

“War is like a Blanket...:” Feminist Convergences in Kurdish and Turkish Women’s Rights Activism for Peace¹

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Abstract:

Despite the recent outbreak of violence and conflict, peace continues to be high on the agenda of the Kurdish political movement and many progressive Turkish intellectuals and activists. We conducted qualitative multi-sited ethnographic research in Turkey (Istanbul and Diyarbakır) and two diaspora locations (London and Berlin) to examine this mobilization for peace. Our analysis of these interviews shows how Kurdish feminist activists have been struggling to make the eradication of gender-based inequalities and gender-based violence central to the wider political movement for peace. Our interviews also reveal a recent convergence between Kurdish and Turkish women's rights activists where segments of the Turkish feminist movement increasingly recognize that “war is like a blanket” that covers over gender injustices. Both Kurdish and Turkish activists stress the intersections between the process of making peace with the state and the struggle for gender-based equality and justice. Thus, our research points to new openings in the conceptualization of and activism for peace, and women’s rights that bridge the deep ethnic and national divides the Turkish-Kurdish conflict has created. Our conclusions underline the need for a feminist perspective on violence and conflict that accounts for women’s rights activists’ visions and strategies for a sustainable and just peace.

Keywords: peace; Turkish-Kurdish conflict; Kurdish political movement; women's rights movement; Turkey

“Bi Hevîya Aşîtî Kî Bi Rûmet Û Mayînde...” (Kurdish)
“Onurlu ve Kalıcı Bir Barış Umuduyla...” (Turkish)
*“With the hope of a honorable and permanent
peace!”*

Leyla Zana, 16.11.2015, Kurdish MP.⁴

I. Introduction

Leyla Zana, the Kurdish MP and women’s rights activist, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 1990s when she spoke Kurdish while taking the parliamentary oath, repeated this act of resistance again after two decades. Her Kurdish oath at the Turkish parliament in November 2015, changing the official wording of ‘Turkish people’ to ‘people of Turkey’, referred to all ethnic minorities, not just the ethnically Turkish majority. But what does an honorable and permanent peace signify?

Despite the recent outbreak of violence and conflict, peace continues to be high on the agenda of the Kurdish political movement and many progressive Turkish intellectuals and activists. In recent years, feminist scholars and activists have been particularly involved in a growing movement of people demanding peace. The Women’s Initiative for Peace (*Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi* or *BIKG*) was founded in

2009 to discuss conflict, campaign for peace, and document the ways women have been affected by war and wider gender-based violence. More recently, 'Academics for Peace', a group that includes many members involved in the women's peace initiative, has made headlines after circulating and signing a petition demanding the end of violence and the beginning of peace talks. The Turkish government's crackdown on academics who signed the petition, and the attack on academic freedom more broadly, has received international attention within media and policy circles, and opened up a space to raise awareness about the recent violence in the Kurdish region of Turkey.

Recognizing that conflict and violence require both structural and attitudinal shifts, we agree with Harders (2011) that it is constructive and useful to conceptualize the sustainability of peace in terms of transforming culture and embedding processes, rather than peace being seen as a status or static aim. In many conflict situations, it is ordinary people and activists who stop war by creating peace: they create peace step by step until war becomes impossible (Nordstrom 2004). Women's rights organizations have historically played an important role in campaigning for peace on a grassroots level.

In this article, we argue that gender-based mobilization is central to articulations of a desire for peace, as well as the creation of common platforms for action and more inclusive and just representation across and within ethnic communities. More specifically, our research intends to shed light on the way that peace is articulated and put into practice by actors whose conceptualization of conflict extends beyond national, ethnic and political violence to also contain gender-based violence and conflict. We do so by looking at the specific empirical case of activists, politicians and intellectuals working for peace in the context of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Through a historically grounded and in depth qualitative research amongst Turkish and Kurdish women and men working towards and for peace, we address the question of what conflict and violence means and how peace activism and gender-based activism might intersect.

The multi-sited qualitative research for our wider project took place between February 2015 and December 2016 in four different locations: Diyarbakır, Istanbul, London and Berlin. We carried out in-depth, open-ended interviews with women's rights activists, MPs, co-mayors⁵, academics, journalists, and lawyers, in addition to seven focus group discussions. Many of our research participants were involved in the pro-Kurdish legal-political movement rather than the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) although some of our respondents have been former PKK militants. In total, our research involved 73 Kurdish and Turkish respondents, of whom 31 were Kurdish and 20 Turkish women, and 12 Kurdish and 10 Turkish men. For this article, we rely on interviews with female participants. Several of our respondents chose to remain anonymous given security concerns and government crackdown. We conducted some interviews in English, but most interviews were held in Turkish and a few in Kurdish (*Kurmanji* dialect). In addition to our empirical research, we consulted relevant policy papers, NGO reports, grey literature and academic writings linked to the historical and current context of peace negotiations and conflict in Turkey.

With more than two million inhabitants, Diyarbakır is regarded as the unofficial capital city for Kurds in Turkey and is at the center of Kurdish political

mobilization and contestations in Turkey today. Istanbul is another major center for both Turkish and Kurdish feminist and peace activism. In fact, Istanbul is the city with the highest Kurdish population in the world: close to 3 million ethnic Kurds call Istanbul their home (Zalewski 2012). Outside Turkey, about one hundred thousand Kurds from Turkey live in Berlin, one of the largest Turkish and Kurdish populations in the diaspora. The main migration trajectory started with Turkish and Kurdish 'guest workers' and their families invited by the German state in the 1960s and 1970s. This was followed by more recent waves of labour migration as well as refugees fleeing state violence in the 1980s and 1990s. London, on the other hand, has been the main hub and center for Kurdish political mobilization in Europe. Most Kurds living in London arrived as a result of the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement and the majority are Alevi Kurds. Their religious minority status has resulted in double marginalization due to their ethnicity as Kurds and their religious background within a predominantly Sunni Muslim state (Tas 2014a). Different trajectories of displacement and migration clearly shape identities and political orientations, as do the specific social, economic and political circumstances and conditions in countries of settlement (Al-Ali 2007).

