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## The differential development of pro-Kurdish mobilizations in France

### ABSTRACT

France is the second-largest settlement country for the Kurdish diaspora, and one of the main centers of Kurdish and pro-Kurdish mobilization in Europe. The links between France and the Kurds are long-standing and numerous, but also often ambiguous, particularly in view of the repression still often suffered by some Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists within the French social movement space. This article describes the various development processes behind the spread of Kurdish demands within French society, looking back at the historical, political and sociological dynamics of Kurdish diasporic and militant structuration.

**Keywords** : cause entrepreneurs, social movement space, framing processes, activist networks, transnationalism.

### RÉSUMÉ

La France est le deuxième plus grand pays d'accueil pour la diaspora kurde et l'un des principaux foyers de mobilisation kurdiste et pro-kurde en Europe. Les liens entre la France et les Kurdes sont profonds et anciens, mais souvent marqués par une certaine ambiguïté, notamment en raison de la répression persistante subie par certains activistes kurdes et pro-kurdes dans l'espace des mouvements

sociaux en France. Cet article examine les divers processus de développement qui sous-tendent la diffusion des revendications kurdes au sein de la société française, en retraçant les dynamiques historiques, politiques et sociologiques de la structuration diasporique et militante kurde.

**Mots-clés :** entrepreneurs de cause, espace des mouvements sociaux, processus de cadrage, réseaux militants, transnationalisme.

On October 12, 2019, in Paris, two rallies were taking place on the same day in support of the Kurds of Rojava, targets of a new attack by the Turkish army in northeastern Syria. The first was held on Place du Trocadéro, at the call of the Institut Kurde de Paris (IKP) and in the presence of numerous public figures such as European Deputy Raphaël Glucksmann of Place Publique (PP), Parti Socialiste (PS) Senator Rémi Féraud and the Rojava representative in France, Khaled Issa. Then it was off to Place de la République for a second rally, called by the Centre Démocratique Kurde en France (CDK-F), which brings together around 20,000 Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists, including other political representatives such as Olivier Besancenot for the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) and the two Deputies from La France Insoumise (LFI), Eric Coquerel and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Almost five years later, the same two Kurdish organizations organized two other events in Paris, one day apart, to celebrate the Kurdish New Year, Newroz. The first was on March 20 at the Mairie du XXème arrondissement, organized by the IKP, and the second on March 21 at the Hôtel Lutetia, organized by the CDK-F. As with the 2019 demonstrations, French personalities are featured prominently by both organizations in the presentation of their respective evenings : we find Senator Rémi Féraud on March 20, and former Minister Jean Michel-Blanquer and then Deputy Sarah Tanzilli of the Renaissance (RE) party, co-President of the study group on the Kurds at the National Assembly, the following day.

Beyond these divisions in the organization of mobilizations in favor of the Kurdish cause in France, the antagonism between the two Kurdish militant poles that are the CDK-F and the IKP was one of the elements observed during my investigation of Kurdish activism in the French « espace des mouvements sociaux » (Mathieu 2012). This notion of social movement space designates a « relatively autonomous universe of practice and meaning within the social world, and within which mobilizations are united by relations of interdependence » [translated from Mathieu 2012]. As the two previous examples illustrate, these Kurdish militant structures are both autonomous in the sense that they stage their own demonstrations, but also interdependent in terms of the common frame of reference that underpins their mobilizations and their competing aims of gaining the support of French public figures. How then can we explain this special relationship between the two main Kurdish militant structures in France ?

Through a presentation of the historical, political and sociological environment of development of Kurdish mobilizations and demands in the French social movement space, this article aims to present the causes and consequences of the internal antagonism within Kurdish militant structuring in France. Com-

pared with existing research on Kurdish mobilizations in France (Karagöz 2017; Toivanen 2021) or more widely in Europe (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Grojean 2008; Casier 2011 ; Schött 2021), the originality of this hypothesis lies in the fact that it seeks not so much to study the transnational dynamics of the development of Kurdish mobilizations in diaspora, but to analyze what is potentially specific in the adaptation of these mobilizations to a particular political context.

