The Political Geography of Globalized Civil Wars: Networked Actors and Multi-Scalar Strategies in the Kurdish Conflict Assemblage

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This article introduces and lays out a *conflict assemblage* framework for understanding the political geography of globalized civil wars. It suggests the utility of conceptualizing Turkey's Kurdish conflict as an assemblage in which networked actors use multi-scalar strategies as part of their overall conflict strategy. Insurgent organizations such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) operate at various scales beyond the national—including local, regional, transnational, and global—and in so doing utilize political opportunities and mobilize resources that are embedded in different locales. In the Kurdish case, disparate sites such as Diyarbakir, Marseille, Istanbul, London, New York, and Kobane become tied together within a single conflict assemblage that transcends geographical boundaries. An assemblage approach to violent conflict is a form of *ontological theorizing* that highlights this spatial and political complexity. By treating violent conflicts as assemblages with their own symbolic boundaries, political dynamics, internal governance structures, and strategic logics, we gain a better understanding of the contours and dynamics of globalized civil wars.

Este artículo presenta y establece un marco de *ensamblaje de conflictos* con el fin de comprender la geografía política de las guerras civiles globalizadas. Sugiere la utilidad que tendría el hecho de conceptualizar el conflicto kurdo de Turquía como un ensamblaje en el que actores interconectados en una red utilizan estrategias multiescalares como parte de su estrategia general de conflicto. Organizaciones insurgentes como el Partido de los Trabajadores del Kurdistán (PKK) operan en diversas escalas más allá de la nacional, incluyendo la local, regional, transnacional y global, y al hacerlo utilizan oportunidades políticas y movilizan recursos que están incorporados en diferentes lugares. En el caso kurdo, sitios dispares como Diyarbakir, Marsella, Estambul, Londres, Nueva York y Kobane se unen dentro de un solo ensamblaje de conflicto que trasciende las fronteras geográficas. Un enfoque de ensamblaje para el conflicto violento es una forma de *teorización ontológica* que destaca esta complejidad espacial y política. Al tratar los conflictos violentos como ensamblajes con sus propias fronteras simbólicas, dinámicas políticas, estructuras de gobierno interno y lógicas estratégicas, obtenemos una mejor comprensión de los contornos y dinámicas de las guerras civiles globalizadas.

Cet article présente la notion d'*agencement de conflits* comme cadre théorique pour comprendre la géographie politique des guerres civiles mondialisées. Il montre l'utilité de conceptualiser le conflit kurde en Turquie comme un agencement dans lequel les acteurs en réseau déploient des stratégies multiscalaires dans le cadre de leur stratégie globale de conflit. Des organisations insurgées telles que le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) opèrent à diverses échelles au-delà du national, y compris local, régional, transnational et mondial. Ce faisant, elles profitent d'opportunités politiques et mobilisent des ressources qui s'inscrivent dans différents contextes géographiques. Dans le cas kurde, des sites disparates tels que Diyarbakir, Marseille, Istanbul, Londres, New York et Kobane sont liés au sein d'un seul agencement de conflit qui transcende les frontières géographiques. Utiliser la notion d'agencement pour appréhender les conflits violents est une forme de *théorisation ontologique* qui met en lumière leur complexité spatiale et politique. En considérant les conflits violents comme des agencements dotés de leurs propres limites symboliques, dynamiques politiques, structures de gouvernance interne et logiques stratégiques, nous enrichissons notre connaissance des contours et dynamiques des guerres civiles mondialisées.

Introduction

Juxtapose the following events: In the town of Kobane in Northern Syria, violent clashes take place between Islamist and Kurdish insurgents, forcing tens of thousands of civilians to flee;[1] 10,000 protestors in Dusseldorf, Germany march in the streets to protest the lack of Turkish intervention;[2] a car bomb goes off in Ankara, Turkey, killing dozens;[3] employees of the social media giant Facebook, located in California, are challenged by activists in Britain for deleting and censoring posts;[4] Dutch and European Parliament buildings are entered and occupied by groups of Kurdish

Author's note: Earlier versions of this article were presented at the workshop "The New International Relations of Eurasia and the Middle East" Central European University, Budapest, June 13–14, 2016; the conference "Historical and Comparative Perspectives on Kurdish Politics" Buffet Institute for Global Studies, Northwestern University, November 2–4, 2016; and at the 24th International Conference of Europeanists, Glasgow, July 12–14, 2017. The author would like to thank Lisa Anderson, Veysi Dag, Stephen Deets, Miryam Hazán, Jacqueline Hazelton, Erin K. Jenne, Robert Jervis, Carter Johnson, Harris Mylonas, Jack Snyder, Hélène Thiollet, Stefan Wolff, Emrah Yildiz, and other workshop and conference participants for their helpful comments, as well as three anonymous reviewers and the current and previous ISQ editorial teams. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship (RF-2015-635).

[1]"Syria Crisis: Massive Destruction Revealed in Kobane after Kurds Drive Out Islamic State Militants." *Agence-France Press*, January 28, 2015. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-29/massive-destruction-in-kobane-after-kurds-drive-out-is/6053404.

[2]"Kurdish Kobani Protest in Düsseldorf." *Deutsche Welle*, October 11, 2014. https://www.dw.com/en/kurds-stage-major-kobani-protest-in-d%C3%BCsseldorf/a-17988185.

[3]Letsch, Constanze. 2016. "Ankara Bombing: Kurdish Militants Claim Responsibility." *Guardian*, March 17, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/17/ankara-car-bomb-kurdish-militants-claim-responsibility-attacks.

[4]Spary, Sara. 2016. "Facebook is Embroiled in a Row with Activists over 'Censorship'." *Buzzfeed UK*, April 8, 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/saraspary/facebook-in-dispute-with-pro-kurdish-activists-over-deleted; Livesay, Christopher. 2015. "After Battling ISIS, Kurds Find New Foe in Face-

Adamson, Fiona B. (2024) The Political Geography of Globalized Civil Wars: Networked Actors and Multi-Scalar Strategies in the Kurdish Conflict Assemblage. *International Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad060

protestors;[5] representatives of a Kurdish quasi-state in Syria open up diplomatic offices in Moscow, Prague, Stockholm, and Copenhagen;[6] an American and a Canadian die in separate attacks by Kurdish forces on the Islamist group ISIL in Syria;[7] a town in southeastern Turkey is razed to the ground in government security operations;[8] two young New Yorkers leave their homes to join Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq;[9] and protestors around the world chant "Woman, Life, Freedom" in response to the killing of a 22-year-old woman in Iran.[10]

These disparate yet connected events point to the geographical and political complexity, and global reach, of Turkey's Kurdish conflict. The conflict has been ongoing for decades, with at least 40,000 killed and one million displaced since 1984. Although conventionally coded as a "civil war" or "internal conflict," the dynamics of the conflict are not limited to the physical territory of the Turkish state. The conflict transcends national borders and is characterized by actors, networks, processes, and strategies that have local, regional, cross-border, and globalized aspects—all of which are highly connected with each other across diverse spaces and locales. The conflict's translocal dimensions suggest the need to expand our understanding of civil war in ways that better capture the complex inter-linkages and geospatial connections that characterize contemporary violent conflicts.

