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Ethnic exclusion and the puzzle of diverging conflict trajectories: A paired comparison of Kurds in Syria and Turkey

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Abstract

This paper raises the question of why representatives of some politically marginalised ethnic groups resort to armed rebellion, while others remain peaceful. To find answers to this question, the paper first develops a theoretical framework that relates the mobilisational capacity of disgruntled ethnic leaders to the dynamic interplay of three factors, including the repressive capacity of the state, the availability of international support, and group-specific organisational capacity. In a second step, it uses this framework to investigate the diverging conflict trajectories of Kurds in Turkey (1946-2005) and Kurds in Syria (1970-2005). Even though the leadership of both groups suffered political marginalisation, this led to armed rebellion only in Turkey where Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) took up arms against the government in 1984. The paired comparison shows that these diverging conflict trajectories mainly reflect differences in the broader political opportunity structure. While the political mobilisation of Syrian Kurds was smothered by the extremely high repressive capacity of the Assad regime and the total lack of international support, the PKK rebellion in Turkey was facilitated by both the state's weakened repressive capacity during the second half of the 1970s and the availability of ample external support from the early 1980s. Differences in group-specific organisational capacity, by contrast, are clearly less important as an explanatory factor. Even though the PKK displayed higher organisational capacity than Kurdish organisations in Syria, these differences are largely endogenous to the observed variation in political opportunity factors.

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Contents

1. The puzzle

Recent research has found strong evidence for a link between ethnic exclusion from executive-level state power and civil war. Most prominently, Wimmer et al. focus on the state as an organisation that is captured to different degrees by representatives of particular ethnic groups[1], expecting that high degrees of ethnic exclusion will increase the likelihood of armed conflict (Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009; Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010). This hypothesis is tested based on the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset, which identifies all politically relevant[2] ethnic groups around the world and measures access to executive-level state power for members of these ethnic categories in all years from 1946 to 2005. The finding is that exclusion along ethnic lines is strongly and robustly associated with civil war, with armed rebellions in the name of excluded ethnic groups being much more likely than violent conflict in the name of included groups. Similar conclusions have been reported in the literatures on relative deprivation (Gurr 1970, 1993a, 1993b, 2000), consociationalism (Lijphart 1977, 2008), elite settlements (Burton and Higley 1987), inclusive coalition (Rothchild 1997; Rothchild and Foley 1988), horizontal inequalities (Stewart 2010; Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011) and elite bargains (Lindemann 2011).

Yet, a closer look at the EPR dataset reveals that ethnic exclusion does not always lead to armed rebellion.[3] This is true for all parts of the world. In Africa, ethnic leaders of the Acholi in Uganda, the Dinka in Sudan, the Tutsi in Rwanda, the Mano in Liberia or the Igbo in Nigeria responded to their political marginalization by waging armed insurgency against the state. By contrast, the leadership of the Luo in Kenya, the Ewe in Togo, the Malinke in Guinea, the San in Botswana or the Batéké in Congo was also long politically excluded but nonetheless refrained from rebellion. In Asia,

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1   Following the Weberian tradition, ethnicity is defined as a subjectively experienced sense of commonality based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry. This definition includes ethnolinguistic, ethnosomatic and ethnoreligious groups, but not tribes and clans that conceive of ancestry in genealogical terms, or regions that do not define commonality on the basis of shared ancestry (see Wimmer 2008).

2   An ethnic group is defined as politically relevant if at least one significant political actor claims to represent the interests of that group in the national political arena, or if members of an ethnic category are systematically and intentionally discriminated against in the domain of public politics (see Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009).

3   Drawing on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), armed rebellion is defined as 'a contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths' (http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/UCDP/).

disgruntled ethnic leaders of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Tajiks in Afghanistan, the Moro in the Philippines or the Kurds in Iraq took up arms against the government, whereas the reverse is true for representatives of the similarly marginalised Madhesi in Nepal, Hindus in Bangladesh, Chinese in Indonesia or the Ahmadis in Pakistan. In Latin America, indigenous leaders in Chile, Paraguay, Ecuador, Peru, Guatemala and Mexico have all suffered from sustained political exclusion, yet this led to armed rebellion only in the latter three cases. In Europe, finally, ethnic exclusion caused insurgency in the cases of the Albanians in Yugoslavia or the Abkhazians in Georgia but not in those of the Roma in Slovakia or the Ukrainians in Poland. These diverging conflict trajectories in a context of ethnic exclusion are puzzling and raise the following question: *Why do representatives of some politically marginalised ethnic groups resort to armed rebellion, while others remain peaceful?*

To find answers to this question, this paper first develops a theoretical framework that relates the mobilisational capacity of disgruntled ethnic leaders to the dynamic interplay of three factors, including the repressive capacity of the state, the availability of international support, and group-specific organisational capacity. To explore this argument, the paper then investigates the diverging conflict trajectories of Kurds in Turkey (1946-2005) and Kurds in Syria (1970-2005): Even though the leadership of both groups suffered political marginalisation, this led to armed rebellion only in Turkey where Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) took up arms against the government (1984-present). It is shown that these diverging conflict trajectories mainly reflect differences in the broader political opportunity structure. While the political mobilisation of Syrian Kurds was smothered by the extremely high repressive capacity of the Assad regime and the total lack of international support, the PKK rebellion in Turkey was facilitated by both the state's weakened repressive capacity during the second half of the 1970s and the availability of ample external support from the early 1980s. Differences in group-specific organisational capacity, by contrast, are clearly less important as an explanatory factor. Even though the PKK displayed higher organisational capacity than Kurdish organisations in Syria, these differences are largely endogenous to the observed variation in political opportunity factors.

2.   Understanding divergent conflict trajectories in a context of ethnic exclusion

Access to executive-level state power is defined as representation in the presidency, cabinet, and senior posts in the administration, including the army (Wimmer, Ceder- man, and Min 2009, 326). It can be considered as crucial in that it provides repre- sentatives of contending ethnic groups with visible recognition, a 'say' in decision- making and access to the spoils of the state, while also shaping feelings of physical security and survival. The persistent exclusion from positions of executive-level power is therefore likely to favour the emergence of serious group-specific grievances, which can in turn be expected to produce a general disposition and willingness to engage in political protest and – if the protest is not successful – collective violence. Yet, the ultimate ability of aggrieved ethnic leaders to mobilize protest and violence will depend on a number of intervening factors.

Figure 1: Understanding divergent conflict trajectories in a context of ethnic exclusion
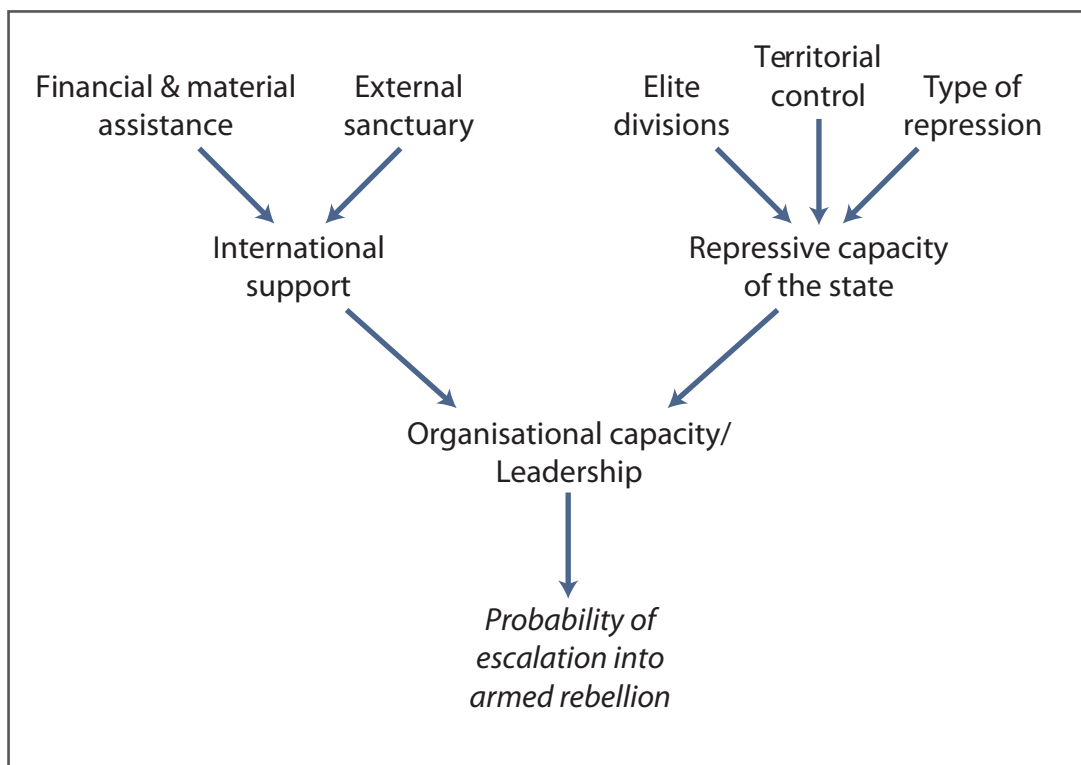
To account for these factors, I propose a theoretical framework that draws on the overlapping literatures on contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2003; Tilly and Tarrow 2007), social revolutions (Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979;

Goodwin 2001), ethnic conflict (Gurr 1970, 1993a, 2000; Horowitz 1985), and civil war (Weinstein 2007; Fjelde and De Soysa 2009; Hendrix 2010). It is argued that the mobilisational capacity of marginalised ethnic leaders depends on the dynamic interplay of three sets of factors, including the repressive capacity of the state, international support, and organisational capacity (see Figure 1). The first two factors describe the broader political opportunity structure in which representatives of marginalized ethnic groups operate (2.1), while the latter relates to the group-specific endowments that ethnic leaders dispose of (2.2.).

