

Book review published in: **Acik, N., & Klesse, C. (2024). Women Fighters in the Kurdish National Movement. Transforming Gender Politics and the PKK, by Mustafa Kemal Topal. *Kurdish Studies Journal*, 2(2), 218-223. <https://doi.org/10.1163/29502292-00202008>**

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Mustafa Kemal Topal's book provides a rich and detail study of women's involvement in the armed struggle of the *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK) for the transformation and liberation of Kurdistan. The book provides good insight into major developments in the decolonial struggle of the PKK which has been exceptional in its successful mobilization of women, with around a third of PKK's 15,000 guerrilla being women. It is a rare and exceptionally rich study into the experiences, perceptions, and convictions of women fighters within the PKK and provides a thorough analysis of the gender politics both within Kurdish society at large and within the PKK. The book values the immense contribution of women to both the civil and armed Kurdish liberation struggle and argues that the successive absorption of three generations of women fighters in the PKK has profoundly transformed the PKK, both ideologically and in its functioning as organisation. At the same time, the book stays attentive to ongoing gender conflicts within the organisation, showing how women have navigated patriarchal structures both within society at large and within the party itself.

Born and raised in a Kurdish family in Turkey, Topal has first-hand experience of anti-Kurdish oppression in Turkey, which forced him to leave the country as a political refugee. The book is based on empirical, qualitative research, and thoughtful analysis originally conducted for a PhD dissertation at Roskilde University in Denmark. Topal is now an Assistant Professor at the Department of People and Technology and member of the Centre for Gender, Power and Diversity at Roskilde University, where he conducts postdoctoral research into Kurdish women's democratic projects in Rojava/North Syria.

The author positions the book primarily in the context of existing research into women's roles in warfare and women's contribution to national and anti-colonial liberation struggles, paying in particular attention to other – mostly recent – existing studies into Kurdish women fighters. His contribution lies in offering a deeper analysis of the enduring legacy of women's activism within the PKK which has established a firm platform for a distinctive gender-political orientation, profoundly shaped and determined by women's collective organizing.

In terms of Topal's theoretical interest and leanings, the book is interested and differs in refreshing ways from mainstream analytical accounts of social movement armed struggles. Throughout the book, Topal refers to a broad range of theorists from within poststructuralist and new materialist – mostly feminist – registers, including scholars such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, Michel Foucault, and Gill Deleuze. Topal's style of theorising is tentative and careful, confining himself mostly to noting resonances between the insights gained from his analysis and observations with certain philosophers' or theorists' claims and concepts. At times, possible conclusions may be left unsaid, but Topal also avoids inappropriate over-theorising of the individual life and

experience stories of his interviewees. Insights derived from Butler's performativity theory and Barad's new materialism certainly appear to be appropriate for thinking about women's fighters embodied enactment with nature in the mountain-based guerrilla struggle.

The research is based on ethnographic field research and qualitative interviews conducted in Northern Syria/Rojava, Northern Iraq/Southern Kurdistan, and Europe in the years of 2018 and 2019. Overall, Topal conducted 36 interviews, mostly with women fighters, accentuated with the inclusion of a very small number of men cadres and ex-combatants. Gender relations and the position of women in the party, camps, and combat units and the gender politics in the PKK are the main topics covered in the interviews with all participants. Taking into account the relative absence of research into the role of women in active warfare in the region and elsewhere, the focus on women fighters is both legitimate and significant. At the same time, we think that a larger contribution of men cadres in the study would have added complexity and new angles to a project that is centrally concerned with the gendered dynamics in the organization of armed anti-colonial resistance. Being a male researcher would have certainly enabled Topal to broaden his approach to recruitment of study participants. Readers may also miss a more expansive self-reflexive discussion of how positionality has shaped research design and dynamics. At the same time, it has to be said that consideration of the gender-difference salient in many research encounters surfaces in many parts of the book.

