

## The “Palestinian Dream” in the Kurdish context

AHMET HAMDI  
AKKAYA \*

### Abstract

Turkey’s rising leftist student movement in the late 1960s admired the Palestinian Fedayeen movement and considered it as a school for their own future struggle. In the late 1960s young Turkish-Kurdish leftist students went to Palestinian guerrilla camps in Lebanon to be trained in preparation for armed struggle in Turkey. That relationship gained new momentum following the 1980 military coup in Turkey, which heavily impacted Turkish and Kurdish radical movements. The Palestinian camps turned out to be a major retreat for these Turkish-Kurdish groups, among whom the PKK was a primary beneficiary. The PKK seized this opportunity not only for military training but also for organisational recovery which almost no other Turkish or Kurdish movement managed. This article aims to trace the relationship between Turkish-Kurdish radical movements and Palestinian organisations, focusing mainly on the PKK. I argue that the PKK has made use of this relationship in realising the so-called “Palestinian Dream” within the Kurdish context.

**Keywords:** Kurds; PKK; Palestine; Lebanon; Turkey.

### “Xewna Felestinê” li meydana kurdî

Hereketa xwendekarên çepgir ya Tirkîyeyê, ku di dawiya salên 60an de bihêz dibû, bi hijmekarî bal û nezera xwe dabûne ser hereketa “Feda’iyên Felestinê” û ew wek mektebekê didîtin ji bo têkoşina xwe ya paşerojê. Dawiya salên 60an, xwendekarên ciwan ên çepgir ên tirk û kurd çûne nav kempên gerilayên Felestinê li Lubnanê da ku xwe ji bo têkoşina çekdarî li Tirkîyeyê amade bikin. Ew têkilî piştî derbeya leşkerî ya 1980an li Tirkîyeyê hêj bihêztir bû û tesîreke mezin li hereketên radikal ên tirk û kurd kir. Kempên Felestinê bûne stargehên girîng ji bo van komên tirk-kurd, ku ji nav wan herî zêde PKKyê sîd jê wergirt. PKKyê ev îmkân ne tenê ji bo perwerdeya leşkerî lê herwiha ji bo selihandin û biserxwedehatina xwe ya rêxistinî ji bi kar anî, ya ku ti yek ji hereketên tirk-kurd ên din nekarîbûn pêk bînin. Ev gotar dikeve pey têkiliya di navbera hereketên radikal ên tirk-kurd û rêxistinên Felestinî de, lê bi taybetî li ser PKKyê hûr dibe, û nişan dide ku PKKyê ji vî îmkânê wisa istifade kiriyê ku “Xewna Felestinê” li meydana kurdî pêk bîne.

“خه‌ونه فله‌ستینییه‌که‌” له ژینگه‌ی کوردیدا

جوولانه‌یه‌ی چه‌پی خوێندکاریی توركیا، كه له ساله‌كانی شمشت له تهبه‌لچووندا بو، چاوی له جوولانه‌وه‌ی “فیداییه‌كانی فله‌ستین” بو و مكوو قوتابخانه‌یه‌ك بۆ خه‌باتی داهاتووی خۆیان. له كوتایی ساله‌كانی ١٩٦٠، خوێندكارانی چه‌پ و گه‌نجی كوردی توركیا، به‌ مه‌یستی راهێنان، چوون بۆ كه‌مپی گه‌ربلاكانی فله‌ستین تاو مكوو بۆ خه‌باتی چه‌كداریی له توركیا ناماده‌ بن. دوايه‌دواى كوودتای نيزامی ١٩٨٠ له توركیا، نه‌م پێوهندییه‌، كه‌ كار یه‌گه‌ر بیه‌كی زووری له سه‌ر جوولانه‌وه‌ رادیه‌كاله‌كانی تورك و كورد هه‌به‌وو، كه‌وته قوتابخنێکی به‌رز تر ه‌وه. كه‌مه‌هه‌ فله‌ستینییه‌كان بوون به‌ په‌ناگه‌یه‌كی یه‌كجار گرێنگ بۆ گرووپه‌كانی كوردی توركیا كه‌ له ناو نه‌ماندا پ.ك.ك. له هه‌مووان زووتر سوودی وهر گرت. پ.ك.ك. نه‌م هه‌له‌ی قوتزه‌وه‌ نه‌ك هه‌ر بۆ راهێنانی چه‌كداریی به‌لگوو بۆ به‌خۆداهاتنه‌وه‌یه‌كی رێكخراوه‌یی كه‌ هه‌یج جوولانه‌وه‌یه‌كی دیه‌كهی كوردیی یان توركیی نه‌بوونی بێی بگه‌ت. نامانجی نه‌م وتاره‌ نه‌سه‌یه‌ كه‌ شوینی پێوهندی نێوان راهێرینی كوردكانی توركیا و رێكخراوه‌ فله‌ستینییه‌كان هه‌لبه‌گه‌رێ تهنیا به‌ وریدووه‌یه‌ له سه‌ر پ.ك.ك. من دهمه‌وێ بیسه‌لمنیم كه‌ پ.ك.ك. توانی كه‌لك له‌م پێوهندییه‌ وهر بگه‌رێ بۆ وهدیه‌بنانی “خه‌ونه‌ فله‌ستینییه‌که‌” له ژینگه‌ی كورددا.