2.1   *DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTUREs*

My starting point when thinking about diverging conflict trajectories in a context of ethnic exclusion is the 'structure of political opportunities', which includes 'consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations of success or failure' (Tarrow 1998, 76f.). The concept of political opportunity structure has been widely used, always in danger of becoming a 'catch-all variable' (Meyer 2004). The literature on social movements has over the years identified a multitude of political opportunity factors, ranging from the openness of the political system, the existence of elite divisions, the availability of influential allies to the state's capacity for repression (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1998; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). In the literature on social revolutions, scholars have mainly focused on the role of an observed decline in state strength as an indicator of political opportunity structure (Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979; Goodwin 2001). The identified explanatory factors include, among others, institutional linkages between states and elites, the nature of the bureaucracy, the penetration of the national territory and external shocks. The more recent civil war literature, finally, has privileged the notion of state capacity, which has been operationalized in terms of either military capacity, bureaucratic and administrative capacity, or the quality and coherence of political institutions (see Hendrix 2010).

Drawing on these diverse traditions, I operationalize the concept of 'political opportunity structure' by focusing on two key incentives that shape the mobilisational capacity of marginalised ethnic leaders. These include the repressive capacity of the state on the one hand (2.1.1), and international support on the other (2.1.2).

2.1.1 The repressive capacity of the state

The repressive capacity of the state is a key feature of the political opportunity structure in which representatives of excluded ethnic groups operate. I argue that it depends on three inter-related factors, namely elite divisions, territorial control, and type of repression.

Elite divisions

Elites can be broadly defined as 'holders of strategic positions in powerful organizations and movements, including dissident ones, who are able to affect national political outcomes regularly and significantly' (Dogan and Higley 1998, 15). They thus comprise the top leadership positions of the government, the political parties, the bureaucracy, the military, business associations, trade unions, traditional and religious authorities, etc. Divisions among elites have been identified as a driver behind social and revolutionary movements in that they are a sign of regime vulnerability and thereby provide potential challengers with incentives to engage in collective action (Tarrow 1998, 79). While this is generally plausible, it seems useful to further distinguish between different kinds of elite divisions (Osa and Schock 2007, 129f.). In established democracies, elite divisions typically occur over specific political and economic policies. In semi- or non-democracies, by contrast, divisions among elites often concern more fundamental issues such as the legitimacy of the state, the institutional basis of the political system, methods of succession, the place of the military in politics, etc.

I argue that the existence of fundamental elite divisions will make armed rebellion more likely in two distinct ways. First, fundamental elite divisions represent a particularly clear sign of regime vulnerability and thus encourage disgruntled ethnic leaders to take the risk of mobilizing armed rebellion. If, for example, there are deep-seated divisions between political and military elites, this will call into question the state's ability to decisively repress violent challenges. In a similar vein, fragile coalition governments that are weakened by elementary disagreements over the institutional basis of the political system will be perceived as a vulnerable target by would-be rebels. Elite unity, by contrast, sends a signal of regime strength and hence favours non-violent action or more sporadic forms of violent protest. If, for instance, a regime exhibits high levels of civil-military integration, would-be rebels can assume that organised violent challenges to the state are likely to meet a united and firm response. This is a serious disincentive for armed rebellion.

H1.1: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups confront a regime that is weakened by fundamental elite divisions.

Second, the presence of fundamental elite divisions will provide the leadership of marginalised ethnic groups with potential allies, which may greatly facilitate the arduous task of organising insurgency. If, for example, political and military elites are divided over the place of the military in politics, disgruntled army officers may be tempted to join forces with other dissident interests. Similarly, disagreements over the methods of succession may motivate some to defect from the ruling coalition and align with other challengers. High levels of elite integration, by contrast, deprive disaffected ethnic leaders of potential allies and hence favour more sporadic forms of political protest.

H1.2: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups dispose of elite allies.

Territorial control

The territorial reach of the state is a long-standing theme in the study of violent conflict. A useful starting point is Mann's (1988, 113) concept of 'infrastructural power', which he defines as the 'institutional capacity of a central state (…) to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions'. Significantly, there are different approaches to state infrastructural power (see Soifer 2008). The 'national capabilities approach' highlights the infrastructural resources at the state's disposal, i.e. the means of coercion available to the state and the material means underlying these. The focus is therefore on the central state and its resources for exercising control over society and territory, and more specifically on the size and the strength of the military. Yet, there is little evidence that large and well-equipped militaries lower the risk of civil war (Hendrix 2010).

More promising is the 'subnational variation approach' that emphasises differences in the territorial presence of states, i.e. in their ability to extend their repressive capacity throughout the entire territory. The underlying insight is that states are rarely homogeneously powerful across national space, instead their repressive capabilities vary. Such spatial variations in territorial control have long been related to violent conflict.[4] Skocpol (1979, 74), in her classic study on the origins of social revo-

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4 While most suggest that a high territorial presence of the state decreases the risk of violent conflict, both Tilly (1993) and Hechter (2001) argue that the general expansion of state territorial presence over the past few centuries, has dramatically reduced local political autonomy and thereby sparked violent conflict.

lutions, argued that the 'weakening grip of the civil administration over the country' contributes to the fiscal crisis of the old regime and plays a fundamental role in its collapse. More recently, Goodwin (2001, 27) found that 'revolutions are unlikely (…) where the state effectively governs throughout the national territory'. Similarly, Herbst (2000, 3) suggested that 'the failure of many African states to consolidate their authority has resulted in civil wars in many countries', while Fearon & Laitin (2003, 80) claimed that the 'prospects of nascent insurgency' are determined by the 'government's police and military capabilities and the reach of government institutions into rural areas'.

Building on these different contributions, I propose to focus on the effects of two kinds of territorial control. First, and most obviously, I argue that the likelihood of armed rebellion will depend on the territorial spread of military, police and/or secret service presence. If the state's security forces have only limited territorial presence, this will seriously constrain their ability to monitor the subversive activities of potential rebels. As a consequence, the leadership of marginalised ethnic groups will dispose of a valuable domestic sanctuary where it can organise armed rebellion at relatively low risk. This is especially the case when the security forces are weak or absent in the 'home territory' of the disaffected leaders. If the state's coercive apparatus penetrates the entire territory, by contrast, this will make the task of organising armed rebellion very difficult and dangerous. Accordingly, disgruntled ethnic leaders will prefer to rely on non-violent action or sporadic forms of violent protest, which can be organised even in a context of high security service presence.

> *H2.1: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups confront security forces that lack territory-wide presence.*

Second, and somewhat less intuitively, I expect that the likelihood of armed rebellion will vary with the extent to which the ruling party penetrates the national territory. If the ruling party is solidly anchored throughout the entire country with party structures down to the village level, this will provide the regime with a powerful means to monitor and detect anti-regime agitation. Accordingly, representatives of marginalized ethnic groups will find it difficult to mobilize armed rebellion without being detected by local party cadres. If, by contrast, the ruling party has only limited territorial reach, the regime will lack information on subversive activities at the local level, which makes the organisation of insurgency less difficult and dangerous.

> *H2.2: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups face a ruling party that does not penetrate the entire territory.*

Type of repression

Varying propensities to rebel are likely to be influenced not only by the territorial spread of the coercive state apparatus but also by the *actual use* of this apparatus against excluded ethnic groups, i.e. by different types of repression. A brief look at the relevant literature reveals that we still know surprisingly little about the relationship between state repression and violent conflict. In 1987, Lichbach (1987, 267) admitted that 'we currently do not know why government coercion produces mixed effects on popular strike'. Twenty years later, Davenport (2007, 8) still reported 'highly inconsistent' findings and deplored what he referred to as a 'punishment puzzle'. Sometimes the impact of state repression on violent dissent is negative (Hibbs 1973; Saxton 2005), sometimes it is positive (Lichbach and Gurr 1981; Francisco 1996, 2004), sometimes it is represented by an inverted U-shape (Muller 1985), sometimes it is alternatively negative or positive (Rasler 1996; Moore 1998), and sometimes it is non-existent (Gurr and Moore 1997).

In the light of these contradictions, I seek to disaggregate the concept of state repression and its effects on armed rebellion. I understand state repression as encompassing 'all behaviour that is applied by governments in an effort to bring about political quiescence and facilitate the continuity of the regime through some sort of restriction or violation of political and civil liberties' (Davenport 2000, 6). Such state repression can be both non-violent and violent in character. Non-violent types of repression may include, among others, demonstration bans, spying, censorship, curfew impositions, arrests, detention and intimidation. Violent types of repression, by contrast, may involve beatings, torture, killings or even genocide.

I expect that non-violent repression will make armed rebellion less likely. This is because non-violent types of repression can – if consistently applied – be a very effective means to undermine the organisational basis of a nascent rebel movement. If key opposition leaders are systematically intimidated or arrested, for instance, this will seriously complicate organised resistance. The same is true for repressive measures such as secret service infiltration or demonstration bans. At the same time, non-violent state repression is rather unlikely to provoke a dramatic escalation of dissent, which is typically necessary when trying to mobilise collective violence. Even though non-violent repression will certainly frustrate demands and reinforce a sense of injustice, it will – unlike open and indiscriminate violent repression – not radicalise previously reformist or apathetic group members.