One means of doing so is to analyze the Kurdish conflict as a conflict *assemblage*. The idea of an assemblage provides an organizing template for analyzing violent conflicts beyond particular geographical or juridical boundaries, thereby allowing one to examine how multiple actors and interests—operating on different scales and in spatially dispersed locales—are joined in a single conflagration. An assemblage approach to civil wars complements—and to some extent overlaps with—contentious politics and social movement approaches to violence and conflict (e.g., McAdam et al. 1996, 2001; Tilly 2003), as well as with processual-relational approaches in International Relations (IR) (e.g., Jackson and Nexon 1999; Jackson 2006; Goddard 2009; Nexon 2009; Goddard and Nexon 2016). Nevertheless, it brings something new to the field as it also suggests an object of study—a *conflict assemblage*—that better allows for theorizing, analyzing, and empirically documenting the spatial complexities of globalized civil wars.[11]

Key to understanding how the Kurdish conflict assemblage operates are the mechanisms of *multi-scalar politics* in response to *translocal opportunities*, which are deployed by *networked actors* who use different spaces and levels (the local, regional, transnational, global, and virtual) as part of their overall conflict strategy. While the literature on contentious politics has paid attention to dynamics such as scale shifts and political opportunity structures, insights from this literature have not been sufficiently leveraged to understand the global and transnational dimensions of civil wars.[12] There is a need to better understand the socio-spatial and translocal aspects of violent conflicts, including how they intersect with other factors such as resource mobilization, the organizational characteristics of rebel groups, and logics of violence.

In this article, I use the case of Turkey's Kurdish conflict to illustrate the value-added of an assemblage approach for understanding globalized civil wars. I begin by discussing how the civil war literature has expanded to place greater emphasis on the external and transnational dimensions of ethnic conflicts. I then propose that a more radical rethinking of the political geography of civil war is required—one that goes beyond an internal/external or levels-of-analysis approach and that instead examines protracted conflicts via the lens of contentious politics mechanisms such as scalar strategies and translocal opportunities. I explain how assemblage theory approaches provide a useful framework for making sense of the aggregated and interconnected translocal dynamics of many contemporary conflicts. I then illustrate the utility of this framework by applying it to Turkey's Kurdish conflict assemblage and discussing its spatial evolution over time. Finally, I end with some theoretical reflections and suggestions for future research.

Political Geographies of Civil War

Scholars of civil war have increasingly recognized that conceptualizing civil wars as conflicts that occur within the boundaries of a state between a government and an armed non-state actor is inadequate (Sambanis 2004; Armitage 2017). While the domestic political dynamics of a country, including resource inequalities, grievances, and power relations (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Cederman et al. 2013), are crucially important, many dynamics of civil wars also transcend state boundaries and have transnational and international dimensions (Hironaka 2005; Gleditsch 2007; Checkel 2013).

Existing literature in civil war and conflict studies has examined a range of factors beyond the state that affect the course of violent conflicts. For example, external states and international organizations (IOs) impact on the course of conflicts by intervening or changing the local balance of power (Walter and Snyder 1999; Regan and Aydin 2006;

book," *Public Radio International*, October 7, 2015. https://theworld.org/stories/2015-10-07/after-battling-isis-kurds-find-new-foe-facebook.

[5]"Kurdish Protesters Occupy Dutch Parliament." *Al Jazeera*, October 7, 2014. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/10/7/kurdish-protesters-occupy-dutch-parliament.

[6]Oliphant, Roland. 2016. "Syrian Kurds Open Diplomatic Mission in Moscow." *The Telegraph*, February 10, 2016. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12150692/Syrian-Kurds-open-diplomatic-mission-in-Moscow.html; Tastekin, Fehim. 2016. "Syrian Kurds Expand Diplomatic Network in Europe." *Al-Monitor*, April 22, 2016. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/04/turkey-syria-rojava-kurds-expand-diplomatic-network-europe.html.

[7]"American Fighting with Kurds against Islamic State" *Associated Press*, 10 June 2015. https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-idUKKCN1021HT; Bell, Stewart. 2015. "Kurdish Unit Honours Canadian Who Died Fighting ISIL: 'We Lost our Daring and Courageous Companion'." *National Post*, November 8, 2015. https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-idUKKCN1021HT.

[8]Associated Press, "Turkey eases Curfew After Assault on PKK Rebels Leaves Cizre in Ruins." *Guardian*, March 2, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/02/turkey-kurdish-people-cizre-return-to-ruins#:%5Cprotect%20$%5Crelax%20%5Csim%20$:text=Turkey%20eases%20curfew%20after%20assault%20on%20PKK%20rebels%20leaves%20Cizre%20in%20ruins

[9]Knefel, John. 2016. "A Hello to Arms: A New Generation of Steely-Gazed Anarcho-Communists Head Off to Syria." *The Village Voice*, June 6, 2016. https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/06/07/a-hello-to-arms-a-new-generation-of-steely-gazed-anarcho-communists-head-off-to-syria/.

[10]Wintour, Patrick. 2022. "'Women, Life Liberty': Iranian Civil Rights Protests Spread Worldwide," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/01/women-life-liberty-iranian-civil-rights-protests-spread-worldwide.

[11]The notion of an *assemblage* resembles Tilly's (1998) "social aggregate." Tilly eschewed labels such as "civil war" and treated collective violence as aggregations of processes (Tilly 2003, 18). See also Jackson and Nexon's (1999) discussion of "configurations" and "projects."

[12]For scale shifts and political opportunity structures, see McAdam et al. (1996, 2001), Tarrow (2005), della Porta and Tarrow (2005), and Tarrow and McAdam (2005). For applications of contentious politics approaches to civil war, see Gleditsch and Ruggeri (2010) and della Porta et al. (2018).

Jenne 2007; Koga 2011; Savun and Tirone 2011). Local conflicts become intertwined with global discourses and practices when international actors such as IOs and international non-governmental organizations import their subcultures and habits into a conflict zone and view local actors and dynamics through pre-existing frames (Autesserre 2014). Foreign fighters and international recruits who fight in a local conflict can shift its dynamics by bringing in external resources and ideologies, leading to a fractionalization of local forces and confusion about the conflict's underlying aims (Bakke 2014). Foreign fighters can also contribute to the diffusion of conflict by engaging in violent acts in their home countries upon return (Hegghammer 2013; Malet 2013).

Additionally, many violent conflicts have strong regional dimensions and become part of broader conflagrations that diffuse across borders (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Gleditsch et al. 2008). For example, rebel groups can operate and recruit across borders, using neighboring states as safe havens for training and the launch of operations (Salehyan 2009). Transnational connections can be drawn upon to secure material resources, weapons, and supplies (Schmitz 2013). Refugee flows across state boundaries can help to spread conflict across national borders (Lischer 2005; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Rüegger 2019). Regional state rivalries are often fought via proxy, with states providing refuge to insurgents from neighboring states (Salehyan 2008). Transnational ties between groups that share a language, culture, or extended kinship networks can be mobilized in ways that diffuse conflict across national borders (Saideman 2002; Cederman et al. 2009; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013).