To do so, my analysis is based on research begun in 2019 among Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists in France, between Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseille, Montpellier, Paris and Rennes. A fieldwork consisting of participant-observations conducted at 32 public events or internal to the organizations followed, the conduct of interviews with 50 stakeholder actors of Kurdist (Grojean, 2008) and pro-Kurdish mobilizations in France, as well as the constitution of a corpus of historical data relating to these mobilizations from archives, administrative or associative, and publications, scientific or produced by the actors concerned.

### **Pre-diasporic foundations of the Franco-Kurdish relationship.**

From a historical point of view, France was already in contact with the Kurds at the end of the First World War : as part of the negotiations for the division of the territories of the Ottoman Empire, defeated during the conflict, a delegation of Kurdish notables took part in the Paris Peace Conference from January to August 1919. Among these « entrepreneurs » (Cobb and Elder 1972) of the Kurdish cause, bearing various claims for Kurdistan, was Emin Ali Bedir Khan (Özoğlu 2004). A descendant of the Bedir Khan dynasty that ruled the autonomous principality of Botan until the mid-nineteenth century, he is Vice-President of the Society for the Development of Kurdistan (*Cemîyeta Tealîya Kurdistanê*), which has been advocating the creation of an independent Kurdish state since 1917 (Henning 2018). Yet France and the UK intend to rely on client states capable of supporting their strategic visions in the region.

The Western victors of the Great War therefore had every interest in supporting the creation of territorial entities detached from the rest of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and acting as buffer states against Soviet ambitions in Anatolia, whose representatives would be accountable to them. The Treaty of Sèvres signed in 1920, following these negotiations, provided for the establishment of a greater independent Armenia and an « autonomous Kurdish territory » in the eastern part of present-day Türkiye. However, the remnants of the Ottoman army organized themselves to prevent the establishment of the borders provided for in the treaty, and took up arms under the command of Mustafa Kemal. He led the revolt during the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922), which led

to the renegotiation of the Treaty in Lausanne and the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. The Kurdish autonomy envisaged at Sèvres was never established, nor was independent Armenia.

Nevertheless, France retained a direct link with the Kurds in the Levant, as it obtained a mandate from the League of Nations to administer the territories currently corresponding to Syria and Lebanon. With the creation of this new administrative entity in 1923, part of the Kurds formerly living under Ottoman rule now found themselves under French authority. They were soon joined by Kurdish militants in exile, who gathered in Beirut and Damascus after fleeing the repression of the first Kurdish mobilizations against the new Turkish government. However, the French Mandatory Authority was not much more tender towards autonomist demands relating to its new borders, and did not hesitate to fight against Kurdish tribes who intended to resist the establishment of its authority (Tejel Gorgas 2006b). Yet, some French actors present in the region during the Mandate period began to take a more detailed interest in the Kurdish population.

This was firstly the case of Pierre Rondot, a member of the French intelligence services based in Beirut since 1928, who, as part of his work, set up an ethnographic approach to studying the populations living on French territory in the Levant (Blau 2000). He thus developed a scientific interest in Kurdish languages and literature, illustrated by a whole series of academic publications on the subject from 1933 onwards (Rondot 1933, 1935, 1936a, 1936b, 1937, 1939...). However, at the same time, some of the Kurdish militants active since the French Mandate had themselves begun to develop their activities in the cultural and linguistic field, following the failure of their successive attempts at revolt in Türkiye. Two of Emin Ali Bedir Khan's sons, Celadet and Kamuran, are indeed working to promote the Kurdish cause throughout the region, through a repertoire of actions aimed at disseminating Kurdish identity. Examples include the creation of a new Latin alphabet for the Kurmancî language and the publication of magazines written in this new form, for which Frenchmen such as Rondot write.