> *H3.1: Armed rebellion becomes less likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups are subject to consistent non-violent repression.*

Violent repression, by contrast, will make armed rebellion more likely. Yet, its ultimate effects depend on whether it is selective or indiscriminate. Selective violent repression targeted at key political leaders may seriously undermine collective mobilisation by depriving groups of their most able leaders. At the same time, it will have a more limited 'inflammatory' effect on dissent than indiscriminate forms of violent repression. Armed rebellion becomes especially likely if members of the marginalised ethnic group face indiscriminate violent repression. Indiscriminate violence in form of arbitrary persecution and mass killings will escalate group-specific grievances and thereby improve the prospects of violent mobilisation. Faced with indiscriminate persecution, the already radicalised group members will redouble their efforts, while reformers and even the previously apathetic are likely to become radicalised. The only necessary qualification is that one may have to further distinguish between short-term reactions to indiscriminate violent repression on the one hand, and medium- and long-term reactions on the other (Rasler 1996). In the short run, indiscriminate repression may help to suppress dissent. In the medium- and long-term, however, deprivation will build and trigger a lagged, yet more radical spur of protest activity. In the end, indiscriminate violent state repression is likely to have both a negative 'instantaneous effect' on protest activity and a positive 'lagged effect' on armed rebellion.

> *H3.2: Armed rebellion is more likely – at least in the medium- and long term – if members of marginalised ethnic groups suffer indiscriminate violent repression.*

2.1.2 International support

A second key aspect of the broader political opportunity structure is the availability of international support. The latter has long been a prominent theme in the different strands of literature on violent conflict. In the literature on social revolutions, Skocpol (1979, 19ff.) argued already decades ago that transnational relations are an important driver behind social social-revolutionary crises. In the literature on ethnic conflict, Gurr (1993a, 132ff.) pointed to the international diffusion and contagion effect on communal mobilisation and political action. In the civil war literature, finally, scholars have over the past decade paid increasing attention to the international dimensions of domestic conflict (Regan 2000; Saideman 2001; Byman 2005; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Salehyan 2007, 2009).

I propose to distinguish between two kinds of international support. First, representatives of marginalised ethnic groups can hope for financial and material assis-

tance from a broad range of international actors, including foreign governments and diverse non-state actors such as ethnic kin in the diaspora. Such external support helps to compensate for the typically weak domestic financial capabilities of disgruntled ethnic leaders and should therefore facilitate the process of organising armed rebellion. If, by contrast, financial and material assistance from outside is not available, an escalation of sporadic political protest into organised insurgency is rather unlikely.

> *H4.1: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups receive financial and material assistance from foreign governments or other external actors.*

Second, and maybe more importantly, disgruntled ethnic leaders and their followers can hope to be offered external sanctuaries in neighbouring countries, which will provide them with a 'safe haven' and thereby offer an important opportunity for organising rebellion (Salehyan 2007, 2009). This seems particularly crucial in the context of a state with high repressive capacity where the mobilization of organised insurgency should be extremely difficult, if not impossible without external sanctuary.

> *H4.2: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups are offered external sanctuary in a neighbouring country.*

2.2   DIFFERENCES IN GROUP-SPECIFIC ENDOWMENTS

While the broader political opportunity structure should clearly be the main focus of analysis, it is unlikely to predetermine the mobilisational capacity of disgruntled ethnic leaders. Instead, there is reason to also pay attention to differences in group-specific endowments, which have so far been conceptualised in various ways. The classical resource mobilization literature focused on how the resources and organisational capabilities of groups help to explain their potential for collective mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977; Jenkins 1983). One of the main distinctions in this context has been between tangible assets such as money and facilities on the one hand, and intangible assets such as the skills and commitment of movement participants on the other (Freeman 1979). In the literature on ethnic conflict, Gurr (1993a) has emphasized the salience of group identity and the extent of group cohesion and mobilisation. In the civil war literature, finally, many have focused on the geographic concentration of groups (Toft 2003; Weidmann 2009), while Weinstein (2007) proposed to broadly differentiate between the economic and social endowments of rebel movements.

I propose to prioritise what is arguably the key group-specific endowment, namely organisational capacity. Even though a group's organisational capacity will be shaped in important ways by the repressive capacity of the state and the availability of international support (see Figure 1), there should remain sufficient scope for agency.

Organisational capacity

Social entities labelled as ethnic 'groups' are never internally homogenous and externally bounded collective actors with common purposes (see Brubaker 2004). Instead, they are always affected by more or less pronounced internal divisions, which manifest themselves in competing individual and segmental interests. These competing interests can stem from a broad range of sources. In some cases, they reflect deep-seated within-group economic inequalities related to class, i.e. between landlords and peasants. In other cases, they merely result from personal differences between individuals. In any case, inner-group divisions will undermine feelings of group solidarity and hence impair collective mobilization.

The key to overcoming inner-group divisions is strong organisational capacity, i.e. the creation of a dominant political organisation that integrates contending factions and mobilises a substantial number of people by formulating and expressing collective interests. In general, political organisations serve as important 'mobilising structures' (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996), which tie individuals to one another in contexts of repeated interaction and facilitate the operation of shared beliefs, thereby helping to overcome the barriers to collective action. They are the sites of transmitting ideas, coordinating activities and drawing participants into the movement. The formation of dominant political organisations typically requires skilled leadership, which is often provided by so-called 'political entrepreneurs' (Tilly 2003) who not only engage in 'boundary activation' but also specialise in connecting and coordinating competing factions.

I argue that the strength of organisational capacity is important when trying to understand diverging conflict trajectories in a context of ethnic exclusion. The existence of a dominant political organisation that integrates contending factions and mobilises a substantial number of people will make armed rebellion more likely in that it eases inner-group divisions and helps mobilise discontent, coordinate activities and recruit potential rebels. The existence of multiple competing political organisations, by contrast, will seriously impair armed rebellion. Faced with the unresolved collective action problems associated with inner-group divisions, the contending ethnic leaders will be unable to mobilize more than sporadic political protest.

H5: Armed rebellion is more likely if representatives of marginalised ethnic groups dispose of strong organisational capacity.

Altogether, I argue that the mobilisational capacity of disgruntled ethnic leaders will depend on the interplay of three factors, including the repressive capacity of the state, the availability of international support, and group-specific organisational characteristics. In what follows, I will explore this argument through a controlled comparison of Kurds in Turkey (1946-2005) and Kurds in Syria (1970-2005) that can be expected to display the same propensity for armed rebellion, yet display dissimilar behaviour. Even though representatives of both groups have suffered serious political marginalisation, only Kurdish leaders in Turkey have resorted to armed rebellion. This pairwise case study was chosen based on the EPR dataset.[5] The selection criterion was to identify two groups, one of which was peaceful while the other engaged in armed rebellion, despite suffering from similar degrees of ethnic exclusion and displaying comparable group size and GDP per capita.[6]

3. A paired comparison of Kurds in Syria and Turkey

In this section I first show that representatives of both Syrian and Turkish Kurds faced exclusion from executive-level state power, which – together with economic and cultural discrimination – produced similar levels of grievances (3.1). In as second step, I explain why these grievances translated into armed rebellion in Turkey but not in Syria (3.2).

3.1   Similar grievances, yet diverging conflict trajectories

Syrian Kurds (1970-2005)

In Syria, Arab Sunni Muslims are the largest group (62%), followed by the Alawi (12%), Kurds (10%), Christians (10%) and Druze (3%). Significantly, Kurds are the largest *non-Arab* ethnic minority, with their total number estimated at approximately 1.7 million (HRW 2009, 9). The vast majority are Sunni Muslims and speak their own language, Kurmanji (the most common Kurdish dialect that is also spoken in Turkey

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5   See http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/epr.

6   I controlled for GDP per capita since this is the most robust variable in the civil war literature (Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Blattman and Miguel 2010).

and north-eastern Iraq and Iran). Most Syrian Kurds live in Northern Syria along the borders with Iraq and Turkey. The three main areas of concentration include the *Jazira* in the North-East (about 40% of Syria's Kurdish population), the *Ain al-Arab* (*Kobani*) region in the North (about 10%), and the *Kurd Dagh* (Mountain of the Kurds) in the North-West (about 30%). The remainder of Syrian Kurds is settled in urban neighbourhoods around the country, especially in Aleppo and Damascus.

From the early 20th century, a number of political developments caused mounting Arab-Kurdish tensions (McDowall 2000, 467ff.). While the populations designated as Kurds were still segmented, two economically powerful Kurdish *agha* families aligned with the Ottoman authorities in Istanbul and opposed the growing Arab nationalism. The ensuing impression that Kurds were hostile to Arab nationalism was reinforced during the French mandate period (1920-1946) as the French adopted a policy of fostering minority identity to weaken the Sunni Arab majority. When Arab nationalists staged a revolt against French rule in 1925, it was crushed with the assistance of ethnic minorities – mostly Kurds but also Armenians and Circassians – who were greatly overrepresented in the police and military. Moreover, Kurds were allowed to organise politically and permitted to publish in their own language. From the late 1920s, the Aleppo-based Kurdish nationalist movement – *Khoybun* – began to lobby for greater cultural and political autonomy. Even though *Khoybun* was mainly concerned with the situation of Kurds in Turkey (see below), growing Kurdish nationalism nonetheless caused disquiet among Arab nationalists in Syria. The primary area of Arab-Kurdish tension under French rule was the *Jazira* in the North-East (Montgomery 2005, 36). From the 1920s onwards, Arabs in the *Jazira* were increasingly outnumbered and marginalised by Kurdish and Christian migrants who shared a suspicion of Arab nationalists in Damascus with their centralising ambitions. In response, the Arab nationalist government began to encourage Arab migration into the *Jazira* to re-establish the Arab character of the area. This led to clashes between Kurdish and Christian autonomists and local Arab nationalists.