### Introduction

The well-known Kurdish writer, Faik Bulut, who was involved in the Turkish leftist movement at the beginning of the 1970s, summarises the meaning of

\* Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya is a PhD candidate at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. Email: Ahmet.Akkaya@Ugent.be.

the Palestinian movement for his generation with the following words: “*Every young revolutionary has dreamt it. It was the Palestinian Dream*” (Bulut, 1998: 7).<sup>1</sup> It was the period when the left in Turkey was gaining morale and inspiration from revolutionary struggles elsewhere in the world, including Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Algeria and Palestine. However, Palestine provided more than just a source of inspiration. By the end of the 1960s, the relationship between the Palestinian movement and rising radical leftist movement in Turkey developed in such a way that the Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon became the main training centres for a projected armed struggle. Later, Palestinian camps in Lebanon provided shelter for various Turkish and Kurdish groups against the military coups of the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, the Palestinian movement and the Turkish/Kurdish movements have had a continuous history of almost two decades, which has not been studied in sufficient depth.

In this article I will discuss this relationship focusing mainly on the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) use of its Palestinian connection in reorganising itself as a party and the main Kurdish guerrilla force in the 1980s. In doing this, first I will give a very general picture of the Palestinian movement to show why and how it became a symbol for different revolutionary movements. I will then trace the history of the relationship between the Palestinian and Turkish/Kurdish revolutionary movements. Lastly I focus on the PKK’s connection with the Palestinian movement between 1979 and 1982. The data for this article has been collected by means of interviews, and literature review concerning the Palestinian movement as well as the study of memoirs of Turkish/Kurdish militants who participated in the Palestinian resistance and of documents of the PKK. All materials are part of my PhD research on the history of the PKK.

### **Palestinian resistance as an inspirational model**

The Palestinian Question became a prominent regional and international issue after World War I. With the establishment of the Israeli State in 1948, it quickly widened into an open conflict between the Arab States and Israel. Since then a Palestinian movement has emerged and passed through several phases which also shows the persistence of the Palestinian Question (Massad, 2005; Baumgarten 2005). Until the mid-1960s, more concretely the June 1967 war, the Arab states, mainly, Egypt, Jordan and Syria, had assumed almost the full responsibility of the Palestinian cause. The main Palestinian organisations at that time, MAN (Movement of Arab Nationalists) and Fatah which had been established at the beginning of the 1950s, operated under the shadow of those states. Similarly, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its military wing the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA), both founded at an Arab summit in 1964, largely remained under the control of “neighbouring Arab

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Turkish or Kurdish were made by the author.

states (the Arab League) that were making all the decisions concerning the Arab-Israeli struggle” (Abu Sharif, 2009: 3).

This situation changed after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war which discredited the promise of Arab nationalism. The 1967 war changed the status quo between the Arab states and Israel as well as between the Arab states and the Palestinian movement. On the one hand, “the humiliating defeat of Nasser’s Egypt and the Baath’s Syria heralded the decline of interventionism between Arab states” (Sayigh, 2004: 143), yet on the other hand, the armed struggle by the Palestinian organisations appeared as the only alternative to those defeated Arab states’ conventional war with Israel and this paved the way for Fatah to be transformed “from a small clandestine organisation into the dominant force in Palestinian politics” (Baumgarten, 2005).

However, this transformation was not complete before the Karameh battle in 1968, as Sayigh explicitly stated that “the battle of Karameh turned overnight into a resounding political and psychological victory in Arab eyes... The image of the invincible IDF (Israeli Defense Force) was shaken, appropriately, at Karameh, Arabic for dignity” (2004: 179). In this sense it became a turning point for the armed struggle in the sense that the military power of the guerrilla movements grew significantly, and as a result, it created the myth of Palestinian resistance which attracted revolutionaries from different part of the world, predominantly from the Middle East. The Palestinian movement had also started to gain a prominent position in Jordan, then in Syria, and lastly expanded into South Lebanon. After bloody clashes between the Jordanian army and Palestinian guerrillas, beginning in September 1970, Jordan was completely free of the guerrillas’ presence by July 1971 (Cobban, 1992), and Lebanon turned out to be the new centre for the politico-military activities of the Palestinian movement which lasted until June 1982 when Israel invaded the country. The PLO’s Lebanon period had a specific meaning for the political and military strategy of the Palestinian movement which is out of scope of this article (Sayigh, 1986). However, for this study, it is important to note that during this period the Palestinian training camps in Lebanon played a crucial role for other radical movements in the Middle East and the world.

The Palestinian movement itself had benefited from “international solidarity” which referred mainly contacts to China, Soviet Union and other socialist countries of the world. It was not only diplomatic contact but also the main channel of “acquisition of training and arms”. And, as Sayigh (2004) states, this made the PLO an internationally recognised player in the Palestinian cause as well as at the regional level:

The consolidation of military expertise and the accumulation of weapons and funds in turn enabled the PLO to offer assistance to Third World states, which then backed its diplomatic demarches at the United Nations, Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation for African Unity, and other multilateral organisations. Fatah (as well as the PFLP and DFLP) also assisted a wide range of revolutionary

movements in its own capacity, this effort being overseen directly by Wazir through a dedicated ‘liberation movements bureau’. Among the beneficiaries were the anti-Shah groups in Iran (both Islamist and Marxist), Argentinian Montoneros, Salvadoran FMLN, Sri Lankan Marxist Tigers, southern Thai muslims (Fatanis), and the African National Congress, to name but a few (p. 452-3).