He was joined by Roger Lescot, who had been in charge of the French Institute in Damascus since 1935, and a linguist with a degree in Arabic, Turkish and Persian from the École des Langues Orientales. Fascinated by the study of the Kurds, so much so that at one point he wanted to write a thesis on the subject, he befriended the Bedir Khan brothers and relayed their demands to the French administration. In 1940, he wrote a report on the *Bases éventuelles d'une politique kurde*, in which he supported the organization of kurmancî courses based

on the work of the Bedir Khan brothers (Tejel Gorgas 2006a). In the same year, Father Thomas Bois, a French missionary who had been working with the Kurds as a Dominican priest since 1927 (Pouillon 2008, 117), met the Bedir Khan brothers in Beirut. A keen observer of Kurdish languages and culture, particularly because of his interest in oral tradition (Chaliand and Ghassem lou 1981), the priest joined the action repertoires of the Kurdish cause's entrepreneurs, who had been distributing periodicals and radio broadcasts in Kurdish since the French Mandate in the Levant during World War II (Henning 2018).

Following the independence of Lebanon in 1943 and Syria in 1946, which came at the end of the conflict, these three founding fathers of French Kurdology continued their activities from metropolitan France, where they welcomed Emir Kamuran Bedir Khan to Paris in 1948. The latter was indeed invited by his three friends to replace Pierre Rondot as the new holder of the Chair of Kurdish Languages and Civilizations at the *École des Langues Orientales*, created two years earlier by General de Gaulle in gratitude for the Kurds' work for Free France during the War<sup>1</sup>. On the strength of this position, the descendant of the Botan princes' dynasty mobilized from the French capital to bring Kurdish autonomist demands to the West, in the period of redefined international alliances that characterized the beginning of the Cold War. Paris once again became a meeting place for Kurdish cause activists, particularly among students, who joined him to follow the academic and political teachings of the Emir, who also founded the Centre d'études kurdes in Paris in 1949 (More 1984). Kamuran Bedir Khan was thus at the origin of the training of a whole generation of Kurdish and non-Kurdish students, who would commit themselves to the Kurdish cause alongside him.

This is particularly true of Joyce Blau, interviewed as part of the research behind this article, who began taking Kamuran Bedir Khan's Kurdish language and civilization courses at the *École des Langues Orientales* in 1959. This young French student was also a communist and anti-colonialist activist, notably active in support networks for political prisoners in Egypt - where she was born - and for the independence fighters of the Algerian National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN). As a result, she was targeted by French intelligence services in 1960 and had to go into exile in Belgium, where the Emir visited her to help her write her dissertation on *Le fait national kurde* in 1962. This work inspired the publication in 1963 of her first book on *Le problème kurde* (Blau 1963), and prompted her to continue her studies with a thesis in linguistics on *Le kurde de 'Amadiya et de Djabal Sindjar* (Blau 1976), after her return to

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<sup>1</sup> International conference in tribute to Kamuran A. Bedir Khan, organized by the Kurdish Institute of Paris on December 14, 2018.

France in 1966. At the same time, she continued her militant commitment through active participation in the clandestine Solidarités movement, set up in 1962 by Henri Curiel, former head of the FLN support network, to help national liberation movements in the Middle East.

Also in 1959, Îsmet Şerif Wanlî moved to Paris to pursue his studies. This Sorbonne student is particularly interested in the history of Kurdistan, and is also President, as well as one of the founders, of the Kurdish Students Association in Europe (KSSE), which by its creation three years earlier had realized the Bedir Khan brothers' plan to bring Kurdish academics and students together on the continent. When he moved to Paris, he became close to the Emir, and alongside him became one of the spokesmen in Europe for the Kurdish revolt led in Iraq from 1961 onwards by Mustafa Barzani<sup>2</sup>. The KSSE and Vanli were then accused by the Iraqi embassy in France of being an « European Kurdish nationalist propaganda center » (Tejel Gorgas, 2013).

In the meantime, the activist Henri Curiel was also behind an encounter between Kamuran Bedir Khan and another personality interviewed for this investigation : Gérard Chaliand. Chaliand, a young French anti-colonial activist who had just returned from a trip to Asia that took him through the Kurdish regions of Türkiye, knew Curiel through his involvement in the struggle for Algerian independence. It was on this basis that Curiel introduced him to the Emir, presented as the representative of the Kurdish struggle against colonialism. Gérard Chaliand left this meeting with several books under his arm, one of which was written by Thomas Bois and the other by Kamuran Bedir Khan himself, with the task of drafting a tract on *La question kurde* for the annual KSSE Congress in 1960, which he was invited to attend alongside the Emir and Îsmet Şerif Wanlî. This work (Chaliand 1961b) was subsequently published by the militant publisher François Maspero, himself committed to Algerian independence, who published another work by Gérard Chaliand the same year, inspired by his meeting with Bedir Khan, as well as Pierre Rondot and Roger Lescot : *Anthologie de la poésie populaire kurde* (Chaliand 1961a).