We think that Topal can be applauded for collecting such rich and nuanced data as he is presenting in the book under very difficult circumstances in conflict zones and under clandestine conditions. The interview material discussed in the book is impressive. His interviewees seem to share personal experiences, views, and biographical details with ease and generosity. This indicates that Topal was able to gain the trust of those who decided to cooperate with him. Topal presents a lot of the data, and his own modulation and interpretation of the study participants' narratives shows respect to the integrity of their views and experiences. At the same time, he does not shy away from raising critical questions about claims or events whenever he considers this adequate or necessary.

Topal quotes extensive excerpts from the interviews, usually adding some more contextualisation, by drawing in further details from within the interviewee's overarching narrative or by adding historical explanations or guarded evaluation of surrounding cultural and political dynamics. In the course of several chapters, suggestive analyses of the complex life course decisions of individual cadres interact with each other, creating a rich tapestry of voices and reflections that provide nuanced insights into the different conditions and motivations that have fed into women fighters' decisions to join the PKK and the struggle.

Topal's diverse sample allows him to describe women's armed struggle in the Kurdish movement as inherently decolonial, coalitional, international, and multi-positional. Women of different classes, educational backgrounds, religious and secular commitments, different ethnicities, nationalities, and women both from within Kurdistan (and its different regions) and the diaspora feel drawn to join the armed struggle. Topal explains this both with the pervasiveness and transnational reach of the Kurdish movement, as well as with the PKK's flexible navigation of cultural and religious sensitivities and investments, plus the creation of

a distinctive appeal for others that emerges from the example of women's successful collective organising and resistance and their decolonial struggle.

The content of the book is organised as follows: The book starts with an introduction that sketches the project and its methodology, gives a quick historical account of the history of the PKK since its foundation in 1978, its start of an armed independence struggle in 1984, its original nationalist and (Marxist-Leninist) anti-capitalist orientation, as well as its major ideological shift from a struggle aiming for independent statehood towards self-administration within a democratic confederalist structure, inspired by the anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin, after the arrest of the political leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, and with reinforced emphasis from 2005 onwards.

The following two chapters deal with women fighters' experiences prior to joining the PKK. Chapter one explores women's experience of 'double otherness' growing up in patriarchal familial or cultural contexts and as members of a discriminated against and oppressed ethnic and national group. The chapter attends to experiences related to the oppression of Kurdish language, identity and persecution, arrests, torture, and killings that affected families active in the movement. Rather than providing individualist psychologising accounts, the chapter aims to show that the emerging gender-politics in the PKK provided realistic options and attractive points of identification around key issues of young people gendered as women.

Chapter two presents a novel analytical narrative of *three generations* of women in the PKK, with the first generation joining in still rather small numbers in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, when the concrete role of women in the national liberation struggle and the question of women units was still an unresolved and contested matter. The second generation of women in the PKK tended to join as members, often without clearly refined ideas what their roles may imply, emerging as confident 'women fighters' (i.e. active combatants) in the unfolding armed struggle of the PKK from the second part of the 1980s onwards. In the 1990s, gender discourse and gender politics became more dominant, among others also reflected in Öcalan's publication of *Women and the Family Question* in 1992. The third generation refers to women joining the PKK from the 2005 paradigm shift onwards, when women's participation in the armed struggle and women's segregated organizational practices in the party were already well established. In the third generation, women's struggles are part of an elaborated gender politics that form an integral element in the project of creating a new human, within a liberated socialist society.

We think that the most exciting and novel insights of Topal's study can be found in chapters three until five. These chapters deal with questions of sexuality, gender, and the body as they are articulated both in party ideology and women's lived experience of organising the armed struggle in the mountain region. Chapter three explores women's fighters accounts of the life as a conscious break with bourgeois family life, and a collective effort to reconstruct the self, love, and sexuality within nature-based communal forms of living. The constitution of a new human being in the context of the revolutionary struggle builds upon cultivation of a sense of womanhood, which for many study participants is based on an interpretation of Kurdish cultural tradition (as mediated in the writings of Öcalan), in frequent distinction from liberal Western feminism. The chapter also contains a discussion of the de-

sexualization of love, a set of values and policies that downplay eroticism, sexual and/or conjugal intimacy between cadres in favour of a more communal interpretation of love as a revolutionary bond in the party context and the life in liberated territories. Sexual and romantic relationships (including marriages) between cadres are not encouraged, and not openly practised, being subject to surveillance and self-surveillance.