Several Turkish and Kurdish organisations also took part in these activities, ultimately forging practical and symbolic ties to the Palestinian movement. In the coming pages, I will attempt to trace the history of this relationship.

### **Turks and Kurds in the Palestinian resistance**

The popularity of the Palestinian armed struggle had reached its peak after the Karameh battle in 1968 in a way that:

Palestinian political culture became characterized by its admiration of the commandos, known in Arabic as Fedayeen, or those who sacrifice themselves. ....The commandos’ ‘victory’ against Israel, like the Vietnamese and Algerian victories, contributed to the Migration of Dreams through the growth of guerrilla movements across national borders (Nassar, 2004).

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That “migration of dreams” influenced the rising leftist movement in Turkey, as explained by Turkey’s well-known journalist Cengiz Çandar, who also participated in the Palestinian movement at the beginning of the 1970s:

For Turkey’s growing leftist student movement, the Palestinian Fedayeen movement that emerged in the wake of the 1967 war had a particular appeal as a model of resistance to neo-imperial domination.... ‘the anti-imperialist struggle’, far from being an abstraction as in Latin America or Vietnam, was in Turkey’s own backyard (2000: 69).

Another participant in the Palestinian resistance, Faik Bulut, mentioned earlier, depicted it as the “Palestinian Dream about which every young and romantic revolutionary has dreamt.”

From 1968, many young Turkish and Kurdish activists began to go into Palestinian guerrilla camps to receive training for the armed struggle. They can be classified under three groups. The first group of activists went to Palestinian guerrilla bases between 1969 and 1971, mostly in Jordan, for a short-term training period after which they returned to Turkey. The second group left Turkey for Palestinian camps in Lebanon following the 12 March 1971 military coup. The third and biggest wave happened at the end of the 1970s, especially after the military coup of 12 September 1980. In the second and third waves, escaping from the military coup was an important motive. However,

among those groups, as I will argue later, the PKK proved most able to use that opportunity to build up its military capacity as well as reorganising itself. Now we will examine these three waves more closely.

In Turkey, memoirs of militants who participated in the Palestinian resistance have been published in recent years.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of these memoirs, we can state that the first group of Turkish militants came to Palestine<sup>3</sup> in the second half of 1968. They were all members or sympathisers of the Workers' Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, WPT), a legal socialist party established in 1961, which became the first socialist party in Turkey to win representation in the national parliament. For the first time, a group of 17 young sympathisers crossed the Turkey-Syria border in Reyhanlı in Antakya. They were trained for three months in the camps of Fatah and then returned to Turkey. Among them, Semih Dinç who had later returned and received training in Jordan, stayed among the ranks of Palestinian movement until 1975. He specified their reasons for going to Palestinian camps in the following words: "Firstly, it was for internationalism. If Vietnam was close, we would have gone there as well. Secondly, to get training for the armed struggle and finally it was due to some spirit of adventure or romanticism" (Atlas Tarih, 2010). That spirit of adventure, romanticism or naivety was very obvious among those first groups. For example, on 1 October, 1968, two young sympathisers of the WPT, A. Kadir Yaşargün and Mustafa Çelik crossed the border on their own with the idea of going to the USSR to acquire a Marxist-Leninist education. The Palestinian movement, they thought, was the best path. They participated in the Palestinian movement and fought with them against Israel; Mustafa Çelik was killed in a battle and later Yaşargün returned to Turkey (Yaşargün, 2005).

The influx of Turkish revolutionaries continued throughout the years 1969 and 1970 during which tens of young militants went in groups to the Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon. These groups went mostly to the camps in Jordan for two months, and according to one account, at least 50 people went to Palestinian camps for training in five different groups (Feyizoğlu, 2011). Among them were well-known youth leaders like Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin İnan and Yusuf Küpeli who would become the leaders of various radical groups in the coming two years. Gezmiş and İnan were founders of the People Liberation Army of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu*,

<sup>2</sup> For these memoirs, among others, see F. Bulut. (1998). *Filistin Rüyası: İsrail Zindanlarında 7 Yıl*. İstanbul: Berfin Yayınları; A.A. Kadir Yaşargün. (2005). *Gaziantep'ten Filistin'e Bir Dostluk ve Mücadele Hikayesi: Filistin Fedailerini*. İstanbul: Ozan Yayıncılık; M. Tepebaşı. (2006). *Yaşanmamış Sayılan Anılar*. İstanbul: Seyhan Kitap; A. Okay. (2008). *12 Eylül ve Filistin Günlüğü*. Ankara: Ütopya Yayınevi; H. Manticı. (2014). *Filistin Güncesi: Türkiye Devrimcilerinin Enternasyonalist Mücadelesi*. İstanbul: Ozan Yayıncılık.

<sup>3</sup> I should clarify that they actually went to Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon, rather than the area known as Palestine. However, in their written memoirs and interviews, the militants who received training in those Palestinian camps narrated it as "going to Palestine", I have therefore used this term in the article.