In the early 1960s, a network of Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists was then active in France. Essentially Parisian, this network was structured around the figure of Emir Kamuran Bedir Khan, who directly contributed to the transfer of Kurdish claims from the Levant to France, through his own process of settlement in the French capital. Benefiting from significant capital in terms of political legitimacy due to his family heritage, his own militant career and his

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<sup>2</sup> « Ismet Sherif Wanlî », *Kurdistanica*, accessed online January 27, 2024. <https://kurdistanica.com/427/ismet-sherif-vanli/>



academic position, Kamuran Bedir Khan also strengthened the process of interweaving his Kurdish claims in the space of French and European social movements by forging links not only with other exiled cause entrepreneurs, but also with local political actors who had integrated the Kurdish cause into the framework of their anti-colonial mobilizations. So, while a Kurdish diaspora in France has not yet really taken shape, given that there are few Kurds living in the country apart from the few students mentioned above, there is already a first center of Kurdish mobilization in Paris.

### **Increasing Kurdish immigration to Europe and broadening of the militant spectrum.**

Throughout the 1960s, Türkiye signed a series of labor agreements with several Western European countries. First with Germany in 1961, then with Belgium, the Netherlands and France in 1965. These countries lacked the manpower to fuel their economic growth, and Türkiye saw unemployment rise in its countryside as a result of the modernization of its agriculture. Thousands of workers were invited to choose economic emigration (Gokalp 1973). Among them were individuals from regions notably populated by Kurds.

Kurdish immigration was thus partly channelled through Turkish economic immigration to Western Europe, and the few Kurdish academics who were already present were joined by workers from regions distant from the intellectual centers through which figures such as Kamuran Bedir Khan (born and educated in Istanbul) or İsmet Şerif Wanlı (born and educated in Damascus then Beirut) had passed. The difference in social capital between newcomers and recent immigrants is also reflected in their disparity in terms of geographical distribution. Kurds who have come to France to study are mainly to be found in Paris, where they frequent academic and activist circles, as illustrated above. Immigrant workers, on the other hand, are scattered throughout the various employment areas of Europe and France. And while some of them did settle in the Paris region, they did not frequent the same circles as the students and intellectuals who arrived earlier, as they worked in the automotive, construction, lumbering, garment, plastics or tire industries (Débarre and Petek 2019).

Moreover, economic immigrants are often recruited by neighborhood, village or province of origin, and distributed among compatriots from the same regions when they arrive in France. Often knowing little of the French language or culture, and under no compulsion to integrate through these means because their presence was considered temporary at the time, they recreated their original way of life during migration (Kastoryano 1986). Confined to more or less de-

cent barracks or housing (Petek-Şalom 1992) offered by their employers, and initially arriving without their families, immigrant workers often participate only through work in the daily life of their host society. Their habits were therefore not very different from those they had in Türkiye, particularly from a political point of view. At that time, Kurdish mobilizations and demands were virtually absent from Turkish social movements.

After years of bloody repression of Kurdish revolts and one-party rule in the early years of the Republic, Türkiye found it difficult to adapt to a multi-party system following the military coup of 1960, which overthrew the first non-Kemalist government and sentenced several of its leaders, including Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, to death. And although the new party inspired by this government's program was re-elected to power in 1965, the echo of Kurdish political movements active at the same time in Iraq or Europe did not take at first the form of partisan mobilizations in Türkiye. The very term « Kurd » was all but banished from Turkish political debate, and only rarely was the population referred to as « Eastern Turks » or « Mountain Turks » (Grojean 2017). The population itself does not refer to itself by this term from a militant point of view, meaning in the form of a political identity, unlike the discourses carried by personalities such as Kamuran Bedir Khan and İsmet Şerif Wanlî in Europe, or Mustafa Barzani in Iraq. As a result, immigrant workers from predominantly Kurdish regions of Anatolia do not claim to be Kurds in France any more than they do in Türkiye.

