

O'CONNOR, FRANCIS. *Understanding Insurgency. Popular Support for The PKK in Turkey*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2021. xv, 280 pp. Maps. £75.00. (E-book: \$80.00.)

The PKK and the broader Kurdish movement in Turkey have been the subject of numerous studies in the past few decades, undertaken from various perspectives including those of social movement theory and security and terrorism studies. The question appears justified whether yet another study of the movement and its supporters has anything of value to add to this body of academic literature. O'Connor's work soon overcomes the reader's initial scepticism and convinces by his obvious command of earlier studies of his subject as well as of the relevant theoretical and comparative literature, well-conceived research questions, and diligent use of interviews with respondents who were involved at various levels and places in different stages of mobilization. Some fifty interviews, carried out over the course of three years, yielded much information not available elsewhere, especially on the matter of central concern in this study – the interaction of the PKK with its “constituency”, the real groups in society that feel to some extent represented by it. It is the focus on the PKK's efforts to create a constituency in the early phases of the struggle, the movement's services to the constituency and occasional changes in strategy in response to desires of the constituency, and the impact of state policies on insurgent-constituency relations that distinguishes O'Connor's work from earlier studies.

O'Connor is not the first to carry out extensive interviews with participants active or formerly active in the movement. In her *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*,<sup>11</sup> Aliza Marcus based her account largely on interviews with disaffected former members, many of whom had an axe to grind and were willing to blow the whistle on the movement's internal purges and violence against other Kurds. The book is informative and remains a major source on the history of the PKK but fails to convey what made the movement so enduring and its leader so charismatic that not even his less than heroic behaviour after his capture could shake his popularity. Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, who co-authored a series of well-received journal articles and book chapters on PKK history, made use of interviews with activists who had remained more loyal to the movement, along with other sources. O'Connor frequently references these earlier authors and acknowledges the significance of their work, but, inspired by his theoretical reading, his questions had a different focus.

As O'Connor remarks in several passages in the book, of the various insurgent movements that were active in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as FARC in Colombia, ETA in the Basque country, FMNL in El Salvador, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the PKK is the longest surviving one as a significant military force and probably has found the largest and most stable constituency. Although rejecting simple causal explanations, he suggests that the movement's efforts to develop a broad constituency and to remain close to it by renouncing unpopular strategies were a major factor in its success. The argument he makes is empirically rich and theoretically

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<sup>11</sup>Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York, 2007).

sophisticated, combining approaches from social movement theory (notably those of Donatella della Porta, his PhD supervisor) and civil war studies, and benefiting especially from the recent “rebel governance” literature that studies how insurgents seek to “regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war”. Recognizing that social movement theory tends to marginalize the role of the state, he affirms its crucial importance in the emergence and strategies of armed groups as well as in shaping civilian responses to them. A complex body of theoretical and conceptual literature as well as case studies of insurgencies and their civilian supporters is surveyed in a long separate chapter (showing the origin of the book as a PhD thesis). In the following chapters, which describe and analyse successive stages of development of the PKK insurgency, the empirical observations are often explicitly connected with statements from this body of literature, making the Kurdish case almost appear as a textbook illustration of general theory.

The four empirical chapters concern different stages of mobilization and changing spatial settings: the phase of mobilization before the onset of the guerrilla war (1974–1984); the rural insurgency (1984–1991); the shift to popular mobilization in Kurdish cities (1990s); and PKK activities and the Kurdish diaspora in Western Turkey (from the 1990s onwards). The first, corresponding with what was perhaps “the most tumultuous period of modern Turkish history”, traces the well-known trajectory of a small group of Kurdish and Turkish leftist students from Ankara to Kurdistan in search of a constituency, conflicts with rival organizations, clashes with tribes and counter-insurgency forces, mass imprisonment, exile, and military training in preparation for armed insurgency. While not ignoring the excessive violence that other observers have attributed to the movement in this phase, O’Connor draws attention to other elements in the group’s “repertoire of contention”, which, before the 1980 military coup, included a broad range of conventional practices such as municipal politics, trade unionism, and everyday conversations with potential supporters through which it shaped a gradually expanding constituency. After the coup, the PKK was the only Kurdish group that was not virtually wiped out and that continued the resistance, in prison as well as outside, winning it the sympathy of many who were traumatized by the years of military repression.

The rural insurgency was marked not only by violent clashes between PKK fighters and the state’s military and police forces and bloody retaliation against the “village guards” (pro-state Kurdish militias), but also by less-known efforts by the PKK to win the trust of the civilian population. O’Connor focuses on services to the constituency, of which especially the court system was effective. The PKK’s “people’s courts”, typically convening in the village mosque, which arbitrated in local conflicts but also meted out criminal justice, were often more trusted than the state’s judiciary. For a brief period, the PKK introduced forced conscription into guerrilla ranks, but it soon renounced this practice, which was quite unpopular. O’Connor remarks that this readjustment of recruitment practices constitutes “a credible example of the exertion of constituency influence on an armed movement, notwithstanding the discrepancy in power resources” (pp. 138–139).