A similar logic operates with the mobilization of diaspora groups in conflict situations (Angoustures and Pascal 1996; Anderson 1998; Shain 2002; Fair 2005; Adamson 2006, 2013; Lyons 2006; Smith and Stares 2007; Kaldor 2013). Framing, resource mobilization, coalition-building, and lobbying by diaspora groups abroad can impact on the dynamics of a civil war by bolstering external material and political support. Much of this transnational activity occurs via "brokers," who act as links between networks of political mobilization and networks of conflict (Adamson 2005, 2013; Koinova 2013, 2014), or who connect "distant" and "contiguous" diasporas (Van Hear and Cohen 2017).

Diaspora groups are both "insiders" and "outsiders" to conflicts: they are based abroad yet often tightly connected to conflict zones via social networks, shared culture, and memory or identity claims (Shain and Barth 2003). These connections are as likely to be translocal as they are to be transnational, with social networks connecting communities abroad with specific locales in the state of origin (Koinova and Karabegović 2017). In an age of social media, connections between the diaspora and the conflict zone can be maintained with greater ease, with communications and interactions happening instantaneously and in real time. Translocal connections mean that the micro-dynamics of civil war can "go global." Moreover, political violence is often shaped by local rivalries and aims, and not just questions of ideology and strategy (Wood 2003; Kalyvas 2006). Insurgent organizations are built on pre-existing social networks and institutions, with their effectiveness varying according to their level of embeddedness (Staniland 2014). When conflicts are embedded in transnational social networks and institutions, low-level localized violence can be deployed by actors in new contexts—such as the gang rivalries that have emerged in European cities around conflicts in Sri Lanka and Turkey (Orjuela 2011; Baser 2015).

Civil wars are thus complex phenomena that frequently transcend divides between local, national, regional, and global. While existing studies of civil war have increasingly focused on the transnational and global dimensions of civil wars, there has still been a lack of ontological theorizing of the various ways in which the "local" and the "global" are intimately intertwined in globalized civil wars. Indeed, many violent conflicts "simultaneously incorporate the highest level of the global system with a radical diversity of local situations and actions" (Srnicek 2010, 31). Local actors can be embedded in broader transnational networks and dynamics, including regional power relations and diasporic political networks. Systemic-level considerations—such as the balance of power and the orientation of great powers—can affect the strategic calculations of local conflict actors (Connelly 2002; Chamberlin 2012). Shifts in power relations or opportunities at one level can have impacts on other levels, making civil wars a complex multi-level game.

Conflict actors, however, do not simply negotiate across different levels, but can actually be embedded in more than one level simultaneously. For example, rebel groups can be engaged in physical combat on a local level while using social media to broadcast information about it globally. Distinctions between the "global" and "local" are reconfigured with new information and communication technologies and changes in global interaction capacity (Sassen 2012; Buzan and Lawson 2015), creating entangled "spaces of global security" that transcend simple internal/external dichotomies (Adamson 2016). Cumulatively, these problems suggest the need for frameworks that can better capture the socio-spatial complexity of violent conflicts.

Conflict Assemblages: Networked Actors and Multi-Scalar Strategies

A "conflict assemblage" approach provides a framework for mapping the socio-spatial complexity of globalized civil wars in ways that move beyond methodological nationalist assumptions.[13] An assemblage can be loosely defined as "a number of disparate and heterogeneous elements convoked together into a single discernible formation" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004[1987], 327, 503–4 as cited in Bueger 2014, 60). Assemblage theory provides a means of modeling the complexity of sets of relations that transcend geographic and political boundaries (Sassen 2006; Anderson et al. 2012; Acuto and Curtis 2013). In IR, it has been employed to map out fields of relations and interests in private security (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009; Berndtsson and Stern 2011), military intervention and policing (Bachmann et al. 2014; Demmers and Gould 2018), environmental politics (Li 2007), international political economy (Jabko and Schmidt 2022), and global governance (Bueger 2017).

Assemblage theory is in essence a form of "ontological theorizing" that provides a template for inductive empirical research (as opposed to being a testable causal theory).[14] It has been used by anthropologists, for example, as a way of defining what "the field" looks like in a global context (Tsing 2005; Ong and Collier 2004). The notion of an assemblage provides a structure or scaffolding on which to hang the "stuff" of violent conflicts—thus allowing for a much richer understanding of how violent con-

[13] On methodological nationalism, see Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003), Adamson (2016), and Adamson and Greenhill (2021).

[14] Daniel Little, "Critical Realism, Social Heterogeneity and Assemblages" *Critical Realism Network Webinar*, May 27, 2016. Last accessed March 31, 2023. https://criticalrealismnetwork.org/webinarvideos/.

flicts are constituted by both "local" and "global" dynamics. An assemblage is, in effect, a spatial configuration that becomes its own unit of analysis (Ong 2004, 338; Bueger 2017, 5). Assemblage theory suggests an object of research composed of sets of relations and connections that transcend particular places or levels of analysis. As such, it has affinities with relational, actor-network, and practice-based approaches to understanding social reality since it is concerned with questions of relationships, configurations, and interactions (Bousquet and Curtis 2011, 48–54; Bueger 2014, 61–2; Bueger 2017, 5–6).

Assemblage theory's focus on relations between actors and the aggregation of social processes also shares affinities with the literature in contentious politics, which views episodes such as revolutions, strikes, riots, and revolts as different aggregations of contentious politics and collective violence (Tilly 2003, 18). Complexity theory (e.g., Cederman 1997), network theory (e.g., Goddard 2009; Hafner-Burton et al. 2009), or relational–institutional approaches (e.g., Jackson and Nexon 1999; Nexon 2009) can take us quite a way in identifying the complexity of networks and interactions that define contemporary conflicts. What assemblage approaches add to this literature is an explicit focus on the spatial dimensions and embeddedness of social relations, including how these relate to the geography and material dimensions of violent conflicts.

Drawing on relational approaches to IR and the literature in contentious politics, we can think of conflict assemblages as archipelagos of conflict-related activities that are connected via *networked actors*, *translocal opportunities*, and *multi-scalar politics*. Networks of actors are essential to understanding the dynamics of assemblages, which are primarily about relations among people, institutions and objects.[15] But identifying actors is not enough. The connecting elements of the assemblage—the material flows, the ideational glue, the geographic opportunities and constraints, and the strategies of violence—are also significant elements of a conflict. Assemblage theory allows the researcher to take an inductive and ethnographic approach to identifying relevant conflict actors, material and ideational elements, and their relationships. One advantage of this bottom-up approach is that it partly takes the perspective of those actors who are deeply embedded in conflict networks and processes and who are devising strategies in response to political opportunities that emerge not just locally in the conflict region, but also translocally, globally, and virtually.

Actors embedded in conflict networks devise strategies in response to numerous translocal and global factors, such as the interests of powerful states, the presence of transnational diaspora populations, the availability of salient political discourses, or the accessibility of particular forms of material resources. For example, networks of actors can take advantage of translocal opportunities to mobilize the financial and material resources available to diaspora communities in dispersed locations around the world (Angoustures and Pascal 1996; Byman 2013). Coordinated large-scale protests by diaspora groups in cities in Europe and North America are more likely to gain global media attention than protests organized locally in a conflict region in the "global periphery" far away from the presence of major global media outlets.

