals in territories controlled by the PKK are mentioned, and health screenings and greater access to medicine for locals is proposed: all of which are classic examples of Rebel Governance health service provision. Similarly in *Serxwebûn* (Issue 146, pg. 14 1994), the need for People's Courts, the importance of holding actual formal trials and the appropriate forms of punishment to deal with nonpolitical disputes within the community are outlined. Frustratingly, it has been established that such courts were already in widespread function, for e.g., in the town of Idil in 1992, its governor (state appointed and not a PKK sympathetic voice) declared that "we have not had a single application to the courts in the past six months. The people prefer to go to the popular tribunal instead. Only when they have complaints about officials do they apply to the real courts and that is only to have the things on record" (in Imset 1992, 270). The wider rebel governance literature has demonstrated that forms of revolutionary courts are usually very popular (Furlan 2020, 482–83; Loyle 2021, 109). Yet, mystifyingly *Serxwebûn* did not cover the popularity or success of these alternative justice systems in Kurdistan.

We had similarly scarce results in the analysis of *Berxwedan*, until its October 1994 issue which reported on the proceedings of PKK's Third National Conference held in March 1994 (Issue 176, pg. 24-25). It outlined the movement's policy on *Crime, Judiciary and Punishment in Kurdistan*. It differentiated between the judicial processes for crimes committed by members of the PKK and the People's Courts. It outlined different classes of crime and appropriate punishments, composition of court authorities and avenues of appeal. Regarding the People's Courts, it clarified that they were established to deal with offences such as murder, blood and clan feuds, non-payment of taxes [to the PKK], prostitution, the kidnapping of girls, and more general crimes such as disturbing the peace. The courts were organised regionally on an ad-hoc basis, and they comprised of a chairperson and two other members of the PKK's military forces (the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan/*Artêşa Rızgariya Gelê Kurdistan*, ARGK) as prosecutors. Additionally, a jury of up to five members, selected from 'patriotic' (*yurtsever)* civilians was convened. In this context patriotic can be understood as people who sympathised with the PKK. The jury's assessment of the defendant's innocence or guilt was advisory rather than binding and the court could impose sentences that contravened the jury's decision. There was a right to lodge an appeal against the sentence to the regional headquarters within one week of the judgement.

Crimes were categorised into offences ranked into three degrees of seriousness. First degree offences included the killing or wounding of a member of the public, or its instigation for personal motivations. Such offences could be punished by the death penalty or long-term imprisonment. The enforcement of sentences was considered according to how they affected the national interests. Second degree offences included prostitution, sex trafficking, kidnapping of girls, and the incitement of hatred on the basis of religion or sect. Infractions led to periods of imprisonment for no less than three years. Third degree offences were related to blood and clan feuding, non-payment of taxes [taxes levied by the PKK], traffic offences,

fraud and issues related to land disputes. They were punishable by imprisonment for up to 3 years, according to the gravity of the offence. In contrast to first degree crimes, penalties for second and third degree infractions could under certain conditions, be postponed, converted into fines or periods of enforced labour. Guilty parties had to avoid committing similar crimes in the future if they wished to avoid ulterior punishment. Finally, death sentences were to be conducted by firing squad and any person who was suspected of committing a crime considered a flight-risk was to be taken into pre-trial custody. However, the article did not provide any empirical information on the extent or functioning of the People's Courts, rendering it difficult to assess the scale of their implementation.

Beyond the limited information that we found, trawling through archives is always worthwhile. We found many interesting insights on the PKK's commemorative practices and the role in martyrdom in binding the movement to its constituency. Especially from 1990, the role of funerals as a platform of symbolic resistance is extensively detailed, highlighting their role as a mechanism of mass politicization. The valorization of the prison resistance for e.g., hunger strikes, and the inclusion of letters from prisoners to the wider public, allowed us to track the spillover effect of movement resistance to broader mass activism such as shutdowns (*kepenk kapatma*) and boycotts of schools (*okulları boykot etmek*). There is also copious space, almost in every issue, dedicated to the political musings of the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan, ranging from broad philosophical discussions on topics like imperialism and nationalism to his views on everyday political wranglings, such as Turkish parliamentary elections and international developments like the Gulf War. What we did not find was unfortunately any detailed accounts of the PKK's rebel governance beyond what was discussed above. It is important to reiterate that the PKK in this phase under analysis is an outlier, most analogous insurgent groups like the IRA or M-19 emphasised their services to the community both in their own dispatches and somewhat sympathetic commercial media outlets.

Why were the PKK so reticent to write about governance?