THKO) and Küpeli of the People’s Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi*, THKP-C).

The second wave of Turkish/Kurdish militants to Palestine came just after the military coup in 1971. This time, besides training for armed struggle, escaping from the oppression of the junta became a primary reason for going to Syria and Lebanon, where the Palestinian movement provided shelter. During this period, up until 1974 when a general amnesty was declared in Turkey, there were tens of Turkish and Kurdish militants in different Palestinian camps in Syria and Lebanon. For example, Çandar (2000) recalls that in the winter of 1971 and spring of 1972, twenty Turkish militants stayed together in a camp near Aita al-Fukhar, in Lebanon close to the Israeli and Syrian borders (p. 77). The most important event of this period happened on 21 February 1973 when Israeli commandos raided one campsite in Nahr al-Barid at the northern tip of the Lebanese city of Tripoli. Eight members of the illegal Maoist group, Party of Revolutionary Workers and Peasants of Turkey (*Türkiye İhtilalcı İşçi-Köylü Partisi*, TİİKP) were killed during this attack, and one of them, Faik Bulut, was wounded and captured. He remained in Israeli prisons until 1980 (Bulut, 1998).

The third wave of “going to Palestine” took place at the beginning of the 1980s, just after the military coup in September 1980. This wave was far larger than previous ones. It has been claimed that more than one thousand Turkish militants were in the camps at one point.<sup>4</sup> This number is easily doubled when members of Kurdish organisations from Turkey are also taken into account, given the PKK alone had almost 300 fighters in Lebanon during that period.

In fact, the period after 1975 should be considered as the beginning phase of this third wave when Turkish and Kurdish revolutionary organisations took to the stage again. The Kurdish groups developed contacts with the Palestinian organisations during this period. After the coup in 1971, some Kurdish political activists like Necmettin Büyükkaya and Kemal Burkay had gone to Syria and Lebanon where they had made connections with some Kurdish leaders.<sup>5</sup> Both Kurdish activists moved on to Europe, however Büyükkaya,

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<sup>4</sup> The number given in a petition signed by those who stayed in the Palestinian camps: <http://blog.milliyet.com.tr/68-li-ve-78-li-turkiyeli-devrimciler-olarak-/Blog/?BlogNo=248613> (last accessed 24 December 2013). In the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 there were 45 militants from Turkey, and during the invasion of the Nabatiyé front, a southern Lebanese city, there were 142 Turkish militants. See Atlas Tarih “Filistin’de Türk solu”, 90. Since 1973, 37 militants from Turkey (of Turkish, Kurdish, Arab origin) have been killed in the Palestine resistance. For the names of 36 of them, see <http://siyasihaber.org/yazilar/filistin-modern-dunyanin-ortak-ayibi-adil-okay> (last accessed 21 June 2014). One member of the PKK, Abdülkadir Çubukcu, who was killed in an Israeli air attack in Nabatiyé in May 1981, is not included in this list.

<sup>5</sup> Salah Badruddin played an important role in establishing these contacts. Badruddin was leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria [*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê*] after 1969. Burkay had met Badruddin in 1972 in Lebanon and through him he got in touch with the Democratic Front of Palestine which helped him travel from Lebanon to Syria in order to go to Europe.

who became one of the leading members of the Revolutionary Democratic Culture Associations/Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Devrimci Demokratik Kültür Dernekleri/ Kürdistan İşçi partisi*, DDKD/KİP)<sup>6</sup> later returned to Syria and Lebanon where he had also established contacts with Palestinian organisations. This was the first contact between Kurdish organisations in Turkey and Palestinian groups, and not surprisingly it was with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) of George Habash, represented by Salah Salah in the meeting held in Beirut on 14 May 1975.<sup>7</sup> In Büyükkaya's diary (2008), the demands from the Palestinian movement were listed as follows:

1. The military training: the place, sheltering facilities, military instructor and equipment (guns etc.).
2. Financial Aid.
3. Aid in forged documents for transportation (Passports, ID cards).
4. Aid in publication and propaganda.
5. The most important request was the continuation of our contact (p. 228).

Their second meeting was held two weeks later, on 26 May 1975 with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) of Nayif Hawatma, who was himself present at the meeting. Hawatma states three connecting bonds between them: Marxism, anti-imperialism and Islam, and he specifically stresses the armed struggle as the main vehicle for liberating their respective peoples. Although Büyükkaya did not specify in his diary what their demands were, Hawatma states that they will be met (p. 236).

On the basis of these and subsequent contacts with the Palestinian movement, the DDKD/KİP sent three different groups of militants to receive armed training in Lebanon. The first and second groups went to the camps of the PLFP in 1976 and 1977. After 1977, the DDKD had developed its relationship with Fatah, mainly through the Syrian Kurdish leader Salah Badruddin and Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani. Then the third and perhaps largest group, went to the Fatah camps at the end of 1979 and spring of 1980, among whom were Vedat Aydın, (Oncu, 2013) a prominent Kurdish politician and human rights activist who was kidnapped from his home in Diyarbakir and killed on July 1991 in an extrajudicial murder as well as Hatip Dicle

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See, K. Burkay. (2001). *Anılar Belgeler, vol.1*. Stokholm: Roja Nû Yayınları, p. 362). Büyükkaya and his fellow- comrades met Salah Badruddin on 14 April, 1974 in Beirut, and at the same time, through him they were acquainted with Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and former Iraqi President.