One of the advantages of assemblage theory is that it does not a priori privilege one level-of-analysis over another—viewing social reality instead as multi-scaled (DeLanda 2006, 38; Bueger 2014, 60). At its most basic level, scale refers to different levels or locations as measured by size, and can be understood as a category of analysis or as the location where particular phenomena take place—such as at the local, national, or global scale (Montello 2001, 13501–04). Conventionally, scales have been understood as being nested—for example, "local" is defined by a physical or geographic proximity, and exists within a hierarchy of nested scales that include the national and global. Yet this understanding of scale as being hierarchically nested is increasingly challenged, with greater levels of interconnectivity leading to a blurring or hybridization of different scales (Sjoberg 2008, 480; MacKinnon 2011; Sassen 2012, 466). Actors can employ scalar strategies as a means of taking advantage of the variegated opportunities and resources that are available in different locales, and bring them together in spatial configurations—or *assemblages*—that enhance their overall power.

In many ways, the concept of *scale* is as central to geography as power is to politics (e.g., Smith 1992; Swyngedouw 1997; Cox 1998; Brenner 1999, 2001; Marston 2000; Moore 2008; Sjoberg 2008; MacKinnon 2011). Scalar issues are important for understanding the dynamics of violent conflict because different forms of social power are closely related to scale. As Swyngedouw (2004, 6–7) argues:

> …the social power that can be mobilized is dependent on the scale or social level at which social actors operate…the success or effectiveness of social or political strategies for empowerment is related to the ways in which geographical scale is actively considered and mobilized.

This means that actors operating in conflict assemblages can leverage opportunities to create a "scale shift" in ways that move processes or identities to a different "level"—for example, between the local, national, and global scales (Smith 1992; McAdam et al. 2001, 331; Marston et al. 2005; Swyngedouw 2004; Merk 2009). Scale shifts can be "upward"—moving from a local to national, supranational, or global levels, but actors can also seek to achieve "downward" shifts by strategically introducing global discourses to new contexts, where they become localized, embedded, and transformed (Smith 1992; Tarrow 2005, 121). By using such scalar strategies, actors access new sources of social and material power and encounter new opportunities that can affect conflict dynamics, but also in many cases actually change the contours of the conflict itself. Scale shifts are not just about the diffusion of identities and interests from one geographic space to another but rather are processes that reconstitute and alter identities and interests. Conflicts become embedded in new spaces with new constituencies, resources, opportunities, and constraints (Tarrow 2005, 121).

Such processes of assembling and disassembling mean that violent conflicts are constantly evolving and transforming, as well as interacting with other types of assemblages in new spaces and contexts.[16] Translocality and scale shifts are both spatial processes that reinscribe boundaries and involve processes of territorialization and deterritorialization—which are central concerns in assemblage approaches (Bousquet and Curtis 2011, 52–3; Bueger 2014, 63–4; DeLanda 2016). A "conflict assemblage" is not a territorial state, but it can be viewed as a coherent ontological

[15] With its focus on networked actors, assemblage theory shares characteristics with Latour's (2005) actor–network theory. See Müller (2015).

[16] For example, conflict-oriented diasporic organizations may also become part of local civil society and advocacy group assemblages; armed conflict assemblages often intersect with assemblages of organized crime. See also Demmers and Gould's (2018) notion of "liquid warfare."

entity defined by symbolic boundaries and material qualities and populated by organizations and agents who act strategically. Its "grand strategy," so to speak, will be shaped by its relationship to other structures and entities in the international system—including diffuse forms of translocal opportunities—but also by the very structure of the international state system itself.

Assemblage theory—like processual relational approaches (e.g., Jackson and Nexon 1999)—is less about isolating variables than aggregating relationships. It is not about linear relationships but rather configurations. It "suggests a different set of metaphors for the social world" of "mosaic, patchwork, and heterogeneity."[17] This provides researchers with a different "lens" for understanding violent conflicts, allowing for the engagement with translocal spaces, actors, and processes that are often invisible or peripheral in substantialist, actor-based approaches to civil war.[18]

The Kurdish "Conflict Assemblage"

Turkey's long-standing Kurdish conflict can be understood as an evolving conflict assemblage characterized by translocally networked actors who employ scalar strategies. The armed conflict has been fought off and on since 1984, with renewed hostilities emerging in 2015 following a failed 2-year peace process between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state. The conflict is regularly coded as a "civil war" and has received substantial scholarly and policy attention—in part due to Turkey's significance as a NATO member and European Union (EU) candidate state, as well as the conflict's intersection with the Syrian war.[19] The war in Syria and the rise of Daesh or the so-called Islamic State altered the dynamics of the Kurdish conflict—both in Turkey, as well as in the region as a whole—such that it now "defies linear or simple narratives" (Kadercan 2015).

Even before the onset of the Syrian war, however, the Kurdish conflict had a complicated geography. The PKK, which is often labeled as an "armed organization" or "rebel group," can also be understood as a complex aggregate of networks and institutions—a spatially dispersed set of relations that provides the underlying structure to the Kurdish conflict assemblage. Moreover, the structure and location of the Kurdish conflict itself has also evolved spatially over time, and now takes place in multiple interconnected arenas that together make it a spatially complex assemblage—with a global reach.

Over the course of the conflict, the networked actors of the PKK have responded to translocal opportunities and constraints via the use of spatial strategies and scalar politics. This has involved the strategic linking and aggregation of material and ideational factors across different scales. Cumulatively, this process has also affected the very ontology and spatial contours of the conflict—including its center of gravity, its underlying ideology and political aims, the physical location of political activities and combat operations, and its internal governance. Whether via the recruitment of fighters in Europe; the setting up of transnational organizational structures, or the establishment of a regional quasi-state; the Kurdish conflict assemblage transcends multiple spaces and boundaries in ways that make it more than an intra-state conflict.

Networked Actors—The Spatial Evolution and Reach of the PKK

The PKK is often referred to as an "actor." However, it is arguably better understood as a set of relations or a "network of networks" with a complex structure and connections that only partially coincide with the territorial boundaries of the Turkish state. What was to eventually become the PKK emerged originally from networks of personally connected individuals—including its founder and subsequent leader, Abdullah Öcalan—who met in private spaces, such as apartments and houses—as well as in university dormitories, canteens, and student associations—in Ankara, Turkey in the 1970s. In this period, "a process of group formation took place, in which a distinctive ideology was crafted, a kindred spirit was forged, and a political organization was established" (Jongerden 2017, 135). The formation of the PKK proceeded from a set of relations (1973–1977) to the establishment of a formal organization (1978) to the initiation of an armed conflict (1984) to a proliferation of actors, institutions, and networks spread throughout Turkey, the Middle East, Europe, cyberspace, and elsewhere. These extended spatial networks now form a PKK-centric conglomerate of interconnected and translocal institutions and nationalized micro-spaces.