The rationale for a multi-sited ethnographic approach is based on the transnational character of conflict, migration flows and diaspora mobilization. Previous peace talks have left out some important key players, including diaspora Kurds. Internally displaced and international diaspora Kurds often remain politically active when it comes to Turkish-Kurdish issues (Tas 2016a, 2016b). As we have illustrated previously, transnational political mobilization is gendered in that men and women might have access to different resources and networks and are operating within specific gender norms and relations, both within the country of residence and their country of origin (Al-Ali 2007).

Gendering conflict and peace

Militarism, and more specifically the privileging of militarized masculinities and authoritarian decision-making is key to understanding the ways gendered violence permeates all aspects of society at local, national and transnational levels (Enloe 1989 and 2000; Cockburn 1998; Yuval-Davis 2003; Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Harders 2011; Mazurana and Proctor 2013). While women tend to be the main victims of gender-based violence, men are also subject to symbolic, structural and physical violence inherent in militarization and authoritarian politics. Crucially, women may be displaying or supporting militarized masculinities, and might also be perpetrators of direct violence themselves (Moser & Clark 2001; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007).

Feminist writings on violence, conflict and peace have been instructive in moving our thinking beyond women as mere 'victims of war' or 'natural peace-makers' (Cockburn 1998; Mazurana et al. 2005; Pankhurst 2008). At the same time, feminist scholarship has introduced the concept of a 'continuum of violence', tracing violence from peace-time to war-time and vice versa and linking acute violence during armed conflicts with sexualized and domestic violence. In this context, authors have stressed the significance of underlying structural violence, unequal access to resources, limited participation in political decision-making, and discriminatory legal rights (Cockburn 2004; Mazurana & Proctor 2013). By pointing to specific empirical examples, feminist scholars have argued that structural and symbolic violence at both

individual and collective levels must be addressed to effectively tackle all forms of gender-based violence (Cockburn 2004; Harders 2011).

In terms of peace building, it would be too simplistic to focus on the question of whether and how many women sit at the negotiating table of official negotiations, although that question is certainly emblematic of prevailing gender norms and power dynamics within any given context, including Turkish-Kurdish peace negotiations. We agree with Mazurana and Proctor (2013) who argue that we need to pay attention to the ways peace building is done on local levels that might shift national outcomes. Groups and actors promoting peace, gender equality and justice agendas can play an important role in contributing to processes and cultural shifts that are essential for sustainable peace, both short-term and long term.

Translating these conceptual insights into the specific empirical context of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and attempts at peace-making necessitates a brief discussion of the way conflict has developed and has been understood by those campaigning for peace. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the history and contemporary dynamics of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in any detail or to address its complexities, it is important to highlight some of its origins and current dynamics. Building on this historical context, we will present the way Kurdish and Turkish women's rights activists in particular conceptualize conflict as intersectional, before moving to an exploration of the various ways peace is understood and translated into activism.

History of conflict in Turkey

Conflict and violence have escalated in Turkey even prior to the recent military coup attempt of 15 July 2016 and its violent aftermath. This is despite the initial hope associated with peace negotiations and a cease-fire, which collapsed in July 2015 after two and a half years. Between 1984 and 2016, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict claimed more than 50,000 lives. Some of our respondents put the death toll, including missing people, as high as 100,000. The majority of these losses have been Kurdish. Between the general elections in Turkey on 7 June and 1 November 2015 alone, around 700 deaths occurred (ICG 2015; Amnesty International 2016). When suicide bombs exploded at a youth organization's humanitarian event in Suruç to help the nearby besieged Kurdish town of Kobanê in June 2015, or at a peace and democracy rally in Ankara in early autumn 2015, and, more recently, at a wedding ceremony in Gaziantep in August 2016, hundreds more people were killed. In November 2015, Tahir Elci, a prominent pro-Kurdish human rights activist, lawyer and chair of the Diyarbakır Law Association, was assassinated just after a speech calling out for peace at a press meeting.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the wider transnational dimension of the Kurdish question, it is important to stress the significant connections between the political struggle in northern Syria and the evolving dynamics of "the Kurdish question" inside Turkey. Without doubt, the Turkish government's shifting policies and wave of attacks on Kurdish towns needs to be understood in relation to its fear of the growing strength of the Kurdish political movement in bordering northern Syria, particularly in light of its close links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). However, in this article our focus will be on the Turkish-Kurdish context in relation to conflict, peace and women's rights activism.

The history of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict has been widely documented.⁶ The root causes of what has been coined “the Kurdish question” are closely linked to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in October 1923, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the previous year. General Mustafa Kemal (later called Atatürk) initially appeared to embrace Ottoman ideas of pluralism and ethnic diversity when he needed the support of Kurds to fend off the invading Greek armies during the Turkish war of independence between 1920 and 1922. Shortly after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, however, ideas of pluralism and multi-culturalism were replaced with strict policies of uniformity and standardization within the overall aim of Turkification of the nation and society (Shaw & Shaw 1992; Gocek 2002; Tas 2014a; Aslan 2015). Adopting a model of nationalism that stressed ethno-cultural homogeneity, Atatürk, his successors and the broader ideological movement of Kemalism focused on the sanctity of “Turkishness” and the centrality of Sunni Islam within the official boundaries of a secular state (Hanioglu 2001). Women’s social, political and economic roles, and wider gender norms and relations, have been central to the modernizing and secularizing agenda of the Kemalist project from its inception (Müftüler-Bac 1999; Yüksel 2006).

