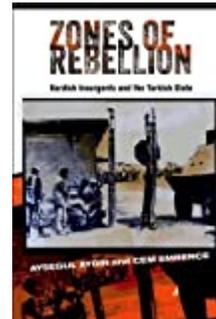


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Aysegul Aydin, Cem Emrence.** *Zones of Rebellion: Kurdish Insurgents and the Turkish State.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. xvii + 192 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5354-0.



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**Published on** H-War (October, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Aysegul Aydin and Cem Emrence present an invaluable perspective on the ongoing Kurdish issue in Turkey. *Zones of Rebellion* addresses the emergence of the Kurdistan Workersâ Party, referred to by its Kurdish acronym PKK, and the nature of violence it caused for the last three and a half decades. Basing their work on five years of qualitative and quantitative research, the authors center their argument on politics and violence.

Aydin and Emrence argue that the nature of this violence has varied over time and space. Defining the fight between the Turkish government and PKK members as a civil war, the authors explicitly show that both the government and the rebels have used coercive strategies, which have had an extensive effect on civilians in the Kurdish regions and cost billions of dollars, in particular in eastern and southeastern Turkey. However, the struggle between the Kurds and the government is not a recent issue. The Kurdish insurgency emerged about a year after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. In 1924, the Sheikh Said Rebellion was the first mass Kurdish rebellion against the central government. Although Saidâs intentions were to revive the caliphate, he used Kurdish nationalism to recruit members for the rebellion. Following the Sheikh Said Rebellion, nationalistic elements became the main source of recruitment

for Kurdish insurgents against the Turkish government, peaking in the 1980s. The foundation of the PKK brought forth a politicized Kurdish identity. A coercive strategy by the state and insurgent violence by the PKK politicized and even radicalized some Kurdish groups. Although the struggle has a long history, the authors primarily cover the 1980s to 2014. Aydin and Emrence effectively present the origins of the PKK, as well as its ideology and strategy.

Aydin and Emrence divide their work into two parts. In the first part, which includes three chapters, they examine the interaction between insurgents and resources. In these chapters, the authors survey the PKKâs organizational choices, ideological journey, and military record. They argue that although organizational choices enabled the PKK early success, these decisions prevented members from achieving their goals in later stages. In its early stage, the group used âorganizational myths to build trust among its membersâ (p. 17). Loyalty was measured by a total submission to the PKK leader, Abdullah Åcalan. Åcalan and his supporters eliminated domestic and external competitors, creating a dictatorship. Åcalanâs centralization and autocratic leadership and the groupâs lack of knowledge of bureaucracy and politics became obstacles for military success as well as transformation into

a political actor. The group needed an efficient bureaucratic class to succeed in its political goals.

The authors also examine the group's ideological processes. The rhetoric that the rebels used was similar to rhetoric used by many colonized states. The group convinced many Kurds that they were victimized by imperialist powers, colonial states, and their local collaborators for centuries (p. 36). However, such language failed to promote an inclusive Kurdish identity. First, the group ignored and left out many Kurdish groups, including religious groups, which were the largest communities of Kurds. Second, the PKK's relations with the Kurds were stagnant, and the group refused to change until its military power waned. Lastly, Aydin and Emrence trace the group's strategy from its early years to 2008. The main strategy that the PKK held was to separate Kurdistan, mainly east and southeast, from Turkey and establish an independent state. To achieve this, the insurgents targeted specific zones and civilians. The PKK divided its territory into Zone 1 and Zone 2. With support of civilians, the group built very strong influence in Zone 1, which was close to the border. However, as the rebels came in contact with a more diverse community and state institutions in Zone 2, they failed to consolidate their influence and had to withdraw back to Zone 1.

Part 2 of the book, which has three chapters, examines the same mechanism from a counterinsurgency angle. The authors detail the state response to the PKK until 2008. The Turkish government saw the ethnic question as a security problem and approached it through a geographical perspective. The state created special administrative units to combat rebels (p. 75). Furthermore, the state depopulated these special regions to cut the PKK's resource lines. This was a counterproductive approach because it contributed to the emergence of a more aggressive Kurdish identity. Although the state initially pur-

sued a centralization policy, a traditional strategy borrowed from the Ottoman Empire, as a solution to the Kurdish problem, the government started negotiations with the PKK's traditional actors in the last decade. The negotiations fell apart between the state and the PKK; more than a thousand lives from both sides have been lost in the last two years.

While *Zones of Rebellion* is a great contribution to Middle Eastern studies, it is not without flaws. What this work needs most is a background chapter on Kurdish history in Turkey. Without such a chapter, it is difficult for nonspecialists to grasp the recent Kurdish issue in Turkey. The authors could have offered at least a brief history since the 1920s. Providing background information about major events, such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion, the Dersim Rebellion of 1937-38, and the military coups in 1960 and 1971, would also have aided readers in more easily understanding the transition to the establishment of the PKK in 1978.

Despite the need for a background chapter, the book gives a balanced account of the Kurdish issue for the last four decades in Turkey. Aydin and Emrence divide their book fairly between the state's and the insurgents' perspectives. While the first part of the work reflects the PKK's ideology, strategy, and organization, the second part examines the insurgents from the state's point of view. The authors extensively used newspapers and secondary sources and conducted interviews with high state officials and PKK authorities. Furthermore, Aydin and Emrence provide an appendix explaining the data they used in their work. When read with *A Modern History of the Kurds* (1958) by David McDowall, *Zones of Rebellion* can be helpful in understanding the reasons for the Kurdish problem and the transformation of this issue in Turkey.

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**Citation:** Hakan Gungor. Review of Aydin, Aysegul; Emrence, Cem, *Zones of Rebellion: Kurdish Insurgents and the Turkish State*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

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