Yet, at the same time, the demands made by these activists continued to spread throughout French academic and militant circles, as illustrated by the creation of the Comité de solidarité avec la révolution kurde (C.S.R.K.) in 1966 by Jean-Pierre Viennot, a student at the École des langues orientales and Maoist militant. This organization in turn aims to support the Kurdish movement led by Mustafa Barzani in Iraq, here assimilated to a revolutionary anti-imperialist struggle in the same way as the « révolution yéménite », for example, for whose support Jean-Pierre Viennot also militates as « Secrétaire du Comité de solidarité à la révolution yéménite et aux mouvements de libération de la péninsule arabe ». The various militant affiliations of the founder of this association, who was also a member of the « Comité de soutien à la lutte anti-impérialiste des peuples arabes », according to the C.S.R.K. archives, continue to shed light on the ideological frameworks within which the demands of the first Kurdish cause-builders in France at the time were constructed. As well as the associative and institutional affiliations of the members of the C.S.R.K.'s « Comité de patronage », which included academics such as the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch and the sociologist Maxime Rodinson, as well as representatives of international

autonomist or independence movements (Assyrian, Basque, Breton, Catalan, Palestinian, Walloon and Aosta Valley) alongside anti-imperialist activists. This *a priori* disparate grouping is nevertheless in line with the links previously created by Emir Kamuran Bedir Khan and İsmet Şerif Wanlî with anti-colonialist activists, while also corresponding to the work of the first mentioned for the safeguarding of Kurdish languages, insofar as we also find the Secretary General and Deputy Secretary of the « Association Internationale pour la défense des langues et cultures menacées (A.I.D.L.C.M.) », among other linguists who are also members of the association's « Comité de patronage ».

The interweaving of the Comité de solidarité avec la révolution kurde (C.S.R.K.) with the structure that had begun to form around Kamuran Bedir Khan since he took up his post at the École des langues orientales is further illustrated by the fact that the founder of this association, Jean-Pierre Viennot, is himself a student at this institution. Above all, in its first year of activity, C.S.R.K. received the support of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê*, PDK), founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani. A letter from General Barzani to the Secretary of the Comité de Solidarité à la Révolution Kurde, dated December 8, 1966, was published by the association, announcing the decision taken at the PDK's Seventh Congress to send one of its representatives to Paris to present in person the difficulties facing the people of Kurdistan, to the members of the C.S.R.K. The following year, 1967, the Comité de solidarité avec la révolution kurde (C.S.R.K.) continued to link the Kurdish cause with other international mobilizations in its publications. These include texts presenting Kurdistan as a second Vietnam, or including the Kurds in a list of peoples who have engaged in armed struggle to wrest their rights from their oppressors, alongside « Colombie [...] Angola, [...] Arabie du Sud [...] Québec [...] Cachemire ». Two years later, in 1969, Jean-Pierre Viennot also became a teacher at the École des Langues Orientales, with a course on « l'Histoire des Kurdes et du Kurdistan » in the Kurdish Studies Department, still directed by the Emir.

From that time onwards, another student played a very important role in the development of this pole of Kurdish and pro-Kurdish demands in France : Kendal Nezan. Encountered in the course of this investigation, Kendal Nezan was a Kurdish student from Ankara University who, in 1967, won a Turkish government scholarship to study nuclear physics at the University of Berkeley in the United States. On the way, he stopped off in France, and decided to stay on during the events of May '68. Losing his funding, he lived for a time on the streets of Paris, but befriended Henri Curiel's group of activists. Already politically committed during his studies in Türkiye, for example through the creation

of a Kurdish students' association and the publication of a book by a publishing house classified as left-wing by the Turkish regime, he also defined himself at the time as a Maoist activist. In parallel with his activism, he continued his studies in France, founding the Union des étudiants kurdes de France (UEKF) and eventually completing his doctorate in particle physics before working as a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) and then at the Collège de France.