There are a few plausible explanations. The first is related to the target audience of these publications. It is likely that the magazines were not oriented to its constituency in Kurdistan but rather a tool for internal ideological socialization and a means to communicate with other political movements in Turkey. It was published and printed in Europe and then smuggled back into Turkey and to PKK bases in Syria, Lebanon and in south Kurdistan. In O'Connor's book, one former militant explained that the copies of *Serxwebûn* he used to read with his student comrades were printed so minutely that it required a magnifying glass to read (2021, 203), showing that even if one had access to it, significant effort was required to read it. There is no readily available data on readership, and it is likely that outside of PKK militants regular members of the potentially PKK-sympathetic public, rarely if ever, would have had access to it. A reality known to the PKK, thus likely shaping its editorial content.

Serxwebûn was also published in Turkish excluding any readers who only spoke Kurdish, particularly of note for Kurdish women who tended to have less advanced Turkish language competence in the period of analysis. Illiteracy rates among the Kurdish population were also high, rendering densely written texts a poor communication strategy with the Kurdish masses. The Kurdish population usually came to learn of the PKK through direct inter-personal contact between its guerrillas, activists in fronts like the ERNK (Eniye Rizgariye Navata Kurdistan National Liberation Front of Kurdistan) and its militia. Therefore, awareness of forms of rebel governance were likely emphasized through these social ties and channels rather than formal publications.

A second related explanation lies in the role of Abdullah Öcalan as a charismatic leader and his comprehensive shaping of the PKK's ideology (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011, 137). His collective writings *Önderlik çözümlemeleri,* in the years between 1979-1999 are estimated to number around 144,000 pages (Özcan 2006, 399), the condensed articles and interviews published in *Serxwebûn* overlapped

significantly with these themes and subject matter. Therefore, not only was the general public not the targeted audience, but these magazines were likely additionally viewed as didactic tools for ideological consolidation of the movement rather than empirical updates for broader audiences.

It is also plausible that the PKK were concerned about the risks of sharing too much detail on People's Courts for security reasons. The parallel justice system functioned extensively and was seemingly popular with large parts of Kurdish society, it was therefore known about by communities that the PKK sought to serve. Why then would the PKK have potentially endangered its functioning by sharing information that might have been of some use to the Turkish intelligence forces? On the other hand, it would have been possible to report on the system in an abstract fashion that would have provided no useful intelligence to the state, potentially enhancing the movement's legitimacy to international audiences.

A final, and somewhat less gratifying possibility for the authors, is that we have somehow overlooked relevant keywords in our coding efforts. But research is an iterative process, we will continue refining our search criteria and re-inputting potential new keywords that will potentially become apparent through interviews and other sources.

Implications for research on Rebel Governance

How best to identify patterns of historical rebel governance remains a key methodological question in the field, a question made much more difficult, if primary movement sources do not address them. This can lead to substantial misunderstandings with longer term implications. Two highly respected rebel governance scholars - albeit in an article on patterns of violence rather than directly on the PKK's rebel governance - boldly (and incorrectly) declared that the movement did not "cultivate[…] ties with civilians and establish[…] itself as the legitimate governing authority in Kurdistan [in both Iraq and Turkey]," rather choosing to "ignore […] or abandon […] opportunities to create parallel institutions or provide social services

to win over civilian support" (Stewart and Liou 2016, 299). Years of cumulative field research in Kurdistan, Turkey and the European diaspora suggest otherwise: the PKK did indeed make efforts to implement forms of governance right from the very onset of its mobilisation back as far as the late 1970s, long before the insurgency erupted in 1984. What is lacking is systematic data on this governance and we are rather left with a patchwork of accounts from PKK guerrillas and local communities of forms of rebel governance.

The *Routinised Insurgent Space* project initially anticipated finding sufficient data to map and compare forms of governance, its chronological evolution and compare them within-case and cross-case with the M-19. This will not be possible. It would entail massive ethnographic fieldwork focusing on specified sub-regions, even village or district level, requiring a huge team and massive budget. Field research on such topics is scarcely possible in the current authoritarian academic and political environment in Turkey, not to mention the aftermath of this year's devastating earthquake in large parts of Kurdistan. Furthermore, we would still encounter the challenge that the villages where such forms of governance took place, were targeted by campaigns of forced eviction, resulting in the displacement and dispersion of millions of the Kurds most likely to have firsthand experience of the PKK's efforts at governance (Jongerden 2007). Additionally, unlike strongly institutionalised cases of rebel governance such as the IRA's Dáil courts during the Irish War of Independence (Borgonovo 2017), FARC-EP's presence in regions of rural Colombia (Gutiérrez Danton 2022) or the LTTE's rule in parts of Sri Lanka (Mampilly 2011), the PKK never enjoyed full territorial control and much of its governance was more informal and ad-hoc in character, thus likely leaving fewer records or even personal memories of it, beyond those directly involved. Thus, rendering the PKK's case even more challenging from a data perspective.