For Kurds, Turkification, and Kemalism more broadly, have not only meant forced assimilation, and a denial of cultural rights and identity, but also a loss of political and legal autonomy granted under the *millet* practice⁷ during the Ottoman Empire (Tas 2014b). Kurds, constituting the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, have engaged in numerous uprisings after the establishment of the Republic, all of which have been violently repressed by the Turkish state. While many Kurds were forced to assimilate and discard their Kurdishness, Kurdish nationalist sentiments endured and were strengthened by the violent repression, forced migration, relocation, economic and social discrimination and the lack of recognition of cultural rights, such as the ban on the Kurdish language and cultural activities (Updegraff 2012; Cayir 2015). Mobilized and strengthened in the context of wider leftist politics in the 1960s and 1970s, Kurdish nationalism became more visible, but was fiercely fought by the Turkish generals who seized power in a military coup in 1980, following previous coups in 1960 and 1971. Brutal repression, involving the detainment and torture of thousands of Kurdish nationalists, including various forms of gender-based violence, outlawing the use of Kurdish in public and even in private conversations, contributed to the rise of the PKK, the militant Kurdish political group founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 (Zeydanlioglu 2009; Aslan 2015).

Since 1984, when the PKK launched its first attack on a Turkish military post, a persistent state of conflict with varying levels of intensity and armed warfare has dominated Turkish politics and the Kurdish political movement. Discussions of this cycle of violence are extremely polarized pending on political positionality as killings and violence have affected both Kurds and Turks. While our respondents had a range of different views about the PKK, all agreed that the systematic and continuous repression of and state violence against Kurds contributed to the growth of the PKK and its popularity amongst disenfranchised Kurds, particularly young men and women. From its early days, the youth of both genders perceived the PKK as a means to personal emancipation as much as a political movement. Our participants stressed that young Kurdish women have historically been attracted to a movement that has promised more egalitarian gender norms than prevalent in much of the Kurdish region.

The 1990s were particularly bloody with more than 3000 Kurdish villages forcibly evacuated and more than 3 million Kurds displaced. A counterinsurgency campaign involved thousands of extra-judicial killings (Bozarslan 2001; Tezcur 2013). During this period not just Kurdish men, but many Kurdish women's rights activists were also imprisoned and tortured in Turkey's notorious prisons, particularly Diyarbakir prison (Zeydanlioglu 2009).

While the original aim of the PKK was an independent and united Kurdistan across the Kurdish regions in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, achieved through guerrilla warfare, the PKK also redefined its primary aim a few years after the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's arrest in 1999. Central to the ideological shift to "democratic modernity" through legal-political struggle within the boundaries of the existing nation state that is Turkey has been an emphasis on the centrality of gender-based equality and rights. Gender-based equality has been promoted by Abdullah Öcalan in his prison writings but has also clearly come about through the long-term political struggle of the Kurdish women's movement that has challenged the male political leadership consistently over the past decades.

After the arrest of Öcalan and his announcement that violence was meaningless, the PKK declared one of several subsequent ceasefires. The initial ceasefire in early 2000s, although declared in a one-sided manner by the PKK, took hold during a period when the Turkish state was eager to show its commitment to human rights and democracy as part of its attempt to join the European Union (EU). This period also coincided with the rise of power of the "reformist" Erdoğan-led Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) that challenged the hitherto all-powerful-secular Kemalist military. The AKP promised economic development and stressed the idea of "Brotherhood" based on Islam, thereby appealing to many conservative Kurds who voted for the AKP for years.

Nevertheless, throughout a period of several attempted ceasefires, no proper peace negotiations took place and no trust was established. The pro-PKK media announced the formation of the YDG-H (*Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi*: Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement)⁸ only a month before the last ceasefire message by Öcalan in 2013, when the official peace process started between the AKP government and the PKK, mediated by the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). This has more recently grown into an armed urban militia involved in digging urban trenches, building barricades and pledging to prevent police from entering 'autonomous' cities and districts in Kurdish towns in south-Eastern Turkey (ICG 2015: 3). Much of the escalated urban conflict since the summer of 2015 has been taking place between the YDG-H, now called YPS (Civil Protection Unit), whose members tend to be between 12 and 25 years, and Turkish security forces. It is unclear how much control the PKK exerts over the youth militia. Our respondents had varying views on this precarious question, with some holding the view that even if the PKK had agreed to the formation of the youth militia, it had since lost the ability to control it. Others felt that this youth groups would not be able to operate and grow without the consent and support of the PKK. Whatever the exact and possibly fluid nature of the relationship between the PKK and YPS, it is clear that Kurdish youths play an increasingly important role in both the conflict as well as possibilities for peace. Their views towards the Turkish state and society are increasingly influenced by structural forms of discrimination and stereotypical depictions of Kurds within the Turkish media (Başer & Çelik 2014).

The 2015 elections resulted in substantial gains of the Kurdish-led progressive HDP, which thwarted Erdoğan's ambitions of an absolute majority rule and a constitutional change to allow for an executive presidency. Most of our Turkish feminist respondents expressed their support for this relatively new progressive party, developed out of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The emergence of the HDP signaled a new radical strand of the broader Kurdish political and legal movement. Rather than focusing on Kurdish issues exclusively, the HDP is stressing minority rights of everyone in Turkey, whether based on ethnicity, gender, religion or sexuality. The HDP's conceptualization of gender-based equality and justice also seems to diverge from and challenge the PKK's glorification of militarized masculinities that appear to extend to both male and female bodies.