After independence in 1946, the elected Arab government was soon ousted in a succession of military coups. Interestingly, two out of three military rulers between 1949 and 1954 were of Kurdish background, including Husni Za'im and Adib al-Shishakli. This reflected the still strong presence of Kurds in the army (Tejel 2009, 40ff.). As both appointed Kurds into many key positions in and outside the military, Arab nationalists feared the creation of a 'Kurdish Republic'. At the same time, al-Shishakli's rule (1949-1954) witnessed attempts to create a homogenous Arab state. Refusing to openly acknowledge his Kurdish origins, al-Shishakli endorsed chau-

vinistic notions of Arab nationalism and tried to forcibly assimilate the Kurds and other minorities. Following his overthrow in 1954, Syria witnessed a surge in Arab nationalist sentiment in the context of the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR) with Nasser's Egypt (1958-1961) (Montgomery 2005, 41ff.). This led to a distinct anti-Kurdish backlash, most evident in the 1960 crackdown on the nascent Kurdish political movement. In 1961, Syria became the 'Syrian Arab Republic' with pan-Arab nationalism as the official ideology, hence denying recognition of non-Arabs. After the Baath Party came to power in the military coup of 1963, the Kurds began to face even more open hostility. In the 'Hilal report' (1965), the Kurds were described as an 'utterly different' ethnic group that was inherently separatist, hostile to Arabs and a threat to Arab unity. As a consequence, the report listed a draconian twelve-point plan for dealing with the Kurdish peril (see Vanly 1992). In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, an Alawi, came to power in yet another military coup. While Assad generally tried to broaden the support base of the Baath regime, members of the Kurdish community – at least if not assimilated – continued to face political, economic and cultural marginalisation in post-1970 Syria.

First, Kurdish leaders have been excluded from executive-level state power, evident not only in the banning of all Kurdish political parties but also in enduring Kurdish under-representation in government, the ruling party, the civil service and the army. This is not to deny that the Baath regime has repeatedly allowed individual Kurds to reach high positions of state power (MEW 1991, 99; Lowe 2006, 2f.).[7] However, these men command little respect among the Kurdish population, especially in the north, since they are typically 'Arabized' and show little support for Kurdish rights in Syria. The situation is even worse in the security sector. From the late 1950s, high- and middle-ranking Kurdish officers were systematically purged from the army, while military academies and the police force both closed the doors to Kurdish applicants (Tejel 2009, 46). As a result, and in striking contrast to the 1940s and 1950s, virtually no Kurds have had officer status since the 1960s (McDowall 2000, 477). Moreover, and this is clearly among the most pressing grievances, many Kurds have been denied basic citizenship rights. In October 1962, Syrian authorities carried out a special census in *Jazira* whereby as many as 120,000 Kurds, and subsequently their children, were arbitrarily denationalized and registered in official archives as foreigners (Ziadeh 2009, 3). This was meant to re-establish Arab control over what had become the most densely Kurdish-populated area. As a result of the 1962 census, there were

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7   Prominent examples include the former Prime Minister Mahmud Ayubi (1972-1976) and Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaru, the former Grand Mufti of Syria (1964-2004).

about 200,000 foreigners (*ajanib*) in 2008. Also, there were an additional 80,000 concealed Kurds (*maktoumeen*) who were not registered in official records and suffered even greater discrimination than the *ajanib*.

Political exclusion was combined with economic and cultural marginalisation. In economic terms, many Kurds suffered from Baathist land reform that is reported to have expropriated 6,552,700 acres of land from Kurdish farmers, which is about 43% of the total land seized by the government in Syria (Montgomery 2005, 92). A specific component of land reform was to encourage Arabs to resettle in Kurdish-dominated areas (especially in *Jazira*) and to create an 'Arab Belt' that would separate Syria's Kurds from the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq (Gambil 2004; HRW 2009). In 1975, the government resettled 4,000 Arab families in 41 'model farms' that were built on land that had been expropriated from Kurdish owners, either under the guise of land reform or because the owners' citizenship had been withdrawn in 1962. Even though President Assad suspended the 'Arab Belt' in 1976, he allowed Arab settlers to remain on confiscated land and provided them with superior facilities. In cultural terms, key elements of Kurdish identity, such as language[8], publications, music, and celebrations (including the Kurdish New Year festival of *Newruz*) were banned from the 1960s (Montgomery 2005, 96ff.). The government also replaced the names of Kurdish villages, businesses and sites with Arabic ones. Since the early 1990s, Damascus has issued orders forbidding Kurdish parents from officially registering their children with Kurdish names. And even after Bashar al-Asad took over as President from his father in 2000, most restrictions on Kurdish activity remained firmly in place (Lowe 2006, 5).

Turkish Kurds (1946-2005)

In Turkey, the Turkish majority (about 82%) opposes a large Kurdish minority (about 17%) (Sirkeci 2006, 117f.). Turkish Kurds are predominantly Sunni Muslim, though most follow a different school (the Shafi School) than the Sunni Turkish majority (which follows the Hanafi School). They speak primarily Kurdish, in particular the *Kurmanji* and *Zara* dialects, but many also speak Turkish. About 65-70% of the Kurdish population lives in the regions of eastern and southeastern Turkey (Mutlu 1996, 533; Icduygu 1999, 1002). The rest has over time moved to the urban centres of

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8 Interestingly, restrictions on the Kurdish language stand in contrast to Syria's treatment of its other non-Arab minorities, such as the Armenians and Assyrians, who are allowed to have private schools, clubs, and cultural associations, where their respective languages are taught (HRW 2009, 11).

western Turkey, especially to Istanbul but also to the wealthier cities of the Marmara in the North-West, the Aegean to the West, and the southern Mediterranean littoral.

Turkish-Kurdish conflicts go back to the foundations of the Turkish state. After World War I, the defeated Ottoman Empire was forced to accept the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which called for the partitioning of Anatolia along ethnic lines (McDowall 2000, 187ff.; Ergil 2000, 123f.). This gave rise to a national liberation movement, led by Mustafa Kemal. Initially, the Kemalists envisaged a Muslim state, composed of the Turkish and Kurdish remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Kemal pragmatically stressed the unity of Turks and Kurds and explicitly recognised the existence of Kurds, which helped him to gain Kurdish support. Even though Kurdish representatives had been offered the prospect of establishing an independent state under the Treaty of Sèvres, most Kurdish tribes and notables sided with the new Turkish government created in Ankara in 1920 and contributed to the Kemalist victory in 1922. After the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, however, plans for a multiethnic state were soon abandoned. Instead, the new Republic was modelled upon the nation-states of Western Europe and based on the principles of Turkish nationalism, secularism and centralism. Atatürk's model of the nation was not *per se* exclusionary as members of ethnic minorities were 'free' to join the new national community as equal citizens.[9] Yet, this new community was explicitly defined as Turkish, which meant that the existence of other ethnic identities was denied and repressed. This had serious consequences for the Kurdish minority. The Turkish Republic not only denied the Kurds' existence and outlawed all manifestations of Kurdish identity, but also removed all non-assimilated Kurds from positions of state power. Furthermore, the abolition of the Sultanate (1922) and the Caliphate (1924) undermined the role of the traditional Kurdish elite who had derived their legitimacy from these two institutions, i.e. *aghas* as secular leaders, and *shaiks* as religious leaders.

In response to the anti-Kurdish nature of the Turkish state, Kurdish leaders mobilised three revolts during the 1920s and 1930s (McDowall 2000, 192ff.). The Shaik Sa'id rebellion (1925) reflected both disenchantment with the emerging secular institutions of the Kemalist Republic and growing Kurdish nationalism. It was put down with ruthless repression, including mass killings and deportations. The Ihsan Nuri

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9 According to Cornell (2001, 34), '*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene*', the maxim that lies at the heart of Turkish identity, is best translated as 'Happy is whoever says I am Turk', not whoever is a Turk. This shows that the new Turkish nation was defined as one into which individuals, irrespective of ethnicity, would be able to integrate. At the same time, becoming a Turk clearly entailed the suppression of an individual's own ethnic identity and therefore threatened all those who were not prepared to abandon their previous identities.

revolt (1928-1930) was organised through the Syria-based *Khoybun* and represented the first secular nationalist insurgency. It was again brutally repressed, followed by mass deportations of Kurdish villagers and the exiling of *shaiks* and *aghas*. Shaik Sayyed Reza's rebellion in Dersim (1937-1938) was a reaction to a 1934 law that abrogated recognition of Kurdish tribes and their leaders, expropriated all immovable property and foresaw compulsory population transfers. All villages or urban quarters with a Kurdish majority were to be dissolved and their inhabitants distributed in Turkish-speaking areas, the ultimate aim being to extinguish Kurdish identity. These plans provoked violent Kurdish resistance, which was however crushed. Entire villages were depopulated or massacred. Altogether, it is alleged that hundreds of thousands of Kurds died in the context of government repression during the 1920s and 1930s.

After World War II, the electoral defeat of the Kemalist Republican People's Party (RPP) and the rise of the newly formed Democratic Party (DP) provided temporary relief (Entessar 1992, 87f.). Most Kurds voted for the DP and some of them were elected to the Turkish National Assembly and even obtained cabinet seats. Furthermore, the DP allowed exiled Kurdish *aghas* and *shaiks* to return and co-opted them into the new regime. The traditional leaders were allowed to re-assume their authority and in return delivered local votes. Also, the liberal Constitution of 1961 guaranteed more democratic freedoms and thereby allowed for some Kurdish mobilization during the 1960s and 1970s, mainly through the Turkish left (see below). On the whole, however, members of the Kurdish community continued to suffer from harsh political, economic and cultural discrimination in post-1945 Turkey.

To begin with, *unassimilated* Kurds remained excluded from executive-level state power. As a general rule, there was no discrimination against individual Kurds as long as they did not politicise their ethnic identity (Ergil 2000, 126). Accordingly, assimilated Kurds have been active at all levels of political life: they have risen to the ranks of generals and cabinet ministers and even to the Presidency of the Republic, while about one-fourth of the members of Parliament since 1923 have been of Kurdish origin (ibid.). By contrast, Kurdish politicians sensitive to the Kurdish cause were either prevented from reaching positions of influence or quickly sidelined.[10]

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10 One good example in the latter respect would be Dr. Azizoglu – the former leader of the New Turkey Party – who became minister of Health in a RPP-led coalition government in 1962 but was quickly forced to resign by his Kemalist colleagues after he paid particular attention to improving health standards in the Kurdish parts of the country (Entessar 1992, 89). Tellingly, Azizoglu – who was very popular among Kurds – was accused of 'promoting Kurdish ethno-nationalism and separatism' (ibid.).