Insurgent activity in the cities emerged into view in a series of seemingly spontaneous protests that, upon being brutally repressed by the police and army, rapidly escalated to massive uprisings. The PKK did not take the guerrilla struggle to the

cities but had recourse to a “popular front” strategy, in which non-combatant sympathizers organized networks in schools and universities and set up various civil society initiatives. The non-violent repertoire of contention included the revolutionary court system (taken from the villages to urban neighbourhoods), mass meetings celebrating the Newroz (Kurdish New Year) holiday, funerals of killed guerrillas and activists, as well as the establishment of “pro-Kurdish” political parties that participated in local and state-wide elections. Counter-insurgency measures meanwhile reached the peak of brutality in the mid-1990s, when thousands of villages were forcibly evacuated, forcing huge numbers of rural dwellers into the towns of the Kurdish region and later onwards to larger cities in Western Turkey. The effort to deny the guerrillas civilian support in the countryside massively strengthened their urban constituency.

The urban constituency, both in Kurdistan and in the West, proved to be a fertile recruiting ground for the guerrillas but also for a wide range of other social, political, and cultural activities. The movement never possessed real territorial control even of densely Kurdish-inhabited neighbourhoods, but it did provide various rudimentary services to the constituency. Öcalan’s arrest in 1999 and the gradual marginalization of the guerrillas did not result in a weakening or breakup of the constituency, which in fact became more consolidated in the new millennium.

The developments in these four stages are described in considerable detail and with special regard to the relations between the armed movement and its broader constituency. O’Connor makes judicious use of a large number of earlier studies and memoirs, including some important books in Turkish. The interviews add important insights throughout, but especially in the latter two chapters. His account of how the PKK started organizing in Istanbul is the first I have come across in English; the story of Kurdish migration to the metropolises in the West, the concentration of recent Kurdish immigrants in specific depressed, overpopulated neighbourhoods, social discrimination, and ambiguous relations with the municipal administration has been told before, but O’Connor ably summarizes the literature while framing the narrative in his overall account of insurgency-constituency-state relations.

O’Connor’s focus on the PKK’s constituency also allows for a nuanced answer to the contentious question of the relationship between the legal “pro-Kurdish” parties and the PKK: are they just a front for the PKK or do they have agency independent of it? As O’Connor observes, the PKK leadership was not involved in founding the first of these parties, but the latter “emerged from the same political and cultural milieu as the PKK and they shared some broad goals, thus guaranteeing a degree of political coherence but structural differentiation” (pp. 214–215). He mentions a few instances where the PKK used power to impose decisions upon the legal party or ordered its militants to assist the party in setting up local branches, but also a case in which the legal party prevailed over the PKK in selecting a candidate for municipal elections. (He neglects to mention, however, Öcalan’s heavy-handed intervention in the lists of candidates for the 2014 local elections.) O’Connor notes the different political styles and some PKK activists’ open disdain for the legal party, adding that the latter “catered to the middle classes and bridged social divisions that the PKK could not” and thereby “raised the level of popular consciousness of the Kurdish struggle”. State repression of legal Kurdish politics has been a major factor pushing young women and men towards recruitment into the PKK (pp. 215–216).

Keeping his sights consistently on the constituency of the PKK insurgency, on how strategies of the PKK and state policies contributed to shaping this constituency, and on the way PKK discourse and practice were, in turn, influenced by its constituency, O'Connor has made a valuable and insightful contribution to our understanding of the Kurdish movement. The role of extreme violence in the early stages of the insurgency, the transformation of Öcalan from *primus inter pares* to charismatic sole leader and ideologue of the movement, and the reorganization of the movement along the lines of “democratic autonomy” and “democratic confederalism” are duly noted but not given central importance. The author’s central argument, that “the PKK’s caution to avoid alienating its constituency has been a contributing factor in its longevity and relative success” has obvious implications for other insurgencies.

**Martin van Bruinessen**

Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

E-mail: [m.vanbruinessen@uu.nl](mailto:m.vanbruinessen@uu.nl)

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BRUCKER, JÉRÉMIE. *Avoir l'étoffe. Une histoire du vêtement professionnel en France des années 1880 à nos jours*. Préf. d'Isabelle Lespinet-Moret. [Histoire des mondes du travail.] Arbre bleu, Nancy 2021. 406 pp. Ill. € 32.00.

To the question, when did work clothes receive their official baptism in France, Jérémie Brucker provides a precise answer: 1904, when the French National Assembly adopted legal provisions requiring the owners of hazardous workplaces to provide their personnel with a locker room where they could change out of their everyday apparel and into garments for wearing only in the mine, the factory, or the shop. Until then, the labouring classes donned clothing on the job and into which, at best, they changed in improvised locales near their work or which, at worst, they wore indifferently and without functional distinction in domestic and open spaces as well. The legislator expanded the law in 1913, highlighting the contribution of specialized work clothes to personal safety and collective protection, i.e. to prevent the diffusion of toxic dusts and micro-particles in public areas. To be sure, the regulation crystallized societal preoccupations with health and the externalities of economic growth. But most of Brucker’s book, whose title plays on the literal and figurative meanings of the noun “stuff” [*étoffe*] (fabric and inward quality or character), takes aim at the material and symbolic uses of workwear.

The narrative comprises three sections. Part One locates the emergence of work clothes in the 1880s, when apparel manufacturers began advertising them in catalogues. These entrepreneurs tended to have honed their technical skills in observing the large orders for uniforms placed by the military, with whom they sometimes struck business deals. Brucker, whose sources remain mute on the size of and competition in this garment market, here delineates the shift from trade-related, bespoke garb that identified and ranked members of guilds and specific crafts – such as the cooks whose sartorial ensemble was codified by chef Carême in the early nineteenth