Three decades of Kurdish resistance against the Turkish state has not just mobilized and politically transformed the Kurdish movement but has also affected Turkish society. Many people, Turks and Kurds, have raised their voices against the increasingly authoritarian and heavy-handed state. The Gezi Movement in 2013, a protest movement against plans to construct a shopping center over Gezi Park in central Istanbul, became the most visible and internationally recognized articulation of this resistance. It demonstrated to young Kurds and Turks that it was possible to non-violently take over the streets in cities to protest against the government. Despite the faltering of the Gezi movement, many intellectuals and activists in Turkey have continued to protest the government's authoritarianism, the state's support for ISIS, and the state's crackdown on Kurdish towns and cities in Turkey.

In addition to feminist and LGBTQ activists, the "Academics for Peace" network and other professional solidarity networks modeled on the academic advocacy group, have taken a lead in challenging President Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism, the government's growing social conservatism, especially in relation to gender norms and sexuality, as well as its brutal crackdown on Kurdish communities. However, the most recent crackdown following the failed military coup in July 2016, has led to an even more extreme politically authoritarian and socially conservative context in which dissent, critique and the support of women and ethnic, religious and sexual minorities has become extremely dangerous and difficult.

Gendered Conflict

Kurdish feminist activists were central to the Kurdish political movement's growing emphasis on gender equality. One of those activists was Sakine Cansız whom we spoke with in December 2012 during a 68-day hunger strike by around 700 Kurdish prisoners across Turkey. The prisoners demanded the use of the Kurdish language in courts and schools, and asked the Turkish government to start peace negotiations with imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan, and providing him with better prison conditions (Harte 2012). Our interview with Sakine Cansız, only two weeks before her **assassination in Paris**, took place in Berlin, where she tried to mobilize the Kurdish diaspora to support the Kurdish prisoners and activists:

Our Kurdish identity and language already exist whether the Turkish state accepts it or not. But our fight is not just against the power of the state. It is also against societal codes, which have been created by the state, and for the sake of the state. These codes act against minority rights. They are made by men and work against the rights of women [...]. Of course the state and men do not want to give power away easily. They force minorities and women into slave conditions. That is why I went to the mountains to fight against the state. At the same time as I am fighting for Kurdish rights, our fight is against

the patriarchal structure of the state. Today we are working for peace. And peace should include the rights of different ethnic groups like Kurds, and also the rights of women. Until both of these are achieved, it is not possible to claim that we have peace. And without these, I will continue to fight, whether the state is Turkish or Kurdish.

Sakine Cansız's statement and those of many other Kurdish women's rights activists, but also of the Kurdish male political elite we talked to, points to an important dimension of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Academic and policy circles often neglect that the struggle against gender-based inequalities and violence has become a core aim of the Kurdish political movement and integral to their wider struggle for cultural and political rights. In fact, many women's rights activists told us that conflict does not only exist between the Kurdish political movement and the Turkish state, but also between Kurdish women and men due to patriarchal authoritarianism. Crucially, Cansız also provides a feminist analysis of state-society-patriarchy relations while pointing out how state power is gendered and works through patriarchy. A prominent Kurdish women's rights activist and former HDP MP, Ayla Akat Ata, stated in an interview in Diyarbakir in September 2015:

Our male comrades are also representing the power of the state. The freedom of women has to be a priority... There are four different articles in the [Turkish] constitution that we want to change... We could solve the Kurdish national cause in Turkey by addressing these four articles. [But] women's rights do not depend on changing articles in the constitution.⁹

Ayla Akat Ata's statement, resonating with the views of others we talked to, runs counter to the historical and cross-cultural expectation and widespread phenomenon that women's rights and gender-based claims tend to be side-lined for wider political claims pertaining to national struggle. In contrast, Ata and other activists we interviewed, link state power to male power so struggling against the state also becomes a struggle against male dominance and masculinist rule. Many of our interviewees stressed that they viewed the conflict with their Kurdish male comrades as more challenging than the conflict with the state. However, given developments since our interview both in terms of the scale and intensity of the state's crackdown on Kurdish towns and communities as well as the Turkish government's increased authoritarian demeanor, we wonder whether this view might have shifted.

The perception that conflict needs to be more widely defined to include gender-based discriminations and forms of violence is also shared by many Turkish women's rights activists who are involved in peace activism. A Turkish feminist lawyer who has been working on issues of domestic violence within Turkey as well as solidarity activism with the Kurdish political movement, stated in Istanbul in October 2015:

Every year, hundreds of Turkish and Kurdish women are being killed in Turkey. And this is only the official number. We have many more unofficial violent killings against women going on, and we don't know how many women feel forced to commit suicide. Violence against women in society and violence in war are directly connected to each other. War is like a blanket to cover all other forms of violence, especially that against women. Women should fight for peace, because without actual peace we cannot even talk, we cannot resolve gender-based inequalities, we cannot stop violence against women. Laws become meaningless during acute conflict. As a group of lawyers we are dealing with at least 30 cases of violence against women in 20 cities in Turkey. If the times were peaceful, we could have pushed policy-makers to follow the law. We could try to lobby the media to focus more on gender-based violence. But we are unable to do so right now, because the war continues between Turks and Kurds, and gender-based violence is perceived to be a minor detail by the media.