The marginalisation of Kurdish nationalists became also evident in the systematic repression of Kurdish political organisations. Significantly, all Kurdish political parties founded since the creation of the Turkish Republic have been outlawed and closed down, while their members and leaders were banned from politics, arrested, imprisoned or even killed. During the 1960s and 1970s, Kurdish political organisations proliferated but had to remain underground. The only legal Kurdish organisation, the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (DDKO), was created in 1969 but banned after the 1971 military coup. Even more recently, the Turkish establishment has shown no tolerance towards parties dedicated to the Kurdish cause (Bacik and Coskun 2011, 257). Accordingly, four Kurdish parties have been closed down since the 1990s, including the People's Labor Party (HEP) in 1993, the Democracy Party (DEP) in 1994, the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) in 2003, and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009.

As in Syria, political exclusion was combined with economic and cultural marginalisation. In economic terms, the Kurdish-dominated regions have experienced a clear decline in per capita income relative to the national average since the 1930s (Mutlu 2001, 103). While the Eastern and South-Eastern regions had about 47% and 51% of the per capita income of Marmara region (Turkey's most developed region) in 1935, both regions' per capita income had fallen to about one-fourth the level in Marmara by 1985. Some improvements since the 1990s notwithstanding, the Kurdish regions continue to lag behind. Similar findings have been reported by Icduygu et al. (1999, 1002ff.) who show that the Kurdish population not only suffers from lower per capita income but also from lower access to key social services. In cultural terms, manifestations of Kurdish identity have been suppressed. Most importantly, the Turkish Republic has placed restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language, prohibiting its use in education and broadcast media. Following the 1980 military coup, Kurdish was even formally banned until 1991 (Ergil 2000, 127). Also, the Turkish government has repeatedly suppressed organisations that promote Kurdish culture, 'Turkified' the names of Kurdish towns and villages, and prevented parents from giving Kurdish names to their children. More recently, the climate for Kurds has slightly improved, especially since 2003 when the prospect of EU membership began to take shape. As a result, restrictions on instructing and broadcasting in Kurdish have been eased and the word 'Kurd' is no longer taboo in Turkey, with open calls to recognise the 'Kurdish reality' (ibid.: 130). At the same time, the current Prime Minister Erdogan has delayed plans to reform his country's relationship with the Kurdish minority as recent draft legislation to revise Turkey's Constitution did not

include any changes to the articles limiting Kurdish freedoms and identity (Marcus 2010).

The puzzle of diverging conflict trajectories

The Kurdish minorities in Turkey and Syria faced strikingly similar degrees of political, economic and cultural discrimination. Yet, this led to rebellion only in Turkish Kurdistan where Ocalan's PKK took up arms against the government in 1984. Combining Kurdish nationalism with Marxist-Leninist ideology, the PKK engaged in guerrilla activity in the Kurdish provinces of the South-East, seeking the creation of an independent Kurdistan. To date, this civil war has allegedly claimed close to 40,000 lives, destroyed thousands of villages and displaced millions of people (Bacik and Coskun 2011, 249). In 1999, Ocalan's arrest in Kenya was a major blow to the PKK and its activism declined. Yet from 2002, the PKK managed to reactivate itself and resumed regular anti-government attacks (Marcus 2010).

Disgruntled ethnic leaders in Syria, by contrast, did not take up arms against the government. During the 1980s and 1990s, there were sporadic political protests, often on significant days such as Newruz or the anniversary of the 1962 census (Lowe 2006, 4ff.). More serious were the riots of 2004 and 2005 (see also Tejel 2009; HRW 2009). The trouble began at a football match in Qamishli in *Jazira* on 12 March 2004 when hostilities between Kurdish and Arab supporters ended with the security forces killing at least seven Kurds. This was followed by further Kurdish fatalities and injuries at their funerals. Thousands demonstrated and rioted in Qamishli and in other Kurdish areas across Syria. After the protests were put down, unrest flared up again in May 2005 after the murder of Shaik Ma'shuq Khaznawi, a respected religious leader of Kurdish background disappeared and died under unknown circumstances. Yet, Kurdish protest in Syria did not escalate into armed rebellion.

3.2   *Explaining diverging conflict trajectories*

What explains the diverging conflict trajectories of Kurds in Syria and Turkey? To find answers to this question, I apply the theoretical framework laid out in section 2.

3.2.1 *The political opportunity structure*

Political opportunity factors are crucial to resolving the described puzzle. While the political mobilisation of Kurdish leaders in Syria was smothered by the extremely high repressive capacity of the Assad regime and the total lack of international sup-

port, the PKK rebellion in Turkey was facilitated by the state's weakened repressive capacity during the second half of the 1970s and the availability of ample external support from the early 1980s.

3.2.1.1 The repressive capacity of the state

The Assad regime has always disposed of a large and well-equipped military, which is a formidable instrument of control and a major bulwark of regime power (Hinnebusch 1990, 162f.). Yet, the existence of a large military *per se* can hardly resolve the puzzle since Turkey's security forces have always been similarly large and well-equipped. Significantly, the PKK rebellion emerged at a time when the army was among the largest in the world, widely considered professional and disciplined, and received substantial aid and modern equipment from Europe, Israel and the United States (Romano 2006, 53f.). Instead, Syria's higher repressive capacity manifested itself in few elite divisions, strong territorial control, and consistent non-violent repression combined with selective violence, which left Kurdish leaders with very little room to organise political protest, let alone armed rebellion. By contrast, the de facto repressive capacity of the Turkish was limited, in particular during the 1970s when extreme elite divisions, low territorial control and inconsistent non-violent repression combined with semi-indiscriminate violence provided Ocalan and his followers with a unique 'window of opportunity' to organise.

Syrian Kurds

A first aspect of the high repressive capacity of the Syrian state between 1970 and 2005 was relatively *few elite divisions*. After the 1970 coup, Hafez al-Assad made efforts to broaden the support base of his regime (Hinnebusch 1990, 144ff.). While the President's inner circle was dominated by fellow Alawi army officers (see also Batatu 1981; van Dam 1996), he avoided accusations of sectarianism by incorporating the Sunni majority – especially Damascenes – and other minorities into party, government and the civil service. As a result, the narrow Alawi power core was always combined with a 'broad, cross-sectarian strategy of coalition building' (Heydemann 1999, 3). Also, a broad range of social interests were given a stake in the regime, including the army, the business community, the salaried middle class, peasants and workers. This was made possible in the context of a steadily growing state apparatus, which was financed by oil revenue and Arab aid. Particularly important with a view to minimising elite divisions was the civil-military integration. Between 1946 and 1970, the country had experienced a seemingly never-ending cycle of military takeovers. After

1970, Assad managed to transform the military from a system-challenging force into a pillar of the state (Hinnebusch 1990, 158ff.). Army, party apparatus and civil service were integrated and made mutually dependent whereby the regime became a 'military-civil coalition' – a situation that put an end to military coups. The only serious exception to this process of elite accommodation was the government's failure to build support among the landed elite and the merchant and religious families, especially from northern cities (ibid.: 152). This favoured the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and culminated in the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood during the early 1980s when thousands of dissidents were killed, especially in the context of the 1982 Hama massacre (see Batatu 1988).

The relative absence of elite divisions undermined Kurdish mobilisation in different ways. First, and as hypothesised, high levels of elite unity made the regime look strong in the eyes of disgruntled Kurdish leaders. More specifically, systematic civil-military integration meant that would-be rebels always knew that insurgent activities were likely to meet a firm and united response. This arguably created a disincentive for armed rebellion, especially after the uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood had been ruthlessly crushed. Second, as shown below, elite integration – in particular civil-military integration – had also a more indirect effect on the prospects of Kurdish mobilisation in that it facilitated high territorial control and effective state repression. Finally, one could argue that the process of elite accommodation deprived Kurdish activists of potential elite allies. Yet, in the light of the regime's conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood such an argument has at best limited explanatory power.

A second and closely related driver behind the high repressive capacity was the government's ability to exercise *strong territorial control*, which was based on the army's security and intelligence agencies on the one hand, and the Baath party apparatus on the other. After coming to power in 1963, the Baathist regime relied on the army's security and intelligence agencies (*mukhabarat*) to consolidate its rule (MEW 1991, 38ff.). After the 1970 coup, President Assad even enlarged the intelligence services and brought their chiefs into the inner councils of the state. This gave rise to a security system built on three key pillars, including the traditional *mukhabarat* (Political Security and Military Intelligence), the newer praetorian units (Special Force, Defence Brigades, and Presidential Guard), and special political military units (most notably, the Third Armoured Division). These multiple security forces were given extraordinary competences and became simply ubiquitous, with tens of thousands of spies in all corners of the country. Some were paid as full-time employees, while many others were part-time employees or paid occasionally. Again others were simply

expected to gather information by virtue of their jobs in the public and even private sector. Beyond the security services, the apparatus of the ruling party was turned into an important instrument of control by anchoring it throughout the entire territory and endowing it with considerable policing and intelligence functions (MEW 1991, 32; Hinnebusch 1990, 166ff.). In general, every party member was expected to pass along information to party superiors. This system, which was larger than the most powerful security agencies, allowed the party to monitor hundreds of organisations and thousands of small towns and villages and gather information about opposition and dissent.