It is not all bad news though. A potential remedy to our data problem, would be to broaden our search to also include newspapers such as the weekly *Yeni Ülke* (1990-1992) and its daily successor

Özgür Gündem (1992-1994). These outlets were sympathetic to the PKK but in contrast to *Serxwebûn* openly sold on many commercial newsstands in Turkey, allowing them to reach a much larger audience. European Court of Human Rights Proceedings have shown that *Özgür Gündem* sold up to 45,000 papers daily, confirming its much broader reach (ECHR 2000). It is possible that some articles in them might have addressed forms of PKK governance. Unfortunately, the publications were shut down by the state and many of their journalists murdered or imprisoned (Bayram 2011). Comprehensive digital archives are currently unavailable, and it is therefore impossible to systematically analyze their content. A next possible step would be to assess the accessibility of any material archives (partial or complete ones) of the publications.

Furthermore, the PKK maintains internal archive which although not currently available to the public or to academics, might potentially become more accessible in the future. In cohort with a broader more diffuse Kurdish movement since Since the mid-2000s, the PKK's forms of rebel governance are exceedingly well documented. They enjoyed much comprehensive success until the post-2015 state clampdown decimated them, even pragmatically oriented ones such as workers co-operatives and health service provision, in Turkey (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013; Aydin and Burç 2022; O'Connor 2018). The Kurdish movement's rule in Rojava and its successful operation of a territorially bounded political entity has been well studied and copious data abounds on it (amongst many others Jongerden 2015; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016; Tank 2022). And even in the timeframe of this project, it is also possible to identify experiments in rebel governance at a more focused scale. O'Connor and Joost Jongerden have recently completed an article (currently under review), *Rebel Governance without Territorial Control: The Experiences of the PKK in 1970s Turkey,* on PKK candidates' success in municipal elections between 1977-1979 in Hilvan and Batman and their projects of "people's municipalism" (*halkçı belediyecelik*). It was based on a series of interviews with participants and first-hand accounts of these years, gathered by Jongerden over an extended

period of time. Accordingly, although data on the PKK's governance remains limited, that does not permit academics to simply dismiss governance as an unimportant part of the PKK's mobilisation. We must rather be more cautious in the scope of our arguments, transparent on the PKK's data limitations and more creative in how we seek to further clarify its efforts at governance in its earliest decades.

Finally, regarding data issues in the field of rebel governance more broadly, there are a number of measures which could methodologically improve our research. To begin with, in order to enhance research openness, "to the degree fair and feasible, information pertinent to the research process should be made public and accessible to others rather than kept private" (A. M. Arjona, Mampilly, and Pearlman 2018, 1). Additionally, there is a need for greater *active* transparency about the limitations of our data and sampling processes (Khalil 2019, 434). The explicit foregrounding of the data gathering process can allow readers/reviewers assess the strengths and weaknesses underlying research findings. Concretely, this would also entail clarity about who gathers the data in the field? Was it done by the author/principal investigator directly or sub-contracted to a research team? If data was not collected by the author/principal investigator personally even greater transparency around questions - such as what measures were in place to control the data gathering process, on what basis were research collaborators hired, were they paid? - is required.

Importantly, this call for caution around primarily qualitative research is arguably even more pertinent for quantitatively oriented research. Much rebel governance research increasingly relies on Large-N datasets, many of which are generated within the context of authors' own research projects but also others which have been made (commendably) publicly available. Some of the more ambitious

datasets in terms of scope are at times inconsistent in data quality[3]. For e.g. many datasets rely on newspaper coverage of forms of rebel governance, often only consulting English language sources or not specifying which language sources have been accessed. As this research note has demonstrated, media coverage and even movements' own sources often do not reflect actual practises of rebel governance thus rendering exclusive reliance on media coverage methodologically problematic. To finish on a note of optimism, in line with the views expressed in this research note, many within the field of rebel governance are actively reflecting on issues related to data reliability and means to improve it striving to consider the impact of our data sources (see Loyle et al. 2021, 2; Pfeifer and Schwab 2022, 7).

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[3] Recent research on datasets on media coverage of Middle East protest events (Clarke 2021) and datasets on political violence more broadly (Raleigh, Kishi, and Linke 2023), have highlighted multiple systematic issues in relation to inclusionary criteria, urban bias, questionable coding decisions and variation between machine and researcher coded data.

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