Here, the emphasis is clearly different in that ethnic/political conflict is seen to prevent and severely limit the struggle against gender-based violence. Aside from state violence, societal gender-based violence, including honor-based killings are also facts in the Kurdish regions. One study based in the Kurdish city of Urfa found that, according to the official data collected between 1974 and 2005, 181 women were killed by their families (Belge 2008). More recently, between 2009 and 2011, more than 200 honor-based killings were carried out annually in Turkey (Huffingtonpost 2011; Corbin 2014). Our respondents told us that the numbers are much higher than the official statistics. Moreover, as several Kurdish and Turkish activists stressed, honor-based killings and wider gender-based violence within Kurdish society have historically been represented by the Turkish state and Turkish feminists as a consequence of tribal culture, enabling the positioning of the state and military as modernizers and liberators who need to intervene. Recently, as conflict and violence in Kurdish regions in Turkey has escalated, the same feminist lawyer quoted above stated that gender-based violence, including homicide of women, has increased in Turkey.

We found that many of our respondents in the diaspora also conceptualized conflict and violence not only in ethnic and political but also in gendered terms. A Turkish long-term feminist activist from Berlin who has been involved in the Kurdish political movement and is active within the HDP, argued in November 2015:

Women make up 50 percent of society. But in every society, even in Germany, we have witnessed violence and forms of inequality against women. It is a global disease. Even 'modern states' have not managed to end this issue. In the context of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict we have also witnessed that. With the effect of ethnic and religious conflict or civil war, violence against women increases. Women, mothers from all sides, should come together to make peace. If we come together, if we refuse to send our sons and daughters to war for a political aim, then we can end both forms of violence together.

Her articulation of the relationship between conflict, gender-based violence and peace parallels that of the Turkish feminist lawyer mentioned earlier. However, her diasporic positionality expands her intersectional analysis and politics by challenging the idea that gender-based violence was inherent to Kurdish, Turkish or Muslim societies, but is also a problem in western countries, like Germany.

Radicalization of Youth

Meanwhile, the breakdown of the formal peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement, as well as the Kurdish uprising in Rojava, northern Syria, have strengthened the Kurdish youth movement. Several of our respondents stressed that young Kurdish women and men have become fearless as a result of their experiences during the 1990s, a period of prolonged acute conflict, widespread violence and large-scale displacement. The next generation of Kurdish activists who have grown up in war, may well be more radical than older generations. A young Kurdish militant explained to the on-line newspaper *Al-Monitor* (Gurcan 2015):

We didn't have a defense force to protect our people in cities. As YDG-H [now YPS], we filled that void. The youth is more organized and aware now. We started by taking an oath to protect the Kurdish people against the state's oppression. In the old days, our youth was afraid of the state and ran away. Today, hundreds of youth push aside the barbed wire in front of soldiers and join the Kobani resistance. These are all benefits of our getting organized. Let everyone know that we have answers to everything the state can come up with.

Our respondents' views were initially divided over the Kurdish youth movement's strategy to build trenches in majority Kurdish towns in order to resist police violence and defend self-governance and democratic autonomy. There have been a series of brutal and prolonged police-enforced curfews that have involved heavy use of tear gas, random and targeted shootings, and shelling of buildings, in addition to denying medical and humanitarian aid into targeted Kurdish towns. These appear to have swayed the majority of people we interviewed to focus their attention and critique against the Turkish state.

Yet, Nebahat Akkoç, a prominent Kurdish women's rights activist and founder of KA-MER, a very active women's rights organization based in Diyarbakir but with many branches throughout Turkey (Arat & Altinay 2015), expressed a different view in an interview with *Bianet*, an online platform closely linked to the group Academics for Peace. In her view, the tactic used by the Kurdish youth movement was not helping the aim of creating democratic autonomy and self-governance, but only justified state violence. According to her, several civil society associations in Diyarbakir are adopting the slogan: "We don't want trenches and we don't want state curfews!" (Tahaoğlu 2016). In the interview, Akkoç, like many of our respondents, also stresses the relationship between the escalation of violence on the streets and an increase in domestic violence.

While the tactics of the Kurdish youth movement, as well as its exact relationship to the PKK, is up for discussion, it is obvious that this militarized form of resistance, as opposed to the political-legal strand of the Kurdish political movement, privileges militarized masculinities, even if young women participate in the movement as well. It is too early to assess whether the Kurdish political movement's emphasis on gender-based justice and equality will mitigate the impact of increased militarization of society, which, according to feminist scholarship in different historical and cultural contexts, tends to lead to increased authoritarianism, a strengthening of patriarchal gender norms and an increase in gender-based violence. It is also clear that any future peace negotiations and processes will have to involve the Kurdish youth movement. Meanwhile, locally as well as nationally, Kurdish and Turkish women's rights activists of different generations have been taking a lead in championing the 'permanent and honorable peace' demanded by the veteran Kurdish activist Leyla Zana.

What kind of Peace?

At the end of February 2015, a joint statement about "peace talks" was issued for the first time by the progressive Kurdish led HDP and representatives of the AKP government, known as the Dolmabahçe Agreement. Subsequently, many people in Turkey and across the Kurdish diaspora were hopeful that some concrete steps would be taken towards peace and the development of a more democratic society. However, after only one month, the picture changed drastically when President Erdoğan publicly distanced himself from any peace process. His shift appeared to be part of a gamble for the Turkish nationalist vote in the June 2015 parliamentary elections (Cengiz 2015).

While the official peace process ground to a halt, having been replaced with an increasingly violent conflict and, since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, a wider violent crackdown on any form of dissent, Turkish and Kurdish women's rights

activists and academics have been at the forefront of joint grassroots initiatives for peace. Several of our Turkish and Kurdish respondents are members of the Women's Initiative for Peace. The group was established in reaction to the arrest of Kurdish women activists who had been struggling for peace in 2009. Members of the group come from a spectrum of political positions, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, as well as sexual orientations. The group has taken a lead in mobilizing women's and LGBTQ organizations across the country to campaign for peace but also to raise awareness about the connection between state and gender based violence. Their activities include conferences and workshops, protests, sit-ins and various other creative forms of non-violent direct action.