<sup>6</sup> The DDKD/KİP was one of the major Kurdish groups in Turkey founded after 1975. It originated from a mass organisation by the name of Revolutionary Democratic Culture Associations (DDKD) and it was named the Kurdistan Workers' Party (KİP) in 1977, but is generally known as DDKD/KİP. This pro-Soviet organisation which was mainly supported by "shopkeepers, artisans, students, and the traditional patriots", published legal magazines and was active in various democratic mass organisations and trade unions. See Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, (2013). Kürt Hareketinin Örgütlenme Süreci Olarak 1970'ler, *Toplum ve Bilim*, 127, 88-120.

<sup>7</sup> Salah Salah was formerly a MAN cadre, then member of PFLP central committee and politburo. See, Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search*, (2004: 888).

who would become, and still is, a well-known Kurdish politician in the 1990s. Although it did never wage an armed struggle, the DDKD had some armed militants in the mountains, especially in the Kozluk and Sason areas of Kurdistan just after the 1980 military coup. However, after a few months without any armed activity, they dispersed, and many militants went to Syria and Lebanon. Until the end of 1982, when the militants dispersed to different countries in Europe, the DDKD/KİP had almost 200 militants in houses in Syria and Fatah camps in Lebanon (V. Serin, skype interview, 9 January 2014).

Although there were militants from other Kurdish groups in Syria and Lebanon after the 1980 coup in Turkey, alongside the DDKD/KİP, another Kurdish organisation with the same name, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) had the most militants there. The PKK had been formed as a small clandestine group around a charismatic leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in the first half of the 1970s. The core group establishing the PKK was carved out from a student environment in Ankara, and then expanded its activities into the Kurdistan region of Turkey. By 1979, it had held its foundational congress, developed its organisational structure, recruited a considerable size of committed militants and became widely known for its strategic employment of violence (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012).

Under these circumstances, the PKK developed contact with the Palestinian movement. As in the case with the DDKD/KİP, the history of the relationship between the PKK and the Palestinian movement can be traced back to the military coup. At the end of 1979, the PKK made contact with the Palestinian movement for military training. Following the military coup, the PKK tried to withdraw most of its manpower to Lebanon. Between 1980 and 1982, almost 300 PKK militants were trained in different Palestinian guerrilla camps in Lebanon and were subsequently involved in the armed resistance against the Israeli invasion of June 1982. However, more importantly the PKK seized this opportunity not only for military training but also for organisational recovery which almost no other Turkish or Kurdish movement managed.

### **The PKK and the Palestinian movement**

In the summer of 1979, Öcalan was forced to flee Turkey for Syria following the police capture of one of the ruling members of his party who divulged important information about this illegal organisation. Öcalan’s exit to Syria was not very well organised, despite the party’s attempts to forge connections abroad since April, 1979. At a meeting of the Central Executive Committee held on 27 April, 1979, it was decided to search for connections in Syria in order to develop the international relations of the movement. However the party did not have any serious connection until then. A local cadre, Ethem Akcan (alias Mehmet Sait) who was from Suruç, a town on the border between Turkey and Syria, had visited his relatives on the other side of border, Kobanê:



Ethem was our relative. I was member of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Left Wing) and I knew that Ethem had also some affiliation to a new Kurdish group that had emerged in the Northern Kurdistan. However I did not have detailed information. Ethem had visited us several times and asked me whether we could help them to get in touch with the Palestine movement in Syria and Lebanon. All contact depended on our kinship relationship (Ö. Aluş, interview, 17 December, 2002, Kobanê).

Relying on this family relationship Öcalan crossed the border on 4 July, 1979 via a well-known smuggler in that area. Ethem Akcan, who had organised the whole border crossing was also with him. After a short stay at Kobanê, Öcalan moved to Aleppo and then to Damascus where he tried to get in touch with the Palestinian movement. In all these journeys, the only network he used was based on his guide Akcan's familial connections. The family members in Kobanê, Aleppo and Damascus hosted them and through their connections they introduced Öcalan to some Kurdish political figures through whom he tried to reach at the Palestinian organisations. The first political connection was with a member of the Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria (*Partiya Çep a Demokrat a Kurdî li Suriyê*, PÇDKS)<sup>8</sup> in Kobanê, named Abdi Nasan who was a pharmacist educated in Turkey. Since he knew Turkish, Öcalan developed contact with him easily:

It was in 1979. I was member of PÇDKS and comrade İsmet [Seyda] was our secretary general. He called me and said that 'Someone from Turkey came to Kobanê and our friend Abdi there said that they are from a new party. Go to Kobanê and try to learn what they want'. Then I went there and met Abdi who was member of our party and that comer from the North. He said that 'we have founded a party and want to bring our cadres for training in the Palestinian camps. I did not know who he was, but from his speech I got the impression that he was the first or second man of his movement. Later I informed our secretary general, İsmet Seyda and they met in Damascus. We helped Öcalan and his party to get touch with Palestinian movement in this way (A. Zahir, interview, 16 April 2003, Denderleeuw, Belgium).