The PKK-centric assemblage is held together by ideological, symbolic, and informal connections that include personal relationships, a shared ideology, and a common admiration for or loyalty to the (imprisoned) Kurdish leader Öcalan.[20] Within Turkey, the Kurdish conflict assemblage includes a range of actors and institutions, including armed units, civil society groups, and political parties that have various relations with what is formally understood as the PKK (Watts 2010; Guneş 2012; Gurbuz 2016). But the networked structure of PKK-related organizations also extends spatially into neighboring states, such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran. While the cross-border connections of the PKK have received increased attention in the context of the Syrian civil war, this presence is not new. Öcalan moved from Turkey to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon in 1979, and, following the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the organizational structure of the PKK relocated to Syria. Throughout the 1990s, Öcalan and the PKK leadership resided in Damascus, Syria. In the early 1980s, PKK networks were linked with networks of other revolutionary nationalist organizations, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna), and the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army). By the early 1990s, there were PKK military bases in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Following a military coup in Turkey, thousands of Kurdish nationalists with various political affiliations also migrated to Europe, where they set up organizational structures, using them to mobilize populations that had previously migrated for economic reasons. The names of PKK-affiliated Kurdish structures in Europe have changed over time, but their presence since the 1980s has been extensive. National umbrella organizations are members of a European-wide umbrella organization (KCDK-E), which, in turn, is nested within a broader Kurdish Communities Union (KCK) transnational structure, which was established in the mid-2000s (Saeed

[17]Daniel Little, "Assemblage Theory" *Understanding Society*, November 18, 2012. Accessed March 31, 2023. https://undsoc.org/2012/11/18/assemblage-theory/; see also Bueger's (2014, 61–2) discussion of "multiplicity."

[18]For relationalist and substantialist approaches, see Jackson and Nexon (1999).

[19]For helpful overviews, see, e.g., O'Connor (2021), Aydin and Emrence (2015), Balci (2016), Guneş (2012), Marcus (2007), Natali (2005), Romano (2006), White (2000, 2015), and Yadirgi (2017).

[20]I use the term "PKK-centric assemblage" although even this description is an oversimplification and shorthand for what is in reality a much more complex configuration of networks, institutions, spaces, relationships, and loyalties.

2017). The larger network also includes news agencies, television stations, radio stations, newspapers, periodicals, publishing houses, and a European-wide Business Association, with estimates of up to 400 affiliated organizations throughout Europe (Ayata 2011, 527–8; Hevian 2013).

In addition to organizations in Europe and Turkey, the KCK also includes affiliates in Iran, Iraq, and Syria.[21] The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) was founded in the Kurdish regions of Syria in 2003, pledging allegiance to Öcalan. Similar affiliated parties were set up in Northern Iraq in 2002 (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party—PÇDK[22]) and in Iran in 2004 (Party of Free Life—PJAK) (Guneş 2012, 141). With the onset of the Syrian War, the PYD became one of the most significant Kurdish actors in the Syrian conflict.[23]

The armed organizations People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) emerged with the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and 2012, respectively, associated with the PYD and following roughly the same model as the PKK's male and female armed units, the HPG and Star-YJA. The organizations, and especially the women's units, received international media coverage for their role in fighting ISIL and also received both American and Russian support in their fight, as well as assistance from a range of foreign fighters and volunteers.[24]

The configuration of interconnected institutions and networks that is referred to in shorthand as the PKK is thus, in effect, a network structure—formed by relations of individual actors and organizations across national borders. What connects them is a shared ideology and symbolic universe in which personal connections and material culture become fused in translocal processes of nationalist placemaking. Thus, while the PKK as a networked structure had affiliated "branches" across Europe, the physical and material manifestations of its presence are also visible in microspaces such as Kurdish community centers, cultural festivals, and public demonstrations of transnational support and solidarity, thus creating a translocal archipelago of Kurdish nationalism. The simultaneous process of de-territorialization (of Kurdish identity being separated from a putative territorial "Kurdistan") and re-territorialization (the re-inscription of Kurdish identity onto new spaces in dispersed locales—in Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and elsewhere) reconstitutes Kurdish nationalism and PKK ideology in an archipelagic and diasporic form.[25]

Multi-Scalar Strategies—Scale Shifts in Response to Translocal Opportunities

The "archipelagic nationalism" of the PKK is not only about the translocal diffusion of nationalist symbols (e.g., colors, flags, languages, slogans), but also has clear material and strategic dimensions. The PKK has been adept at the use of scalar politics in response to evolving translocal opportunities and constraints, strategically shifting the conflict's center of gravity, its ideologies, its sources of funding, and its locations of armed conflict over time. This has transformed the conflict's geographical reach, as well as the very meaning and ontology of the conflict itself.

By the 1990s, the Kurdish nationalist movement had become "an almost invisible network spread across the globe" (van Bruinessen 1998, 48) and was using its diffuse networks to channel financial support and fighters into the conflict, via a combination of voluntary donations, "taxes" of individual salaries, business profits, and extortion. At the peak of the violence in Turkey, the PKK was raising tens of millions of dollars per year via a mixture of donations, illicit activities, and legitimate or semi-legitimate commercial entities in Europe (Marcus 2007, 232; White 2000, 193). Diasporic populations in Europe and elsewhere were tapped for the material and political resources they could bring to the conflict, including their ability to organize coordinated protests and provide manpower for the conflict in the form of fighters from abroad: In the 1990s an estimated 4–5,000 recruits traveled from Europe to fight in the conflict—including a number of non-Kurdish-origin Germans (Solina 1996; van Bruinessen 1998, 45; Grojean 2011).

The PKK was able to leverage diffuse networks to create a "scale shift" in the conflict in the 1990s, moving much of the center of gravity (fundraising, planning, recruitment, training, and propaganda) to Europe and surrounding states. There were material reasons for the deployment of these scalar strategies. Until the end of the Soviet Union, the PKK had identified as Marxist–Leninist and received substantial financial backing and military training from the USSR. This required a degree of "symbolic localization" and also situated the Kurdish conflict within a larger global frame of resistance, including an ability to draw comparisons with other cases, such as the Mexican Zapatista movement (Gambetti 2009; Casier 2011, 3; Gurbuz 2015).

The material benefits of deploying a Marxist ideology, however, waned with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was at this point that the diaspora became increasingly important as a source of funds to support the conflict—but also as a political force in Europe and beyond. There was a major ideological shift at the PKK's Second National Conference in May 1990, which took place in Syria. The PKK adopted a new platform focused on human rights, democracy, and environmental issues. This fits with both the changing political climate but also its interest in harnessing the power of civil society groups in Europe (Balci 2016, 164ff). During the 1990s, the PKK used scalar strategies that brought together different "spaces" in the international system in ways that somewhat resembled Keck and Sikkink's (1998) "boomerang pattern" in which actors exit the domestic arena due to blocked political opportunities and "go transnational." The PKK engaged in diaspora mobilization activities in Europe in the 1990s, while it also used neighboring states, such as Syria and Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, as sanctuaries and to pursue military training and launch attacks (Adamson 2005).