A report published by the Women's Initiative for Peace in 2013 invited the government to not only create a national plan that ensures equal participation of women in peace-building processes but also asked for greater transparency and mechanisms to allow peace-building processes within society to be part of a national action plan (BIKG 2013). However, at the time, the government engaged only in limited steps to create "the myth of democratic peace" (Layne 1994). One of the few concrete steps taken by the government was the formation of a "Wise Men's Committee" on 3 April 2013, members of which were personally selected by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. There was initial criticism of the commission's name, "Wise Men," which was later changed to "Wise People's Committee" as critics suggested. Accusations of sexism continued after the announcement of its members revealed that it included 51 men and only 12 women (Gursel 2013). The ethnic make-up also did not seem well-designed for an end to more than 30 years' war: only 6 out of the 63 members had any connection with Kurdish ethnicity or politics.

Several of our respondents commented on the need to have more equal representation between men and women in order to achieve success and a sustainable peace. One of our respondents said that: 'The so-called 'Wise People' were a propaganda team for the government.' The need of equal representation for women and men was particularly stressed by Kurdish women's rights activists who have been involved in the Kurdish women's movement's struggle to increase female representations within the Kurdish political and legal movement.

Based on Al-Ali's (2007) and Al-Ali and Pratt's (2009) work in Iraq on gender-based quotas, we were initially skeptical about the idea of women and men co-chairing in leadership positions as advocated and practiced by the Kurdish political movement in Turkey as well as in Rojava. The co-mayor of Diyarbakır, Gültan Kışanak, who is also a veteran women's rights activists and a former MP of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), explained to us in September 2015 that the development of a co-chair system had been pushed by Kurdish women's rights activists linked to the PKK as part of the attempt to create a more just political system (Al-Ali & Tas 2016a). Despite our initial skepticism, we saw evidence that women's political participation as MPs and as co-chairs was more than an "add women and stir approach". It also became obvious in the course of our research that co-chairing is not an end in and of itself but part of a broader political process. Gültan Kışanak reminded us of the internal struggle to create a gender-balanced system of co-chairing:

We started co-chairing in 2004, although at the time this was not legal. But the women were all pressured by their male co-chairs. They were perceived as assistants. After 2007, women

became more visible and powerful. The 2007 elections were revolutionary for both Kurdish and Turkish women. 8 out of 26 Kurdish MPs were women. Women became more confident as co-chairs and men had to accept them as equals. Other political parties were embarrassed and started to introduce a co-chair system as well. But it was not simply a matter of a quota and co-chairing, but the actual style and work of parliament changed. Women did not ask for permission any more to speak on important subjects such as the defense budget.¹⁰

Kışanak, as other Kurdish activists, emphasized that the shift towards a more equitable and representative political system of co-chairing between male and female leaders, and also taking into consideration diversity in terms of generation and ethnicity, was not merely a cosmetic exercise but was part of a radical attempt to transform the political culture of the Kurdish political movement and to make gender-based justice central to its wider political claims. All of our respondents also stressed that they perceived their commitment to gender-based justice as a condition for sustainable peace.

Meanwhile, the Turkish feminists we interviewed stressed that they learnt a lot from their Kurdish counterparts. One of the Turkish founding members of the Women for Peace Initiative, who is also involved in the group Academics for Peace said in a public talk in Istanbul in September 2015:

I would like to propose that we should redefine the word of 'peace'. As an anthropologist and peace activist, I know the meaning and difficulty of peace. And, since 2001, I have witnessed the Kurdish women's movement for peace in Kurdish cities, such as Mardin, Diyarbakir and Urfa. Those of us living in Istanbul had to learn a lot from women living in the East of the country. Peace means listening to the other person.

Here, we see a crucial expansion of the feminist conceptualization of peace frequently articulated as an end to all forms of physical, structural and symbolic violence to include the act of listening, and being open to hearing the voices and views of others. Her conceptualization profoundly humanizes the processes linked to peace making.

The recognition that Kurdish women's rights activists have paved the way for more radical feminist politics was widespread amongst several Turkish feminists we talked to. Yet, only a decade ago, as many of our respondents stressed as well, Turkish and Kurdish feminist organizations were deeply divided along ethnic and political lines, with limited cooperation around gender-based violence. Despite the critique of Kemalism as patriarchal and authoritarian by the more radical and autonomous Turkish feminist organizations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the specific plights of and challenges for Kurdish women's rights activists were largely ignored or dismissed by third wave Turkish feminists (Yüksel 2006; Diner & Toktas 2010; Çaha 2011). The limitations of the Turkish feminist movement became obvious in relation to Islamic feminists' critique of the authoritarian secular character of the movement but, as many of our respondents argued, it was Kurdish feminists who pointed to its ethnocentric 'Turkishness'.

In recent years, however, Turkish feminists have not only become much more critical of the modernizing nationalist trends that was central to Kemalist women's rights activism, but they have also started to take the specific plights and concerns of Kurdish women's rights activists more seriously. This change in attitude and politics has been a result of many factors, including the consistent work of Kurdish women's rights activists over the past decades, which have been noticed and increasingly respected by Turkish feminists of all generations. Another important factor has been

the emergence of a new generation of feminists in Turkey who are critical of the Turkish women's movement's Kemalist past, Turkish nationalism, and authoritarianism. This generation is influenced by transnational feminist politics and solidarities and engages in intersectional feminist politics (Arat & Altınay 2015; Çaha, 2011; Diner & Toktas 2010; Yüksel 2006).