Since this party had a close relationship to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekitiya Nîştîmanî Kurdistan*, YNK, led by Jalal Talabani) which was

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<sup>8</sup> PÇDKS, rooted from the main Kurdish party in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Suriyê*, PDKS) founded in 1957. PDKS had divided into left and right wings in 1965, and PÇDKS is one of the parties in the left wing. It was founded in 1975 as a result of the fragmentation in the left wing of the PDKS and it was renamed in 1998 as Kurdish Left Party in Syria (*Partiya Çep a Kurdî li Suriyê*). Its chairmen were İsmet Seyda, (1975-1991), Yusuf Dibo (1991-1993) and Khayruddin Murad (1994-2005). Retrieved from [http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en\\_2.pdf](http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en_2.pdf) (last accessed 24 December 2013).

founded in Syria, it is supposed that the PUK had also played a role in this relationship. Thus Necmettin Büyükkaya, a very prominent Kurdish activist from Turkey who had close contacts with the PUK and some Syrian Kurdish organisations, noted this relationship in his diary in October 1979 in this way:

Adil Murad [one of the founders of the PUK] is in Beirut. He and some Lebanese Kurds who are from the party of İsmet Seyda [PÇDKS] are helping Apocus, [follower of Apo, nickname for Abdullah Öcalan] bringing them to the Palestinians (2008: 456).

However these relationships with Syrian or Iraqi Kurdish organisations cannot be considered as very deep and well-structured ones. For example they were not based on any binding agreement with the PKK. And the role played by those named Kurdish organisations is limited. It is no more than to introduce the PKK to the Palestinian organisations. In the end, Öcalan succeeded in establishing contact with the Palestinian movement. The first organisation he contacted was the DFLP led by Nawef Hawatmeh. Qais Abd al-Karim (alias Abou Layla) who is still a leading member of the DFLP, was the person from this organisation with whom Öcalan talked first. Abou Layla noted that in the second half of the 1970s, the Democratic Front had many contacts with a lot of left wing groups in different parts of the Middle East, including Iraq, Turkey and to some extent Iran in addition to other Arab countries. Those groups were trying to organise themselves as Turkish guerrilla units or as Kurdish movements of national liberation. However, he recalled the meeting with Öcalan very well:

Actually it was a very long chat we had and that went late into the night. The main thing was that we agreed that neither party should interfere in the others internal affairs. However they will be completely under the discipline of our armed forces and that they will respect the regulations of our armed forces without any exception or without any distinction (A. Layla, interview, December 2004, Ramallah).

Abou Layla states that the first contacts with Öcalan did not have anything special about them and there was no specific agreement in that sense: the PKK sent its cadres to Lebanon or Lebanon-Syrian border in order to get training there. At these very first meetings Öcalan made a good impression on Abou Layla:

Certainly he was very serious. He was sometimes also very hard to convince. He was very much attached to his own opinions, sometimes stubborn, but that gave also the impression that he is the man that holds to his principles (A. Layla, interview, December 2004, Ramallah, Palestine).

Through these contacts Öcalan managed to reach Lebanon where he also found opportunities to meet some Kurds. The lawyer Hassan Ibrahim Mo-

ammed recalls his first meeting with Öcalan in an office of the DFLP in Beirut. He was then member of the Syrian Kurdish party PÇDKS which informed him about the coming of a representative from a newly formed Kurdish party in Turkey:

With some other comrades from our party we went to the Foreign Affairs Office of the Democratic Front in Beirut. In the room of Abu Shahab, who was the deputy of the office we saw another guy. Later we learned that he was Öcalan. We talked to him. He was staying with the Palestinians. After a while I invited him to my house and he stayed there with me, and then Öcalan sent me to Kobanê in order to bring his cadres who came from Turkey to Lebanon (H. I. Mohammed, interview, 20 November 2002, Beirut, Lebanon).

The DFLP had agreed to train PKK cadres. However, they were not sure whether the PKK could manage to bring its cadres to Damascus and then Lebanon. The advance of this agreement was hinged upon the capabilities of the PKK. The DFLP promised only to provide Palestinian refugee cards for use inside Syria and Lebanon. At the beginning they issued a very limited number of the identity cards; 5 or 10. The PKK provided photos of its cadres and identity cards were issued. Ömer Aluş recalls the first time that his relative and Öcalan's confident aide in Syria, Ethem Akcan got identity cards for 10 PKK militants at the office of the DFLP in Damascus (Ö. Aluş, interview, 17 December, 2002, Kobanê, Syrian Kurdistan). Akcan brought those militants from Kobanê to Lebanon through Damascus, and he used the same cards for another group of militants by changing photos on them.

After his passage to Syria at the beginning of July, Öcalan maintained contact with his organisation through written messages sent to the leading members of based in Turkey. The organisation also contacted him in the same way. The PKK archive has the copies of those messages between Öcalan and his representatives in Turkey, i.e. Cemil Bayık and Duran Kalkan. However, the most important note of that period was sent by Öcalan to the Central Committee at the end of October, 1979:

As the most urgent task, you should prepare a group of 250 persons for training. Their photos should be taken and sent to me. Among those people, 50 of them should be at the level of committed cadres, 100 should be sympathisers who are candidates for becoming cadres and 100 should be candidates for military activities. Among the cadres, at least 15 people should be ideologically developed uni-

versity students/graduates, preferably from the METU (Middle East Technical University).<sup>9</sup>

This marked a new period in terms of the PKK’s network in the Middle East whose effect was felt much more concretely in the following years. It also shows that the relationship with the Palestinian movement turned out to be a functional one.