Brokers played a key role in connecting the armed conflict networks of the PKK in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, the political leadership in Syria, the armed operations in the Southeast of Turkey, and the political activities of diaspora organizations in Europe (Adamson 2005, 2013). In 1995, the political wing of the PKK established a parliament-in-exile in Europe, and Kurdish organizations continuously lobbied European states in support of Kurdish rights in Turkey. The PKK was also effective in mobilizing grassroots support within the ~1.5 million Kurdish diaspora community in Europe through public events and mass demonstrations, and by promoting Kurdish national identity and

[21] There are also PKK-linked organizations in Japan, Canada, Russia, Australia, South Africa, and elsewhere (Hevian 2013).

[22] Now known as the Freedom Movement (Tevgara Azadi).

[23] "Kurdish National Council in Syria" Carnegie Middle East Center, February 15, 2012. Accessed March 31, 2023. https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48502&lang=en.

[24] Oliphant, Roland. 2017. "Russia to Train US-Allied Kurds in Syria." *The Telegraph*, March 21, 2017. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/21/russia-train-us-allied-kurds-syria/.

[25] For de-territorializing and re-territorializing dynamics, see Bueger (2014) and DeLanda (2016).

culture (Gürbey 1996, 25; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Watts 2004; Adamson and Demetriou 2007; Eccarius-Kelly 2008; Adamson 2023).

The arrest of Öcalan in 1999 and the acceptance of Turkey as an official candidate to the EU that same year, followed by the domestic rise to power of the religiously oriented Justice and Development (AK) party within Turkey and a change in the global strategic climate following the attacks of 9/11, led to additional transformations in the Kurdish conflict and new forms of multi-scalar strategies.[26] Whereas the PKK had relied heavily on strategies of globalization during the 1990s, during the 2000s it turned increasingly to strategies of localization. This was in response to changing opportunities for strategic action, but also the emergence of alternative spaces—within Turkey and the region—for taking forward the Kurdish nationalist project. It coincided, once again, with a shift or evolution in political ideology.

In the 2000s, the PKK began to pursue a strategy of localism, and promoted a new ideology, creating new institutional structures and cross-regional organizations dedicated to the establishment of a regional form of democratic confederalism. A cross-regional and translocal organization, the KCK (Council of Communities in Kurdistan) was established by the PKK in the mid-2000s. It was designed to be a federation of local autonomous communities within Turkey, while also stretching beyond to include communities and entities in Syria, Iran, and northern Iraq (White 2015, 126–49; Saeed 2017). Utilizing ideas found in the writings of anarchist and libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin, the confederation promoted Kurdish self-governance in the form of local democratic assemblies.[27] Öcalan had reportedly read Benedict Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities* and became convinced that the nation-state model had to be overcome, rather than emulated.[28] Localism also had an appeal for a number of pragmatic reasons, however, and can be interpreted as a response to a combination of global, regional, and transnational constraints—but also to new incentives that created more scope for Kurdish actors to maneuver within local structures in Turkey.

In addition to the weakening of the PKK following Öcalan's arrest, the 9/11 attacks also placed pressure on the PKK's strategy of internationalization in Europe. Although some of their activities had been condemned in the European Parliament since the late 1980s, and both Germany and France had proscribed the organization in 1994, the PKK was further securitized and placed on the EU's list of banned terrorist organizations in 2002, reducing its influence and scope to engage in lobbying and mobilization (Ilbiz and Kaunert 2021, 8).

At the same time, Turkey's new relationship with the EU as an official member candidate led to domestic reforms that provided more openings for local expressions of Kurdish politics (Tocci 2007, 53–77). The interest in localism as expressed via the ideology of democratic confederalism thus coincided with increased political liberalization within Turkey in the mid-2000s, as well as a shift in regional relations. On the one hand, there was the emergence of a new Kurdish state-like entity, the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, following the US-led coalition's military intervention that removed Saddam Hussein from power. On the other hand, the ruling AKP party's "zero problems with our neighbors" foreign policy had led to liberalization in Turkey's relations with Syria. This included less restrictive visa policies between the two countries, which facilitated more cross-border flows, including trade and travel.

The combination of emerging local structures and the liberalization of border regimes provided opportunities for the construction of a translocal federation that crossed national borders. The new PKK strategy was to build a Kurdish political structure from the bottom-up – one that would not necessarily overtly challenge existing state power, but rather exist alongside it or perhaps, eventually, supersede it. The focus was on increased local and regional autonomy combined with the facilitation of transnational ties across the entire Kurdish region, including northern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran. The 2000s saw an increasing number of congresses and meetings in Turkey that drew actors and representatives from across the region, including Syria, where Öcalan and other PKK members had developed ties while in exile in the 1980s and 1990s.[29] This created a type of patchwork entity that stretched across national borders.

The development of an interconnected regional assemblage affiliated with Öcalan's ideology of democratic confederalism set the stage for further developments following the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011. Between 2013 and 2015, the autonomous region of *Rojava* was founded in northern Syria by the PYD, which established popular assemblies across the region based on the same principles of "democratic confederalism." The establishment of the quasi-state Rojava in northern Syria, and the prominent roles played by the YPG and YPJ forces in battling ISIL, opened up new opportunities for the PKK to engage in multi-scalar politics. It provided a means of enhancing the movement's legitimacy and mobilizing global support. Whereas the PKK had been listed as a terrorist organization by NATO, the EU, the United States, and others, the establishment of the PYD and associated entities–and the roles they played in fighting against Daesh/ISIL proved to be an effective means of bypassing this proscription (Kadercan 2015).

The declaration of autonomy by Rojava in 2013 was accompanied by a second wave of internationalization, with campaigns to gain support in Europe, Russia, and North America. The PYD was able to effectively "utilize its access to global communications and advocacy networks to pursue a sophisticated program of public diplomacy" (Khalaf 2016, 2). Alongside an already-existing network of PKK-linked Kurdish organizations in Europe, new entities tied more closely to Rojava and the YPG emerged. Organizations in Europe formed part of this larger assemblage as they were directly connected with the KCK. Indeed, as a partially de-territorialized entity, the KCK also included a form of citizenship for Kurds in the diaspora, and treated the diaspora as part of its organizational structure (Saeed 2017, 66). The principles of democratic confederalism and the symbols of Kurdish nationalism, therefore, extended into multiple spaces and locales in Europe and beyond, with diaspora activists mobilizing solidarity networks; engaging in campaigns such as the "Peace in Kurdistan Campaign"; and

[26]This change in the strategic climate had global effects, including on al-Qaeda itself, with the "landscape" of militant Islamism moving from a globalized to more regional and localized focus, such as the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Devji 2017).

[27]Biehl, Janet. 2012. "Bookchin, Öcalan and the Dialectics of Democracy" *New Compass: Navigation Toward Democracy*, February 16, 2012. Accessed March 31, 2023. http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-%C3%B6calan-and-dialectics-democracy; see also Leezenberg (2016) and Öcalan's (2011) political writings.

[28]Nicholas Danforth, "An Imprisoned Nationalist Reads Benedict Anderson," *Dissent Blog*, March 7, 2013. Accessed March 31, 2023. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/an-imprisoned-nationalist-reads-benedict-anderson.