The theme of strategic gender segregation is further examined in chapter four, advancing two claims: first, that the segregation stems in part from the organization's desire to align with traditional gender norms and to safeguard female fighters from sexual harassment or unintended pregnancies; second, that creating physical and mental separation between men and women serves to liberate individuals from masculine influences, enabling personal transformation. The chapter furthermore shows that gender segregation is underpinned by a strong theory of gender/sex difference and a binary gender logic. These views are expressed in the theory of 'Jineology', a PKK-backed discourse on womanhood that critiques dominant androcentric scientific accounts, capitalist society, and Western feminism, in favour of a theory of the 'natural woman' of the Kurdish Neolithic period. Topal shows how the investment into natural binary genders goes hand in hand with the problematisation of homosexuality as deviation or excessive sexualization. These views of propriety and heteronormative desexualization go hand in hand with the encouragement of modest self-presentation and behaviours among cadres in the mountains.

Chapter five carries further the exploration of gender discourse by focusing specially on women's experiences of combat, and perceptions of developing and strengthening the body through training and active militant action. By stressing the capacity of women for – or even their superiority in – discipline and warfare, many women fighters deploy gender essentialist arguments in a way that challenge men's hegemony. The discussion of the gender-focused critique of family life, love, sexuality, gender segregation, gender presentation, the phenomenology of embodiment under the conditions of warfare, and the distinctive ideology (and mythology) of womanhood within party-discourse and women combatants' narratives creates fascinating insights in the multi-faceted production of a gender counter-discourse through everyday practices and actions within women's armed units and collective forms of living in the mountains.

Chapter six expands this analysis by exploring women fighters' wishes for their future, including consideration of those who decide to leave the struggle, and discussion of the ongoing experiments in the women's village of *Jinwar* in Rojava. The conclusion sums up the main arguments of the book and underscores the central and indispensable role of women in the movement (both the party organization and the fighting units) and the over-all significance of their double-sided struggle against both colonialism and patriarchal values in Kurdish society and the PKK.

We see the following arguments emerging from Topal's study. The book provides rich insights into the gender politics of women's collective organization within the PKK and the Kurdish liberation struggle. The study suggests that the accumulation of decades of women's activism, their struggle for voice, space, and decision power within in the party has transformed gender discourses and the power relations between genders in the Kurdish

national liberation movements. Women have become an indispensable force in the movement, not only numerically, but by setting the tone and the agenda in many debates.

Topal also shows that patriarchal attitudes continue to shape both wider Kurdish and PKK-internal cultural dynamics. Topal explores some of the paradoxes of the PKK gender discourse that continue to burden women with responsibility for modest and decent gender relations in the party. He further shows that many women fighters' narratives are invested into a discourse of natural and essentialist gender differences. These views tend to stress the value of women's strength and creative powers, underscoring their capacity for leadership in a new society. At the same time, they reinforce heteronormative values with regards to reproduction, love, and sexuality. If Topal's analysis of this state of affairs is accurate, much ground remains to be gained, in particular with regards to the perception, participation, and representation of LGBTI+ members in the movement. An engagement with the voices of LGBTI+ activists, and also with the critiques from within *Kurdish Queer Studies* (as presented in the special issue of *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1 (12) from December 2023) will without question enhance positive developments in these areas.

Topal's book presents a brave, novel, and original critical engagement with an under-researched topic. Focusing on women's political and military organization in the decolonial Kurdish struggle, it pushes boundaries and fractures dominant representation of gender relations and gender politics in the region. The study will be a significant reading for scholars and researchers with an interest in the Middle East, and specifically for those engaged in Kurdish Studies, adding an important volume to the burgeoning field of Kurdish Gender Studies. The book will further be an important item for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Courses in Political Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Sociology, Human Geography and more.

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