The countrywide system of pervasive surveillance based on the *mukhabarat* and the Baath party apparatus gave rise to a society riddled with informers, which allowed the Assad government to exercise extremely high levels of territorial control. Almost needless to say, this made dissident political organisation inside Syria extremely difficult and dangerous. Accordingly, subversive political activities either did not take place reflecting the fear that people had of the security services or were detected at a very early stage. In the case of the Kurds, the omnipresent intelligence services repeatedly managed to infiltrate Kurdish political parties, caused dissent within them and thereby scotched Kurdish political mobilization (Montgomery 2005, 115; Gambil 2004).

A third key aspect of high repressive capacity was the government's strategy to rely on *consistent non-violent repression combined with selective violence* to counter Kurdish mobilisation. The most serious crackdown on the Kurdish movement had already occurred in 1960 when more than 5,000 members and sympathisers of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) were arrested and interrogated, while its main leaders were accused of separatism and imprisoned (Tejel 2009, 49). After Assad took over in 1970, the quasi-permanent state of emergency, which was declared in 1962 and abolished only in 2011, became the key instrument for anti-Kurdish measures, and for the country's repressive system more generally. This emergency law gave the President extraordinary judicial powers, including the right to suppress opposition, restrict freedom of assembly and movement, conduct preventive arrests, censor media, and confiscate property (Montgomery 2005, 65f.). Significantly, these powers were consistently used to undermine any sign of Kurdish mobilisation. In 1973, for example, security forces arrested twelve KDPS leaders shortly after they had addressed a memorandum to the President protesting the living conditions of stateless Syrian Kurds (Tejel 2009, 63). Moreover, Kurdish public protests were rou-

tinely met with bans and arrests. More violent forms of repression – mainly torture in prison and police violence at demonstrations – were used whenever necessary but remained mostly selective in nature, which means that they were targeted at key political activists rather than at the Kurdish population as a whole. At the same time, as the 1982 Hama massacre shows, there was always the *threat* of massive indiscriminate repression against potential challengers. While such indiscriminate violence was, in contrast to Turkey, never applied to Kurds, the Syrian government's determination to use less targeted forms of repression became evident in its crackdown on the 2004 Qamishli riots when at least 36 Kurds were killed, 160 injured, and more than 2,000 detained (HRW 2009, 15).

In the end, the employed coercive strategies turned out to be a very effective mix to minimise Kurdish mobilisation. First, and as hypothesised, the consistent use of non-violent means of repression crippled the organisational basis of the Kurdish movement, which had already been severely weakened during the 1960 crackdown. Second, the use of selective rather than indiscriminate violence allowed the government to contain key political activists without radicalising more moderate or apathetic elements within the Kurdish community. Finally, there was always the threat of massive repression by omnipresent security forces, which – especially after the Hama massacre – was probably enough to intimidate Kurdish leaders.

Turkish Kurds

The repressive capacity of the Turkish state could not match that of its Syrian counterpart, especially during the second half of the 1970s. A first reason for this was that post-1945-Turkey came to exhibit *extreme elite divisions*. The advent of multi-party politics and the electoral defeat of the Kemalist RPP in 1950 introduced an enduring split between state elites on the one hand, and political elites on the other (Romano 2006, 40ff.). The former comprise military and bureaucratic elites and are mainly concerned with protecting the Kemalist legacy of secularism, Turkish nationalism, statism, and a western orientation. The latter include the political party leadership that wants to gain political power and thus tends to pursue whatever political strategy that helps to maximise votes. Most problematically, these elite divisions resulted in recurrent civil-military tensions. Whereas the political and military elite was largely congruent before 1945, this changed with the rise of the DP in 1950 (see Jenkins 2007; Tachau and Heper 1983). Ever since then, civilian governments have been unable to control the military, which has continued to regard itself as the guarantor of domestic stability and the guardian of Kemalism. This has become

strikingly evident in the three military coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980 and the quasi-coup of 1997. To make matters worse, the Turkish political elite entered a process of chronic splintering and instability during the Second Republic (1960-1980). This was not least linked to the liberal 1960 Constitution that provided some opening for the growth of civil society and leftist opposition organisations. The instability of multi-party politics escalated during the 1970s with no less than ten short-term coalition governments between 1973 and 1980, which were paralysed by deep-seated ideological divisions between leftist and rightist parties and were barely functional (Marcus 2007, 49f.). At the same time, political divisions began to seep into the bureaucracy, the trade unions and even the security services.

Escalating elite divisions during the 1960s and especially the 1970s facilitated Kurdish mobilisation in different ways. First, the persistence of fundamental elite divisions – especially between political and military elites – sent a clear sign of regime vulnerability, which arguably served as a source of encouragement for would-be rebels. Second, the absence of elite integration effectively paralysed the various short-lived coalition governments during the second half of the 1970s and hence severely constrained their ability to exercise territorial control and implement repressive measures (see below for details). Finally, growing elite divisions initially provided Kurdish activists with like-minded allies, in particular from the Turkish leftist movement, which had important initiation and socialisation effects (Marcus 2007, 25). Yet, Kurdish activists, including Ocalan's PKK, soon broke with the Turkish Left whereby Kurdish mobilisation proceeded without the support of elite allies.

A second and closely related aspect of the state's limited repressive capacity was *low territorial control*. First, and this has rarely been recognised, territorial control was constrained by absence of a ruling party with territory-wide presence: the return of multi-party politics and the increasing fragmentation of the Turkish party system effectively deprived subsequent governments in post-1945 Turkey of a strong party machinery, which could have been used to monitor political dissent. Second, and more importantly, the Turkish security forces also exhibited a limited territorial presence, especially until the 1980s. The outposts of the military were all in the big cities or near the main roads, not in the mountainous terrain of Central Kurdistan (Marcus 2007, 86). Similarly, the secret services, in particular the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), were hardly capable of penetrating and surveying the entire territory due to a combination of low budgets, insufficient personnel and inefficient management structures (Bese 2006; Ünlü 2006). The territorial presence of the security forces improved only *after* the start of the PKK rebellion in the mid-1980s when

the army began to establish itself in the areas under insurgency (Marcus 2007, 97). Moreover, the intelligence apparatus was made more effective through the creation of the Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation (JITEM) (Bese 2006). Telling, JITEM's relative 'success' seems to have been based on the establishment of stations in even the smallest residential areas.

The limited territorial presence of the regime's political and coercive apparatus was highly conducive to Kurdish mobilisation. As the gathered information on dissident Kurdish activities during the second half of the 1970s remained incomplete and contradictory (Gunter 1990, 80), Kurdish activists had – at least until the 1980 military coup – the option of retreating into areas where they could organise at relatively low risk. In this context, it is certainly no coincidence that the PKK rebels chose to operate in the rugged terrain of Central Kurdistan (Hakkari, Van, and Siirt) where the government's reach was even weaker than in north-west Kurdistan (ibid.: 75).

A third key aspect of limited repressive capacity was that subsequent governments came to rely on *inconsistent non-violent repression combined with semi-indiscriminate violence* to counter Kurdish political mobilization. Non-violent repression was inconsistent in that it was only erratically applied, especially during the Second Republic. Initially, the liberal 1961 Constitution permitted freedom of thought, expression, association, and publication, which for the first time gave Kurdish activists an opportunity to organise, albeit almost exclusively through the organisations of the Turkish left since bans on the open expression of Kurdish identity remained in place (McDowall 2000, 405ff.). After the 1971 military coup, non-violent repression increased considerably, evident in the introduction of martial law and thousands of arrests across Kurdistan. Yet, this crackdown on the Kurdish movement did not last very long. After the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1974, elite divisions paralysed subsequent coalition governments, which meant that existing restrictions on Kurdish political activity were barely implemented and the proliferating Kurdish underground parties, including the PKK, were able to operate with increasing impunity (Marcus 2007, 49f.). After the 1980 coup, non-violent repression again abruptly increased, with the re-introduction of martial law and about 81,000 arrests in Kurdistan until 1982 (McDowall 2000, 413f.). Significantly, inconsistent patterns of non-violent repression went along with semi-indiscriminate violence, especially in the wake of the military coups. After the 1971 coup, for example, Kurds suffered considerable violence, most evident in sustained attacks on Kurdish villages (Entessar 1992, 89f.). Things got even worse after the 1980 coup when the military government not only arrested tens of thousands of Kurds but also subjected many of them to

routine torture in prison (Romano 2006, 78ff.). Moreover, the army forcefully occu-pied hotbeds of dissent, allegedly destroying over 4000 Kurdish villages.

In the end, anti-Kurdish repression proved rather ineffective. On the one hand, the inconsistent nature of non-violent repression during the Second Republic failed to undermine the organisational basis of the nascent rebel movement and repeatedly provided Kurdish activists with de facto 'breathing room' to re-organise (Marcus 2007, 49f.). On the other hand, the massive violent repression after the 1980 coup did not have the desired effects (Romano 2006, 78ff.). In the short term, it proved quite effective by breaking the great majority of Kurdish opposition groups whose members were either killed, arrested or forced out of the country. In the medium-und long-term, however, it provide counter-productive in that the victims of state violence were not mainly Kurdish activists but rather villagers who had never been involved in political activities – a situation that helped to radicalise the previously moderate and created an environment receptive to revenge. In the end, the army's inability to channel violence more selectively meant that the PKK gained increasing popular support. Having experienced brutal repression, even the larger masses came to a sympathetic understanding of radical groups like the PKK (Bacik and Coskun 2011, 252).

3.2.1.2 International support

Syrian and Turkish Kurds did not only confront states with varying repressive capa-cities but also received strikingly dissimilar levels of international support. While Kurdish protest in Syria was long externally discouraged, Kurdish mobilisation in Turkey greatly benefitted from ample international support.

Syrian Kurds

Kurdish activists in Syria did not, at least until the late 1990s, receive any substantial international support, neither in form of financial or material assistance, nor in form of external sanctuary in a neighbouring country. Instead, Kurdish political mobilisa-tion in Syria was for a long time even actively discouraged by outside actors.