[29]Author's interview, Urfa, Turkey, September 2010.

supporting educational training on principles of democratic confederalism (Khalaf 2016, 21).

Even cities like Marseille, France with relatively small Kurdish communities (5,000–7,000), had associations directly related to the KCK. Such organizations relocate aspects of Kurdish nationalism and identity to spaces and places beyond the borders of Turkey, Syria, or other states that directly form part of the Kurdistan region. They do so by providing support to the local community of refugees and migrants and replicating and localizing symbols of nationalism in the diaspora (Karagöz 2017, 88–90). They also forge connections with local solidarity networks, which brings the Kurdish issue into a completely new context. An example is the "Collective Rojava-Marseille," which was founded as a partnership between second-generation Kurdish activists and a local anarchist activist network. Similar committees exist in other cities across Europe (Karagöz 2017).

Organizations connected with Rojava used forms of rebel diplomacy similar to those employed by the PKK in the 1990s, but in a new geopolitical context.[30] Diplomatic efforts were organized by the Foreign Relations Committee of the Executive Council of the Democratic Autonomous Administration system in Rojava (Khalaf 2016, 16). In 2016, Rojava offices were opened in Moscow, Paris, Prague, Stockholm, Berlin, The Hague, and Copenhagen.[31] The YPG also sent delegations to countries throughout Europe, where they were received by public officials or addressed parliamentary bodies.[32] The offices were used to gain legitimacy and status, and to secure financial and political resources from abroad.

Separately, there were international recruiting efforts to bring in foreign fighters via the "Lions of Rojava" and a number of other units, such as the "International Freedom Battalion," which attracted volunteers from around the world. Reports estimate that up to 400 foreign fighters from Europe, North America and elsewhere traveled to the region to fight or support the YPG, including numerous US citizens. The recruits were a mix of those sympathetic to the revolutionary political agenda in Rojava and—in the words of a *Rolling Stone* reporter—"military vets, Christian crusaders [and], adventurers looking for thrills or the chance to kill ISIS fighters."[33] The use of social media to mobilize international support drew Facebook into the politics of the conflict, as Kurdish activists and their supporters in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and elsewhere contested Facebook's decisions to remove content that it deemed to be in violation of its standards.[34] The conflict therefore experienced various "scale shifts" in which it moved from being an internal conflict with transnational dimensions to a more complex conflict assemblage that stretched across different levels.

The events surrounding the siege of the town of Kobane in northern Syria between September 2014 and February 2015 illustrate these dynamics. During this period, intense fighting occurred as Kurdish YPG and YPJ forces battled ISIL fighters for control of the town. The conflict began in mid-September, when ISIL forces advanced on Kobane, and tens of thousands of refugees fled across the Turkish border. In late September, US-led coalition forces used air strikes against ISIL, which were unsuccessful in deterring it. October and November saw fierce fighting that left hundreds dead.[35] International media beamed images of Kurdish refugees and locals watching the destruction from across the Turkish–Syrian border.

The battle for Kobane helped to create a "scale shift" in the conflict and was utilized by conflict actors to gain international support. As Leezenberg (2016, 681–2) writes, it "gave the PYD—and by extension the PKK—an unprecedentedly positive media presence in Europe and America. In particular, the stark and dramatic opposition between female PYD guerrillas and bearded IS warriors created considerable sympathy abroad, and mobilized substantial numbers of foreign activists to come to the region in support of the Rojava Revolution." Kurdish diaspora groups organized protests, demonstrations, and occupations of public buildings across Europe, and tens of thousands of people protested in Kurdish cities and towns across Turkey (Aghajanian 2015; Karagöz 2017, 93). Demands for Turkish intervention in Kobane and support for an interlinked cross-regional Kurdish federation were increasingly brought into the domestic peace process between the government and the PKK, which officially ended in July 2015 following a suicide attack in the town of Suruç on youth activists who had planned to cross over and help rebuild Kobane.[36] Parallels were drawn between Turkey's lack of intervention in Kobane and its inability to prevent the attack in Suruç, and there was a subsequent escalation of violence between the PKK and government forces.[37] The military victory by YPG forces in Kobane may also have influenced the tactics of PKK-related groups in Turkey, by inspiring Kurdish youth movements and militant PKK supporters to initiate a campaign of guerrilla warfare in Kurdish-majority cities within Turkey, thus re-igniting the armed conflict (Leezenberg 2016, 683).

More generally, the engagement of YPG and YPJ forces with ISIL led to levels of international support for the group that would otherwise not have been possible. Whereas the PKK is proscribed as a terrorist organization in many states, including the United States, the YPG was not and received military support from the United States in the fight against ISIL.[38] The establishment of the independent quasi-state of Rojava in northern Syria also provided a new space from which PKK-related actors could pursue their aims outside the boundaries of the increasingly repressive Turkish state. They were thus physically and geopolitically positioned to mobilize resources from actors as varied as the United States

[30] For rebel diplomacy, see Coggins (2015) and Huang (2016). For Kurdish diplomatic activities in Europe in the 1990s, see Watts (2004).

[31] Oliphant (2016) and Tastekin (2016). Many were short-lived, however.

[32] For example, then-French President Francoise Hollande received a PYD delegation in April 2015 (Karagöz 2017, 92).

[33] Knefel (2016); Patin, Nathin. 2016. "The Other Foreign Fighters: An Open Source Investigation into Americans Fighting the Islamic State." *Bellingcat*, August 26, 2015. https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/08/26/the-other-foreign-fighters/; Harp, Seth. 2017. "The Anarchists vs. The Islamic State." *Rolling Stone*, February 14, 2017; Stilwell, Blake. 2015. "Meet the US Military Veterans Fighting ISIS." *Business Insider*, September 25, 2015. https://www.businessinsider.com/meet-the-us-military-veterans-fighting-isis-2015-9?r=US&IR=T; Costello, Norma. 2016. "War on ISIS: Western Fighters Joining Kurds to Fight Terror Group in Iraq and Syria." *The Independent*, May 21, 2016. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/western-fighters-joining-the-kurds-to-fight-isis-in-iraq-and-syria-a7041136.html; Dearden, Lizzie. 2015. "Former British Army Soldiers Going to Fight ISIS in Syria in "International Volunteer Force." *The Independent*, March 16, 2015. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/former-british-army-soldiers-form-international-volunteer-force-to-fight-isis-in-syria-10111054.html.

[34] Spary (2016) and Livesay (2015).

[35] Battle for Kobane: Key Events. *BBC News*, 15 June 2015. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29688108.

[36] The attacker was allegedly a Kurdish member of an ISIL-affiliated group. See "Suruc Massacre: 'Turkish student' was suicide bomber." *BBC News*, July 22, 2015. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-33619043.

[37] Akyol, Mustafa. 2015. "Who Killed Turkey-PKK Peace Process?" *Al-Monitor*, August 4, 2015. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/08/turkey-syria-iraq-pkk-peace-process-who-killed-kurds.html.