Arrived after the signing of the labor agreement between France and Türkiye in 1965, Kendal Nezan's migratory trajectory is not comparable to that of the Kurds who arrived in France as economic immigrants. In an interview, he confides that in the early 1970s, there were « only twelve Kurds in France [...] all students », and that for lack of sufficient numbers to rent a hall to celebrate the 1971 Newroz, he was obliged to borrow the premises of the Quebec student association in Paris. It's an anecdote that reveals the gap that existed still between the two types of Kurdish immigrants to France : those who have come to the country for economic reasons, and those who have come for academic reasons. Two populations that don't mix, insofar as they don't seem to know each other.

However, despite coming from an educational and sociological background that distanced him from the daily lives of Kurdish immigrant workers - his father was a civil servant and an avid reader of literature - Kendal Nezan was nonetheless committed to expanding Kurdish militancy in France. Still in 1971, he and his comrades - among whom he cites Gérard Chaliand and Emir Kamuran Bedir Khan - mobilized to accompany the arrival of exiles fleeing the new military coup in Türkiye. In fact, the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with the beginnings of a resurgence of Kurdish demands in the Turkish political arena, as part of the gradual take-up of the subject by the more or less radical left-wing organizations that began to proliferate at the time of the 1971 coup (Grojean 2017).

A new type of political immigrant is therefore coming to Europe from Türkiye, and some of them are keen to continue mobilizing from abroad in relation to the space of Turkish social movements, by transposing their mobilization structures to the immigrant populations of Turkish provenance already present there. Especially since, in addition to the migrants already present, the families of workers who had arrived during the labor drive began to join them in France, as family reunification policies began to be implemented in the 1970s. But these partisan movements, which are re-forming abroad because they are banned in Türkiye, still correspond to the Turkish political landscape, in which the Kurds

are still not represented as such, and it is therefore mainly Turkish organizations of the left (Nell 2008), the right (Antakyali 1992) or Islam-politics (Weibel 1992) that are active or re-activated in Europe.

Kendal Nezan is nevertheless at the origin of the creation of a new pro-Kurdish structure in 1975, with France-Kurdistan, whose official founder is Gérard Chaliand, due to the fact that the right of association was not then open to foreigners in France. The two men were backed by French intellectuals who, as with the Comité de solidarité à la révolution kurde (C.S.R.K.), illustrated the new dimension taken on by the network of mobilizations in favor of the Kurdish cause within French social movements. Among the members of this France-Kurdistan association are philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, known for their commitment during the Algerian War and May 68 ; Maxime Rodinson, already a member of the C.S.R.K.'s « Comité de patronage » ; the sociologist Edgar Morin, an anti-fascist activist who participated in the Spanish Civil War and the French Resistance ; the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, previously committed to opposing torture during the Algerian War and to the creation of a Palestinian state ; the diplomat Bernard Dorin, then French Ambassador to Haiti ; the journalist Claude Bourdet, also a resistance fighter, anti-colonialist, pacifist and socialist activist ; and the then Secretary of State for the Status of Women, Françoise Giroud.

This new example of the ability of these Kurdish cause entrepreneurs from a university-based migratory trajectory to attract increasingly endowed support in terms of social and political capital, illustrates once again the gap between the activism of these Kurdish militants and the situation of Kurdish immigrant workers in the 1970s.

### **Structuring the diaspora and a second pole of pro-Kurdish mobilization.**

The situation took a new turn at the beginning of the following decade, with the arrival of a new generation of political exiles following the 1980 military coup in Türkiye, the third in twenty years. This time, Kurdish activists were among the main targets of the putschist junta that seized power, imprisoning thousands of citizens suspected of belonging to a revolutionary left-wing organization, whether Kurdish or not. Torture of these suspected opponents was systematized, and most political parties were banned. But, just as after the previous coup d'état, those who took the road to exile sought to recreate a militant dynamic in the diaspora and around their demands. Because fifteen years after the signing of labor agreements between Türkiye and France, a diasporic consciousness was developing in the early 1980s.