Although Öcalan asked for 250 militants to be sent to Lebanon, his organisation could have sent only 40-50 militants for training at the end of 1979. Those militants were trained in Lebanon until the spring of 1980 in two main groups. The first group which was composed of almost 15 militants was trained in a DFLP’s camp near Na’ameh in the south of Beirut. The second group took military training in the camp of Bourj el-Barajneh, located in the southern suburb of Beirut. In those camps, there were also militants from different countries, as one of the PKK members recalled from his training in the DFLP camp:

It was the biggest camp of DFLP which had more than 300 tents. There were people from Yemen, Iran and Congo. Our military instructor was Abu Jalal from the DFLP, however their leading members were also coming to the camp (A. Yüksel, interview, 5 December 2002, Damascus, Syria).

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After their fundamental training, those militants were sent to Southern Lebanon, around Tyre, Nabatieh and Sarba in small groups of 5-6 persons for reconnaissance and patrolling activities. They concluded with a wide scale military exercise in Helwe camp, near to the village of Haloua, Beka’a valley in the Eastern Lebanon.

From the beginning, the PKK did not merely regard the Middle East as site for military training. It aimed at taking advantage of organising the Kurdish people in Syria as well in Lebanon. Therefore, at the very beginning of its days in the Middle East, the PKK tried to find ways to reach the Kurds in the area. In the spring of 1980, it invited a young but promising Kurdish singer Şivan Perwer and his wife Gülistan Perwer, who was also a singer, to Lebanon for a concert. Both were sympathisers of the movement and went to Beirut to meet Öcalan and a small group of militants who were trying to make a life for themselves under the conditions of exile:

It was spring, before May, 1980. We met Öcalan and some pioneering cadres, like Delil Doğan, Sefkan (Celal Ercan). There was an ongoing struggle in Turkey and the Kurds in Lebanon did not have any information about it. Our friends were trying to build a relationship with them. We organised a concert in Beirut in which almost

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<sup>9</sup> This note was registered in the PKK archive under the rubric of “Merkez Komite” (MK): 040/519.

two thousand people attended. Not only we but also Delil Doğan and Sefkan [who were militants but also interested in the singing, later both have died in the clashes] took to the stage (Gulistan Perwer, interview, 21 January 2003, Denderleeuw, Belgium).

The PKK's activities towards Kurds in Lebanon and Syria developed faster in the following years. At the beginning of the 1980s, this area was important for military preparation. And, starting from spring of 1980, those trained militants were sent to the Kurdish areas of Turkey in preparation for the armed struggle, but they were not successful, primarily due to the military coup which took place in Turkey just a few months later. However, the relationship with the Palestinian movement in Lebanon did not lose its importance for the PKK. On the contrary, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon became the main field of escaping from the violence of the military coup which was aimed at the Turkish and Kurdish radical movements. Among the Turkish and Kurdish organisations, it was the PKK which benefited at most from this opportunity. It had managed to withdraw an important number of militants from Turkey to Lebanon through Syria. After the military coup in 1980 until the end of 1982, almost 300 PKK militants were trained in those camps (Karayılan, 2011).

According to the PKK sources, the training was mainly given by the DFLP of Hawatmeh, and to a lesser extent by the PFLP of Habash. Smaller groups also received training in the camps of Fatah and of the Front of Abu Nidal. In an unsigned 21 page document by the PKK entitled "The evaluation of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon",<sup>10</sup> dated the end of 1982, it was stated that just before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, there were 232 PKK militants in the Palestinian camps in southern and eastern of Lebanon. Among them were 150 militants in the camps of DFLP, 35 in PFLP, 21 in Fatah and 26 in Abu Nidal's camps. Out of these 232 militants, 10 were killed by the Israeli Forces in the Castle of Beaufort (*Shaqif Arnun or Qala'at al-Shaqif*) which is a crusader fortress in Nabatieh Governorate, Southern Lebanon, about one kilometre to the south-south-east of the village of Arnoun. 15 were captured and taken as prisoners of war (*Serxwebûn*, 1984, p. 6).<sup>11</sup>

As it is understood from this document, the PKK militants in smaller groups, mostly composed of 6-7 persons, were staying in different camps controlled by these four Palestinian organisations. In total there were 12 camps in which they were staying during the war. The biggest group composed of 54

<sup>10</sup> This document was registered in the PKK archive under the rubric of "Merkez Komite" (MK): P/1471.

<sup>11</sup> Another PKK militant, A.Kadir Çubukçu was killed in an Israeli bombardment in Southern Lebanon on 2 May, 1981.

militants was in the Helwe camp. The PKK was uneasy with this partitioning into small groups:

The Palestinians did not allow us to settle more friends in a camp. Rather they were distributing in small groups and did not approve that we had our own mechanisms of governing body. The problems emerged from this. Especially in the Southern Lebanon which was a conflictual area, we had a lot of problems. In those cases we contacted Abou Memduh who was in charge of military affairs for the DFLP and he helped a lot (D. Kalkan alias Abbas, interview, 31 May 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan).