Who was behind this external discouragement? Surprisingly, the Kurdish move-ment in Syria was long actively undermined by Kurdish leaders in neighbouring countries. The main reason for this puzzling situation was that the Assad regime– in striking contrast to the repression of its own Kurds – supported Kurdish separatist groups in Iraq and Turkey and in return asked these groups not to support their ethnic brethren in Syria. From the early 1970s, Syria provided a safe haven for Iraqi

Kurds, particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani (Tejel 2009, 71ff.). In 1979, the Assad Government also formalised relations with Mustafa Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the PUK's main rival in Iraqi Kurdistan. During the 1980s, the Syrian regime not only turned a blind eye to the recruitment of hundreds of Syrian Kurds to fight for rebel groups in Iraq but also successfully supported the PUK-KDP reconciliation of 1987. In return for Syrian support, the two main Kurdish parties of Iraq actively discouraged Syrian Kurds from mobilising against Assad (see also Gambil 2004). Even more importantly, the Syrian government also backed the PKK against Turkey by providing its guerrillas with shelter, arms and training during the 1980s and 1990s (see below for details), while always making clear to the PKK that it could not agitate on behalf of Syrian Kurds. This had very serious implications for Kurdish political mobilization in Syria (Tejel 2009, 78; Gambil 2004). After relocating to Damascus, PKK leader Ocalan publicly condemned the fight for Kurdish rights in Syria and on several occasions repeated the Assad regime's claim that most Syrian Kurds are refugees from Turkey. Moreover, the PKK even engaged in incursions against Kurdish political parties in Syria, especially against the KDPS. The PPK's alliance with the Assad regime also had repercussions in the large Kurdish Diaspora in Europe where Syrian Kurdish activists were often perceived as a threat to the PKK and therefore received with hostility.

In the end, the external discouragement by Kurdish leaders in Iraq, Turkey and the diaspora must be regarded a very important factor when trying to explain the absence of sustained Kurdish protest and mobilization in Syria. The importance of the 'external factor' is further underlined when accounting for the effects of recent changes in regional dynamics. First, the below-discussed 1998 security agreement between Syria and Turkey meant that Ocalan and his PKK were expelled from Syria and no longer saw a need to stifle Kurdish activism in what was no longer a safe haven (Ziadeh 2009, 7). Second, Syria's staunch opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 created direct conflict between the Assad regime and Kurdish leaders in Iraq who not only welcomed the coalition forces but even provided logistical and field assistance. At the same time, the new political autonomy accorded to Iraqi Kurds was seen as an encouragement by Kurdish leaders in Syria and increased their own political mobilization. The occurrence and timing of the Qamishli riots was therefore not least linked to the changed regional constellation. Even though external actors did not directly instigate any of the rioting, the uprising was clearly encouraged by Kurdish leaders outside of Syria, evident in the fact that both the KDP and the

PUK allowed thousands of demonstrators to hold anti-Syrian protests in territory under their control (Gambil 2004). Moreover, and in sharp contrast to the past, the Kurdish diaspora rallied to help their Syrian brethren, with major demonstrations in Washington and across Europe.

Turkish Kurds

Kurdish activists in Turkey, by contrast, benefitted from ample external support. The most important support came from Syria. In July 1979, Ocalan realised that mounting state repression was becoming a danger to his group and fled across the border into Syria where he was later joined by his supporters (Marcus 2007, 48ff.). The decision to leave the country gave the PKK a huge advantage: whereas many of the Kurdish groups that stayed in Turkey were crushed, Ocalan saved himself and his organisation, giving him a head start when it came to competing with other groups after the 1980 coup.[11] In the beginning, Syrian support was only tacit as Ocalan had few contacts and thus failed to acquire direct support. Instead, he made his way to Syria-controlled Lebanon where he managed to convince a number of Palestinian organisations to train his group in the mainstays of guerrilla war – an arrangement that was tolerated by the Syrian intelligence services. Significantly, the Palestinians were impressed with the PKK that was considered as reliable, disciplined and united. This set it apart from many other Turkish and Kurdish leftist groups that had also fled to Syria after the 1980 coup. From 1985, Syria began to provide the insurgents with more open military, financial, and logistic support, which continued even after Syria signed a security cooperation protocol with Turkey (ibid.: 99f.). The PKK now had offices in Damascus and many other Syrian cities, while Ocalan acquired a villa in Damascus and enjoyed the protection of bodyguards from the state. In the 1990s, the Baathist regime even encouraged Syrian Kurds to join the PKK's ranks by forcing Kurdish tribal leaders to fill a 'quota' of recruits (Gambil 2004). As a result, Syrian Kurds comprised over 25% of the PKK's fighters by the mid-1990s. Syrian support for the PKK reflected not only the regime's desire to contain its own Kurdish minority but also enduing animosities concerning the Turkish annexation of the Hatay province in 1939 and conflicts over the sharing of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates.

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11 Ocalan later stated: 'the others could only get out two years after me, after they had already lost their organisation (…). Because I got out before Sep. 12 [the day of the 1980 coup], I could both save hundreds of my comrades and get them trained' (cited after Marcus 2007, 62).

While Syria was a good place for taking refuge, it was not appropriate for launching attacks, especially since the terrain between Turkey and Syria was too flat and Damascus did not want the PKK to fight from its territory (Marcus 2007, 68ff.). By contrast, Northern Iraq was very suitable for launching a guerrilla war since the mountainous Turkish-Iraqi border was near impossible to control and both the KDP and PUK controlled parts of the border area. The ambition to build a base in Northern Iraq was realised in 1982 when Ocalan reached a deal with Massoud Barzani to allow the PKK to use the border territory controlled by the KDP. This agreement was at least as important as ties with Syria in that it allowed the rebels to launch a war inside Turkey from permanent bases in Northern Iraq – a plan that was realised from early 1984. When Barzani abandoned the agreement in 1987 due to Turkish pressure, the PKK was already too entrenched and could no longer be easily dislodged.

Beyond support from Syria and Iraq, the PKK insurgency was also facilitated by the support of the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe. The decision to boost organisational operations was taken as early as mid-1981 when five senior militants were sent to Europe to collect money and recruit cadres (ibid.: 65f.). The initial organising work took mainly place in Germany – the country with the largest Kurdish diaspora – but also in Holland, Sweden and France. By the mid-1990s, the annual PKK income in Europe was estimated at between $200-500 million (Radu 2001, 54f.). This income came from two major sources. First, there were voluntary contributions and donations from European Kurdish militants. In Germany alone, the PKK had at least 11,000 sympathisers in 1997 and collected millions of Deutschmarks at its annual fundraising events. Second, the PKK has financed itself through criminal activity across Europe, including theft, extortion, arms trade, human smuggling, and drug trafficking.

On the whole, international support – in particular from Syria – must be regarded as a (if not *the*) key factor in the genesis of the PKK rebellion. Without this support, Ocalan's rebel group would have hardly survived, not least since it found itself in a precarious position in post-1980 Turkey where the military coup had put an end to the extreme elite divisions of the 1970s, the state's territorial control began to increase, and Kurdish activists, sympathisers and villagers alike faced fierce repression. In fact, there were clear signs that the PKK was falling apart as massive arrests had cut avenues for action and deprived the group of many capable and charismatic members (Marcus 2007, 52). In this situation, Ocalan's group was saved by international support. The importance of the 'external factor' is emphasised when considering more recent changes in the rebel's external support base. In 1998, having lost

its patience with the Assad regime, Turkey massed 10,000 troops on Syria's northern border and demanded that it expel the PKK and hand over Ocalan (McDowall 2000, 442f.). Faced with the prospect of invasion by the stronger Turkish army that enjoyed Israeli support, Syria brought PKK activity to a halt and signed a 'mutual security' agreement with Turkey. After Ocalan had to leave the country, he was ultimately captured in Kenya and brought to a Turkish prison in February 1999. Significantly, the unravelling of the PKK's external support base led to a serious decline in activism.

3.2.2 Group-specific endowments

Group-specific endowments are clearly less important as an explanatory factor. Even though Kurdish leaders in Syria disposed of lower organisational capacity than Ocalan and his followers in Turkey, these differences were largely endogenous to the described variation in the repressive capacity of the state and the availability of international support.

<u>Syrian Kurds</u>

The Kurdish community in Syria has long been characterised by pronounced inner-group divisions. Until the advent of contemporary Syria, there was hardly any national Kurdish identity in Syria (Tejel 2009, 9). Instead, Kurdish groups mainly defined themselves in tribal terms, which was clearly the dominant social cleavage in the countryside. This gave rise to enduring conflicts between competing tribes and their secular (*aghas*) and religious leaders (*shaiks*). While aghas and shaiks exercised considerable social control over the Kurdish population in rural areas, they held less sway over a small group of urbanised and westernised Kurdish intellectuals. The latter dominated the nationalist *Khoybun* League and worked to strengthen a national Kurdish identity. From the 1940s, the nationalists began to face stiff competition in the cities from communists (ibid.: 39ff.). In a context of increasingly mechanised agriculture and abuses by large landowners, many young Kurds moved to the urban centres and often joined the Syrian Communist Party (SCP), hoping to realise Kurdish ambitions through the nascent communist movement. Accordingly, the SCP, which was led by a Kurd, Khalid Bakdash, became informally known as the 'Kurdish Party' in the North. Social and ideological divisions between the traditional elite, the nationalists and the communists were further complicated by the existence of a non-negligible number of Arab nationalists of Kurdish background who vigorously advocated Kurdish assimilation.