In January 2016, the Women's Initiative for Peace started to spearhead a campaign, involving a petition, regular vigils and solidarity events, supported by 165 feminist and LGBTQ organizations across Turkey.¹¹ Stressing the right to life and need to protect life, the petition and the wider campaign shifts focus from the debate on whether violence on 'both sides' should be condemned, or whether the focus should be on state violence. As part of their campaign, the Women's Initiative for Peace issued a statement in February 2016, entitled 'We are on the side of life, not death! We defend our right to peace and truth', which describes the scale of the conflict and suffering of the Kurdish population in the besieged towns under attack. It also outlines the activities of the coalition of women's groups. The leaflet states:

On 31 January we met as '1000 Women for Peace' in a square in Istanbul despite police pressure to end our protest. We gathered hundreds of messages for peace on our website. On 6 February we embarked upon a journey to Diyarbakır – the center of the Kurdish area, of which the Sur neighborhood is under heavy siege – in order to demonstrate our solidarity as women against this war and these sieges. Dozens of buses, full of more than 600 women from cities across Turkey – Istanbul, Bursa, Rize, Ankara, Mersin, Izmir, Antalya, Kocaeli, Bolu, Eskişehir, Foça, Antakya, Adana, Muğla, Artvin, Iskenderun, Soma – arrived in Diyarbakır for a sit-in. The women visited the Democratic Society Congress, the Diyarbakır Municipality and the [local] Human Rights Foundation, and held a massive forum on the Truths of the Sur Neighbourhood and Self-Government, to the sounds of bombs falling upon Sur close by (Women's Initiative for Peace 2016).

Despite this strong commitment in support of peace and risk-taking on behalf of the majority of the women we interviewed, it became clear that the conceptualization and meaning of peace varies amongst our respondents, even amongst members of the Women's Initiative for Peace. One feminist activist who is also a member of the group Academics for Peace, and had lost her job after signing the academic petition, told us: 'The word peace is somehow becoming an empty signifier. You organize a peace rally, and then people display posters of Öcalan. It is a contradictory position. You revere a military leader. So are you for armed struggle or are you for peace?'

It was evident that within the Women's Initiative for Peace, there exists a continuum of positions along pacifist lines, the commitment to non-violent struggle and the right to defend through armed struggle. It would be too simplistic to attach specific political positions to ethnicity as there were a range of different views amongst both Kurdish and Turkish activists. However, the centrality of freedom for Öcalan is a particular aspect of the Kurdish political movement, including Kurdish women's rights activism.

Interestingly, a few months later, when the conflict and violence had escalated drastically, the same activist quoted above stressed in a follow-up interview that she had lost her reservations about the way the Kurdish political movement approaches and conceptualizes peace: 'State power and oppression have consolidated my position and my commitment to peace.' Over the period of time that violence in Kurdish regions in Turkey escalated, the views of Turkish and Kurdish feminist academics and activists increasingly mirrored each other. The state's growing authoritarianism and

brutal repression of Kurdish communities resulted in a shift in conceptualization of peace amongst many Turkish feminist activists who initially might have expressed discomfort about the Kurdish political movement's complex relationship to the PKK and Öcalan.

Yet, not everyone we talked to felt committed to the idea of peace in whichever form expressed and conceptualized. As Tas (2016b) has shown in greater detail, many Kurds in the diaspora do not trust the Turkish state, especially the current Erdoğan-led government, to make peace. A former Kurdish fighter who spent decades of her life devoted to armed struggle before moving to Berlin stated, in November 2015:

I don't think a centralized hegemonic state like Turkey wants peace with Kurds. If they do want it, they need first to prove it by releasing our leader, Öcalan, and all our other prisoners. Öcalan has been in a Turkish prison for 17 years and so, in his name, all Kurds have been imprisoned. Instead of doing this, they just make more demands when they ask the PKK to give up their arms and surrender. There is no equality, and there can't be an equal peace or process if one side is forced to drop their arms, and their leader – who is a main actor within the peace process – is still kept in prison... The Turkish public simply follows their leader's nationalist slogans. The PKK should not give up any arms until a definite peace has been made, under international guarantees. If they don't defend their public with their guns and create an equal space for Kurds, I and many other Kurdish people won't forgive the PKK for any crimes against Kurds in the present and future. We can only make a strong and equal peace with the existence of a strong, armed force.

The Kurdish diaspora, just like other conflict-generated diasporas, tends to be more radical and nationalist than many Kurds living in Kurdish regions in Turkey. Although views amongst the Kurdish and Turkish women and men are not homogeneous and reflect different personal and political experiences, migration trajectories as well as socio-economic and gendered positions, the failure to recognize the significance of diaspora mobilization, activism and influence on political developments inside Turkey, will be detrimental to the prospect of more sustainable peace.

Although we detected a range of positions and conceptualizations of peace both in the diaspora and inside Turkey, it was evident that Kurdish peace activists have come to see gender-based equality central to their struggle. At the same time Turkish women's rights activists increasingly realize that there cannot be a struggle for women's rights while there is constant violence and war.

Conclusions

In the context of a failed official peace process and escalating violence, the Women's Initiative for Peace and other Turkish and Kurdish activists have been instrumental in creating spaces for dialogue, raising awareness about the scale and impact of conflict, and making the connection between the violence linked to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and different forms of gender-based violence. Formal cessation of armed conflict, that is state-sponsored peace, can and does regularly take place without including women or considering broader gender norms and relations. As feminist scholars have pointed out (Cockburn 2004; Gleditsch et al. 2014), studies on war and peace often reproduce the gender gap prevalent in policy discourses and practices. However, in line with recent feminist scholarship, we argue that transforming violence, tackling root causes of conflict and achieving sustainable peace is impossible without a gendered lens and approach. Moreover, our article illustrates

that feminism and a concern for gender-based equality enables Kurdish and Turkish women (and some men) to cross the ethnic/national - and maybe even class-based and regional - boundaries that separate them and to challenge militarism and authoritarianism.