But, as Marcus (2007) stated “the Palestinian organisations not only covered the basic expenses of militants in its camps, but also paid a monthly allowance -variously said to be \$15, \$100, and \$300 per person- to help cover other expenses” (p. 57). In the PKK case, that money went directly to the organisation, not to the individual militants, and it became one of the main financial sources of the organisation. And on this basis Mamdouh Nofal who was the commander of the DFLP’s military wing from 1972 until 1988 makes another point about this debate on the large groups: “I noticed that they had started to bring large numbers to our camps and we said we can’t accept all your members to stay long periods of time because it costs a lot” (ibid.).

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The PKK not only benefited from the training facilities provided by the Palestinian organisations but also armed itself on the basis of their resources. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, many in the ranks of Palestinian organisations had laid aside their weapons:

The weapons we used in the training belonged to the Palestinians. At the beginning, we had a very limited number of weapons of our own. But it changed when Israel invaded Lebanon. A lot of people laid aside their weapons when they were on run and we collected them. During that period, the villagers also sold a lot of guns to us. All these weapons, mainly AK-47s which were almost 400-500, were deposited in Helwe camp and later we transported them to the Derik area, on the border between Syria, Turkey and Iraq in order to pass them to Turkey. Syria allowed us to do it (S. Çelik, interview, 18 November 2013, France).

In the end, both the PKK militants’ attitudes during training and their participation in the war made a marked impression on the Palestinian movement, as Abou Layla noted:

There was no distinction between them, either with the Turkish groups or with the Kurdish. But gradually it began to appear that they were more serious than the others. They were more determined and they definitely had more influence amongst the Kurdish

population (A. Layla, interview, December 2004, Ramallah, Palestine).

The Palestinian movement bore witness to the PKK's involvement in the war and the losses they suffered and thus a specific camp place was assigned to the PKK. That camp known as Helwe camp which was located near to the village of Haloua in Beqaa valley on the border between Lebanon and Syria, played a significant role over the next decade up until September 1992. In the summer of 1981, the PKK held its first conference in that camp in which the decision for guerrilla warfare in Kurdistan was taken. That decision was put into practice after the 2<sup>nd</sup> congress of the PKK which was held in a camp of the DFPL south of Daraa in Syria on the Jordanian border in August 1982. After this congress almost all trained militants were sent to Northern Iraq to set up bases. On 15 August 1984, guerrilla units of the PKK attacked the towns of Eruh and Şemdinli in the provinces of Siirt and Hakkari. So this large-scale, daring and well-coordinated operation opened the period of the protracted people's war in Turkey.

However, since the end of 1982, the relationship between the PKK and the Palestinian organisations has declined. Between 1983 and 1985, the PKK had used two camps in Lebanon, one Helwe camp and the other known as Arsel camp which was located on the northern edge of the Beqaa valley, near to the village of Arsal. After 1985, the Helwe camp served as the only camp for the PKK. In the meantime, the Palestinians lost control of this area which came under the direct control of Syria, and the relationship between the PKK and the Palestinians came to an end. However, as Çelik noted, in the period of its stay in Lebanon, "the PKK could gather itself together":

Apart from reorganising ourselves in the camps in which the Palestinian movement provided us with shelter, we learned things from the Palestinians. We learned about making demonstrations for martyrs, about ceremonies. We did a lot of reading on the people's war, we also had armed training. I mean, we owe the Palestinians something (S. Çelik, interview, 18 November 2013, France).

## Conclusion

The relationship between Turkish-Kurdish militants and the Palestinian movement has a long history, dating back to the 1960s. From the beginning, the Palestinian movement had been a source of inspiration for the armed struggle in Turkey and then it transformed into something more tangible. The various Turkish and Kurdish radical groups received military training in Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon. During the military coups in 1971 and 1980, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon provided shelter for various Turkish and Kurdish groups. However, among those groups which had more than one thousand militants in Lebanon following the 1980 military coup, the PKK benefited most from this opportunity. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, the PKK had managed to withdraw an important number of militants from Turkey to Lebanon through Syria. Secondly, due to its highly centralised ruling body including its leader located in Lebanon, the PKK also kept its organisational structure active in the time of retreat and focused on its shortcomings in a relatively secure environment. Thirdly, the PKK had more experienced militant body in terms of the armed struggle than other Kurdish and Turkish organisations so it could easily have adapted itself to the guerrilla training in the Palestinian camps.

Another important outcome of this period was that for the first time in its history the PKK developed regional and international relations. Through the Palestinian organisations, the PKK established connections with regional powers like Syria, and it also developed contacts with international powers through their embassies in Lebanon. The relationship with the Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan was also developed during this period, especially with Kurds in Syria and Lebanon, which would turn out to be strategically important in the future.

Consequently, on the basis of its relationship to the Palestinian movement, the PKK reorganised itself as a party at some distance from its “geography of war” and trained its militants for its planned people’s warfare in the Kurdistan region of Turkey. Despite the military coup which crushed almost all Turkish and Kurdish radical groups in Turkey, the PKK alone managed to persevere and indeed strengthen itself. In this success, the relationship to the Palestinian movement played a crucial role, allowing the Kurdish movement to attempt to realise its own “Palestinian Dream”.

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