These divisions were never fully overcome. Under French rule, Kurdish intellectuals in the *Khoybun* League performed the role of Tilly's 'political entrepreneurs' by trying to activate national Kurdish consciousness. The Badirkhan brothers, for example, engaged in various activities from the 1930s to restore the Kurdish language, develop education in Kurdish, and revive popular Kurdish literature (Tejel 2009, 21f.). The westernised intelligentsia also sought to connect distinct Kurdish groups by allying with representatives of the traditional Kurdish elite. As a result, intellectuals, *aghas* and *shaiks* came together within the *Khoybun*. The connection of competing segments continued from the mid-1950s when growing Arab nationalism and the realisation that the Communists would not officially defend Kurdish rights created the need for a Kurdish nationalist party (ibid.: 48f.). Accordingly, leaders such as Nur al-Din Zaza and Uthman Sabri founded the KDPS in 1957, which brought together former *Khoybun* members and former SCP militants. The initially broad-based KDPS called for the recognition of Kurdish rights and managed to recruit some 30,000 members. This early success was however short-lived (ibid.: 86f.). By the mid-1960s, the KDPS leadership was deeply divided between 'leftist' and 'rightist' factions, representing former SCP cadres, students and teachers on the one hand, and notables, landowners and religious leaders on the other. Attempts for re-unification during the 1970s failed and the KDPS entered a process of chronic splintering. The result was a growing number of small Kurdish parties who are typically personalised, often have no more than between 10 and 25 members, and enjoy very little support among the Kurdish population. In 2009, there were at least 14 unlicensed Kurdish splinter parties in Syria (HRW 2009, 14).

Altogether, the Kurdish community in Syria lacked organisational capacity, evident in the failure to build and maintain a dominant political organisation that integrates contending factions and mobilises a substantial number of people. Yet, this can only very partially be blamed on Syrian Kurdish leaders. Instead, the described lack in organisational capacity was largely endogenous to the high repressive capacity of the Syrian state and the total lack of international support. Significantly, the chronic splintering of Kurdish political organisation started after the above-discussed 1960 crackdown on the KDPS, from which the nascent movement never fully recovered (Tejel 2009, 49). Afterwards, the Kurdish organisational capacity was further debilitated not only by the regime's high territorial control and effective repressive measures but also by the hostile stance of Kurdish leaders in Turkey, Iraq and Europe. In the end, the low organisational capacity of the Kurdish community in Syria is therefore first and foremost a product of a very unfavourable political opportunity structure.

Turkish Kurds

Turkish Kurds have long been characterised by inner-group divisions, which are similar to those that affect the Kurdish community in Syria. Upon the creation of the Kemalist state, Kurdish groups still mainly defined themselves in tribal terms, which became evident in enduring rivalries between competing tribes and their leaders. While traditional leaders were severely weakened during the massive repression and forced displacements of the 1930s, their authority was restored from the 1950s when the DP co-opted them into the system. This re-entrenched tribal divisions in the Kurdish countryside. At the same time, the revival of *shaiks* and *aghas* was accompanied by mounting class divisions. The mechanisation of agriculture – especially the large-scale introduction of tractors – favoured land accumulation in the hands of the Kurdish traditional elite whereby the exploitation of the peasantry intensified (McDowall 2000, 399ff.). The net result of this process was that hundreds of thousands of Kurds abandoned their land and migrated to urban areas. In the cities, the migrants became more aware of West-East economic disparities and anti-Kurdish discrimination and therefore 'discovered' their Kurdish identity (Entessar 1992, 89f.; Marcus 2007, 18ff.). In a context of improved access to education, this favoured the rise of both nationalist and socialist thinking and the proliferation of leftist groups from the late 1960s, who were typically at odds with the traditional Kurdish elite. Social and ideological divisions among Turkish Kurds were further complicated by the existence of a sizable number of assimilated Kurds who preferred not to politicise their ethnicity.

As in Syria, inner-group divisions hampered Kurdish political organisation. During the 1960s, many of the newly educated and urbanised Kurds joined the Turkish Workers Party (TIP) or other Turkish leftist organisations such as Dev Genc (Revolutionary Youth) or the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Union (DISK) (McDowall 2000, 405ff.). Yet, as the Turkish left proved hesitant to tackle the Kurdish question, Kurds soon began to form their own organisations. The clandestine Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (TKDP) was created in 1965 but enjoyed little support due to its conservative orientation. More influential were Kurdish cultural clubs, the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (DDKO), which were created from the late 1960s but soon undermined by divisions between a left and right wing. Ideological and personal divisions intensified throughout the 1970s and resulted in the proliferation of Kurdish left-wing organisations (Romano 2006, 46f.).[12] The lat-

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12 These included – among others – Sivancilar (1972), the Revolutionary Democratic Culture Association (DDKD) (1975), Bes Parcacilar (1976), Kawa (1976), Denge Kawa (1977),

ter had typically no more than 50-100 members and their support base was confined to minor territorial bases in the cities or countryside.

Ocalan's PKK, which was formally established in 1978, was no different at first sight. Ocalan was a political science student in Ankara who had developed some lose links with Dev Genc but soon realised that the Turkish left was unlikely to really tackle the Kurdish problem (Marcus 2007, 21ff.). As a result, Ocalan and about 15 others decided to give up university in 1975 and henceforth focused on forming a Marxist-Leninist group that would fight for an independent Kurdish state. The fusion of Marxism-Leninism with Kurdish nationalism was typical for many Kurdish left-wing groups at the time, yet Ocalan's approach would develop more appeal. Significantly, and against my hypothesis, this success was not based on the connection and coordination of competing Kurdish groups. Instead, the PKK struggle was explicitly constructed *against* other Kurdish groups. First, competing Kurdish leftist groups were not only rejected as collaborators and revisionists but even subjected to organised and often deadly attacks. Second, and more importantly, the PKK identified the Kurdish landlords and tribal leaders as the main enemies, blaming them for allying with the Turkish state and exploiting their own people.[13] Even though other Kurdish leftist were equally opposed to the state-allied landlords, only the PKK was prepared to take decisive action. In 1975, Ocalan's core group withdrew to the Kurdish South-East and concentrated on recruitment in those areas from which they themselves originated. The group began to gain more substantial support from 1978 when it killed the leader of the Suleymanlar tribe, Mehmet Baysal – an event that was followed by a series of attacks against large tribal leaders. This strategy was shrewd in that it tapped into growing resentment towards the *aghas* and appealed to all those who suffered from the traditional Kurdish social structures. Moreover, the aggressiveness of the PKK and its preparedness to endure own losses distinguished it from leftist rivals and earned it credibility among the peasantry. The net result was a growing rebel movement that was almost exclusively drawn from the modestly-educated village youth who had themselves experienced oppression and therefore wanted action, not ideological sophistication. This movement was held together by

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    Rizgari (1977), Red Kawa (1978), the Kurdistan National Liberationists (KUK) (1978), TEKOSIN (1978), Ala Rizgari (1979), YEKBUN (1979), and the Kurdistan Socialist Movement (TSK) (1980). See also Gunter (1990, 63ff.).

13 Ocalan himself originated from a poor, remote Kurdish village and had therefore himself experienced the domination of the landlords (Marcus 2007, 15). The same was true for many of his closest allies. Supporters would typically make much of the fact that their leaders came from as depressed surroundings as their followers.

a hierarchical and authoritarian organisational structure, organised around Ocalan who was both loved and feared by his supporters. Every sign of internal dissent was repressed, often by violent means, which helped the PKK avoid the ideological splits that weakened other Kurdish organisations.

In the end, Ocalan's rebel movement came to dispose of considerable organisational capacity. Even though the PKK was built against competing Kurdish factions (rather than integrating them), it over time became the dominant Kurdish organisation that would over the years recruit around 50,000 cadres, guerrilla fighters and other active members (Romano 2006, 95f.). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that this organisational capacity was mostly endogenous to the weakened repressive capacity of the Turkish state during the second half of the 1970s and the availability of international support from the 1980s. This is not to deny that Ocalan was able – in sharp contrast to the leaders of other Kurdish organisations in Turkey – to make use of this favourable political opportunity structure. Yet, it seems safe to assume that the PPK would have suffered the same fate as the Kurdish groups in Syria had it not first benefitted from the weakness of the Turkish state during the 1970s and later been saved by international support.

4. Conclusion

This paper has raised the question of why representatives of some politically marginalised ethnic groups resort to armed rebellion, while others remain peaceful. To find answers to this question, the paper first developed a theoretical framework that relates the mobilisational capacity of disgruntled ethnic leaders to the dynamic interplay of three factors, including the repressive capacity of the state, the availability of international support, and group-specific organisational capacity. In a second step, it used this framework to investigate the diverging conflict trajectories of Kurds in Turkey (1946-2005) and Kurds in Syria (1970-2005). Even though the leadership of both groups has suffered political marginalisation, this led to armed rebellion only in Turkish Kurdistan, where Ocalan's PKK took up arms against the government in 1984. The paired comparison showed that these diverging conflict trajectories mainly reflect differences in the broader political opportunity structure. While the political mobilisation of Syrian Kurds was smothered by the extremely high repressive capacity of the Assad regime and the total lack of international support, the PKK rebellion in Turkey was facilitated by both the state's weakened repressive capacity during

the second half of the 1970s and the availability of ample external support from the early 1980s. Differences in group-specific organisational capacity, by contrast, are clearly less important as an explanatory factor. Even though the PKK displayed higher organisational capacity than Kurdish organisations in Syria, these differences are largely endogenous to the observed variation in political opportunity factors.

This presented case study is the first of a series of paired comparisons on diverging conflict trajectories in a context of ethnic exclusion, which are part of a research project at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.[14] Future pairwise case studies will cover examples from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. It remains to be seen whether the findings from the 'Kurdish' case study can be generalised to a larger number of cases.

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14 See **http://www.mmg.mpg.de/research/all-projects/conditions-of-conviviality-and-conflict/**.

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