In order to achieve sustainable peace, it is more productive to conceptualize conflict not as an event but as a set of interlinked processes and power configurations relevant to any given historical and empirical context. In the context of Turkey, as well as in relation to many other conflicts in the world, the transformation of conservative gender norms and relations is central to challenging the underlying structural inequalities fuelling conflict, and, in the long-term, achieving more sustainable peace between and within communities. Our article highlights the need to widen conceptualizations of conflict to not view it as a bounded event but as a site where masculinist militarism, patriarchy and authoritarianism converge.

Turkish and Kurdish feminist peace activists both stress the intersections between the process of making peace with the state and across different ethnic groups on the one hand, and creating peace between men and women on the other hand. A gendered analysis forces us to expand our conceptualization of the underlying conflict, or rather conflicts. As our respondents forcefully argue, conflict is not only linked to the state, that is state-based violence, but also about conflict with men, and gender-based violence. In this context, Turkish and Kurdish feminist activists push boundaries not only pertaining to ethnic and political divisions, but also force a feminist analysis that looks beyond a continuum of violence to consider intersecting and mutually constitutive forms of violence and conflict.

Moreover, we need to stress the tensions and contradictions apparent in our respondents' views and practices around the role of the state. On the level of everyday political practices, and one might add pragmatism, much of the activism and campaigning is state centric. What was narrated to us by Kurdish women's rights activists was often focused on the Turkish state, i.e. stopping state violence, changing articles in the constitution, recognizing Kurdish political parties. However, on the level of ideology and political vision, there is clearly a perception, in line with the prison writings of Abdullah Öcalan, that the state as we know it is part of the problem and key in reproducing patriarchal structures. The long-term political vision is to achieve peace in a context where the state and its current authoritarian and patriarchal structures is replaced by a more localized horizontal and egalitarian political entity in line with the ideas about democratic confederalism put into practice in northern Syria (Rojava). At the same time, there appears to be a recognition amongst some activists that the Kurdish issue within Turkey could be addressed by changing several articles within the constitution, while gender inequalities require a much broader political and social transformation.

The majority of our respondents were genuinely committed to a radical inclusive, pluralist democracy with gender-based equality at its heart. Several Kurdish women's rights activists emphasized the shift away from nationalist discourse, stating that "nationalism is bad for women: whether Turkish or Kurdish nationalism." In a historical and cross-cultural perspective, a view in which women's rights and gender-based equality are not seen as secondary to the wider political struggle is unique. Feminist scholars have documented in many different contexts in the Middle East, but also cross-culturally, how gender-based claims are systematically sidelined in favor of

wider political struggles for independence, rights, justice and so-called equality. Our respondents, on the other hand, were consistent in stressing the centrality of gender-based equality and justice in the struggle against authoritarianism. Despite our participants' appreciation of Abdullah Öcalan's support of gender-based equality, Kurdish women activists stress that rights were not given to them but they had to struggle for them over a long period, and this very struggle continues. It is also important to stress that the women we interviewed do not represent the broad spectrum of political positions existent amongst the Kurdish population in Turkey, which include nationalist, Islamist, and liberal views. We should also recognize that a growing urban Kurdish middle class is invested differently in conflict and peace which might be led less by political principles of egalitarianism but considerations linked to economic conditions and access to resources.

It is too early to assess how far the commitment of gender-based equality and justice will be impacted by the increased militarization of Kurdish and Turkish society due to the escalation of conflict and the growing significance of the militant Kurdish youth movement in Kurdish regions in Turkey as well as Kurdish military resistance to ISIS in northern Syria. We anticipate that if the killing of Kurdish civilians and youth militants - with retaliation against the Turkish army and police - continues without a proper peace process, more radical Kurdish constituencies may eclipse the PKK within Turkey. In this context, the question emerges of how long the Kurdish political leadership will be able to convince the more radicalized youth that non-violent and non-nationalist struggle with gender-based equality and justice at its center is the way forward? It also remains to be seen how an agenda based on gender equality will find sustained support in an environment of growing conservatism, attacks on feminism and increasing authoritarianism in Erdoğan-ruled Turkey.

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⁴ The Kurdish MP and women's rights activist Leyla Zana, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 1990s when she spoke Kurdish while taking the parliamentary oath, repeated this act of resistance again after two decades. Her Kurdish oath at the Turkish parliament on 16.11.2015 started: "with the hope of a permanent and honorable peace!" She also changed the official wording in the oath of "Turkish people" to "people of Turkey," which covers all ethnic minorities, not just the ethnically Turkish majority.

⁵ In 2004, the Kurdish political party in Turkey introduced a system where each city and town under their control has two co-mayors: one female, the other male. This was intended to support gender equality.

⁶ See for example, Barkey and Fuller (1998); Yeğen (1999); van Bruinessen (2000); Bozarlan (2004); Heper (2007); Jongerden (2007); Aslan (2015); Philips (2015).

⁷ The term millet refers to the different ethnic and religious communities living under the Ottoman Empire. Millet Practice was neither static nor unitary nor a structure. In the practice, the Ottomans benefited from the loose, fluid and hybrid types of strategies used to control different subject populations in the Roman world, as well as in late Byzantine and post-Seljuk times (see Tas 2014b).

⁸ This group has been renamed and is now called YPS (Civil Protection Unit).

⁹ The full interview with Ayla Akat was published by *Open Democracy* (see Al-Ali & Tas 2016b).

¹⁰ The full interview with Gültan Kışanak was published by *Open Democracy* (see Al-Ali & Tas 2016a).

¹¹ It is estimated that there are over 250 Feminist, LGBTQ and Women's organisations across Turkey.