[38] In 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) formed out of a PYG-led coalition of multi-ethnic forces and were renamed, partly in response to Turkey's concerns about a Kurdish force on its border (Knights and van Wilgenburg 2021; Dag 2023).

government, international anarchist groups, and ex-US and British military members who joined to fight ISIL.

Moreover, the PYD, YPG, and YPJ were successful in promoting themselves at the international level as a grassroots and democratic project pursuing gender equality, ecological justice, local democracy, and minority rights, contrasting themselves with both ISIL, on the one hand, and the regimes in Turkey and Syria, on the other.[39] They successfully courted the press, academics, and activists through social media and by organizing delegations to tour parts of Rojava.[40] The female YPJ forces fighting ISIL received widespread media coverage, and inspired solidarity events by feminist activists, such as the "World March for Women" in 2015 and the "International Journey for Women's Rights" in 2016 (Karagöz 2017, 93). In many respects, Rojava became a cause célèbre for some sectors of the left, with parallels drawn with the international brigades of the Spanish Civil War.[41]

Regional dynamics changed yet again in 2019, following the US withdrawal from northeastern Syria and ongoing Turkish military campaigns in the Turkey–Syria border region and northern Iraq, which have arguably weakened Kurdish actors in the region. However, the extent to which Turkey's Kurdish conflict has become a complex translocal assemblage with broader geopolitical implications is evident in its interaction with the Russian war in Ukraine. Following the May 2022 applications of Finland and Sweden to join NATO, Turkey blocked their membership on the basis that they were hosting Kurdish "terrorist" organizations on their territory and funding the Kurdish autonomous area in northern Syria. Turkey demanded the extradition of Kurdish figures from Sweden and the cutting off of support to the YPG. The Kurdish conflict assemblage, which reaches into Sweden via transnational organizational structures and networks, has therefore directly impacted on the question of NATO enlargement, as the Turkish state uses the blocking of the enlargement process as a way of pursuing its ongoing conflict with the PKK.[42]

At the same time, the worldwide protests that occurred following the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa (Jina) Amini, in Iran in September 2022 brought a new dimension to the Kurdish conflict assemblage, with the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Jin, Jiyan, Azadî in Kurdish) picked up across Iran and around the world, taking on a life of its own beyond the region. The slogan originated in the writings of Öcalan and the broader PKK-centric Kurdish movement, which, as discussed above, is connected with Iran though its affiliate, PJAK. Thus, a slogan that was used in the 2000s in Turkey and in the 2010s by the YPG-affiliated YPJ female fighters in Syria is now inscribed on products, broadcast by media, and used by politicians in Europe, North America, and beyond (Dirik 2022).[43]

Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested the utility of viewing violent conflicts as assemblages, and illustrated the value-added of this approach by showing how an assemblage lens can help make sense of the changing geography of Turkey's Kurdish conflict. The conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state has long had transnational, regional, and international dimensions—via the involvement of external states and diaspora populations. But with a shift in ideology and the adoption of strategies of localization and regionalization in the 2000s, combined with the opportunities that the war in Syria provided to bypass constraints within Turkey, the Kurdish conflict expanded to encompass a much larger selection of actors and interests across a broader range of geographical sites. It is, in essence, an *assemblage* that brings together the social and material in an archipelagic form in which networked actors respond to translocal opportunities through the use of multi-scalar politics.

The Kurdish conflict, however, is not unique in being a "globalized civil war" composed of processes, actors, and forms of mobilization that transcend multiple state boundaries. One need only look at the role that factors such as diaspora mobilization have played in a range of conflicts as diverse as Kosovo, Ireland, and Sri Lanka, or that foreign fighters have played in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya. Moreover, although social media and other technological developments have added new dynamics to contemporary conflicts, the strategy of "going global" has been a widespread feature of localized armed struggles. In addition to examples such as the international brigades in the Spanish Civil War, multi-scalar strategies have been used in historical conflicts as diverse as the 1848 revolutions, the American War of Independence, and anti-colonial conflicts, such as the Algerian War of Liberation (Connelly 2002; Chamberlain 2012; Armitage 2017).

An assemblage approach provides a way of moving beyond methodological nationalist frameworks that treat violent conflicts as occurring either *between* or *within* states, thus allowing for a better understanding of the deeper structures and global geographies of a range of conflicts. Assemblage theory provides a framework for studying the political geography of globalized civil wars by emphasizing the aggregation of diverse elements and their interaction rather than the isolation of single variables. Because assemblage theory does not privilege one level over another, it allows for an analysis of how conflict actors can use translocal and multi-scalar strategies to achieve their aims. Actors can shift the scale of the conflict by using strategies of internationalization, regionalization, or localization. Different physical, social, and political spaces can be leveraged in ways that alter a conflict's center of gravity over time, in the process changing its meaning and drawing in new actors and interests—thus also altering the very ontology and contours of the conflict.

Assemblage theory suggests a template for conducting empirical research on conflicts in ways that take account of their geographical and political complexity. This pushes

[39] Graeber, David. 2014. "Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria? *The Guardian*, October 8, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis.

[40] Ross, Carne. 2015. "The Kurds' Democratic Experiment." *New York Times*, November 30, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/opinion/the-kurds-democratic-experiment.html; Enzinna, Wes. 2015. "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *New York Times*, November 24, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html; Ross, Carne. 2015. "Power to the People: A Syrian Experiment in Democracy." *Financial Times*, October 28, 2015. https://www.ft.com/content/50102294-77fd-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7.

[41] Graeber (2014) and Knefel (2016). The "Rojava Experiment" spawned numerous personal accounts, political tracts, and solidarity statements (see, e.g., Tatort Kurdistan 2013; Sabio 2015; Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness 2015; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016; Tax 2016).

[42] Milne, Richard. 2022. "Sweden Distances itself from Kurdish Groups to Win Turkey's NATO Support." *Financial Times*, November 6, 2022. https://www.ft.com/content/44076fc9-9a93-4ea4-99ee-a66246a83518.

[43] Pillar, Ingrid. 2022. "Woman, Life, Freedom—The Slogan Swimming Against the Global Tide." *Language on the Move*, Accessed March 31, 2023. https://www.languageonthemove.com/women-life-freedom-the-slogan-swimming-against-the-global-tide/; Bayram, Seyma and Diba Mohtasham. 2022. "Iran's Protests Find Inspiration in a Revolutionary Kurdish Slogan." *National Public Radio*, October 27, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/10/27/1131436766/kurdish-roots-iran-protest-slogan.

in the opposite direction from reductionist approaches to conflicts, instead emphasizing the aggregation of actors and processes in complex spatial configurations. In the Kurdish case, disparate sites such as Diyarbakir in Turkey, Marseille in southern France, Istanbul, London, New York, and Kobane in northern Syria became tied together within a single "conflict assemblage" that transcends geographical boundaries. In order to understand how these different spaces are connected, we need a framework that brings a wider aperture than that provided by much of the literature on civil war. By engaging in a deeper form of "ontological theorizing" and by treating violent conflicts as assemblages with their own symbolic boundaries, political dynamics, internal governance structures, and strategic logics, we move a step closer to having a better understanding of the political geography of globalized civil wars.

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