Immigrant workers who arrived from Türkiye in the late 1960s, and were joined by their families throughout the 1970s, have continued to follow the daily life of their country of origin, and are therefore aware of developments in the Turkish political landscape since their departure. Living in Europe, but linked to Turkish society by their way of life, their comings and goings to Türkiye on vacation, and, for those who have developed their own businesses, the multiplication of commercial exchanges as part of the development of their companies, Türkiye's economic immigrants have created an « espace transnational » (De Tapia 1996) between their country of origin and their host society. One of the other pillars of this space is the regular monitoring of Turkish news by immigrants through the provision of Turkish press, radio and TV channels in Europe (De Tapia 1996). As a result, migrants from Türkiye have followed the changes in the Turkish political landscape since their departure, and in particular the reappearance of Kurdish movements.

For those from Kurdish-inhabited regions, this development may have acted as a revelation in terms of identity. Considered as Turks within their host society due to their migratory trajectory, this part of the emigrant population then realized that they were being pointed at for their difference by certain political parties in their country of origin, and that other movements were fighting for the right to claim this difference. The Kurdish cause, which had so far been largely marginalized by the Turkish political landscape, either not taking it into account at all or in invisibilizing terms and in the context of non-specific demands, took on its independence throughout the 1970s from the rest of Türkiye's partisan organizations, particularly from a revolutionary angle. Kurdish militant organizations multiply and often draw on a repertoire of violent action both from the matrix of Turkish radical left-wing movements (Grojean 2017) and from the imaginary relating to previous Kurdish revolts. At the same time, however, Turkish nationalist movements were also becoming more extreme, not hesitating to take up arms against what they saw as communist and separatist threats to the Turkish state. When the military re-entered the political scene in 1980, it was officially to put an end to violence on both sides, but in fact it was mainly Kurds and left-wing activists who were locked up and tortured after the coup.

When they arrived in France after their imprisonment or before their arrest, the new Kurdish exiles discovered a country where kurdist mobilizations were already well known and where a population receptive to their ideas had already settled. Indeed, even beyond the previous generation of Kurdish immigrants, the Parti Socialiste, which came to power with François Mitterrand in 1981, was made aware of the Kurdish cause through Kendal Nezan. The latter had

been introduced to the future President of the Republic and his wife, Danielle Mitterrand, as early as 1976, by mutual friends, and was subsequently introduced to Lionel Jospin, then National Secretary for the Third World of the Parti Socialiste (PS), to present him with the situation of the Kurds in the world. Moreover, in 1981, the new socialist majority voted to open up the right of association to foreigners, thus paving the way for the associative structuring of the Kurdish political movement in France.

The 1980s therefore saw an increase in the number of Kurdish immigrant organizations throughout France. In the three years from 1981 to 1984, the creation of thirteen associations with the word « Kurd » or « Kurdistan » in their names was recorded in the Journal Officiel, both in the Paris region and elsewhere in France, following the Kurdish diaspora's settlements in the center (Nevers) and east (Chalon-sur-Saône, Grenoble, Montbéliard) of the country. A period synonymous of a certain golden age for the Kurdish cause in France, insofar as in 1982 filmmaker Yilmaz Güney won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his film *Yol*, shot partially in Kurmançî, and that same year saw the creation of the Institut Kurde de Paris (IKP). Chaired by Kendal Nezan, this new organization once again brings together Kurdish artists, including Yilmaz Güney, with French intellectuals, such as Gérard Chaliand and Joyce Blau. The Institute was also created as a tribute to Kamuran Bedir Khan, who died in Paris in 1978, and whose Chair of Kurdish Languages and Civilizations was taken over by Joyce Blau after the Emir's retirement in 1970.

But this time, this type of activism is no longer the only one to represent Kurds in the French social movement space, as illustrated by the reference to « travailleurs » found in the names of five of the thirteen Kurdish associations previously listed. This term can be used to refer to the migrant workers who have been arriving in France since 1965, and to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), which emerged in Türkiye in 1978. A Kurdish political organization among others within the Turkish social movement space prior to the 1980 coup d'état, the PKK distinguished itself in the years that followed by its ability to mobilize despite repression. Notably in prison, where the party recruited among militants arrested by the junta, and also from abroad, where its cadres were sent to establish themselves among the Kurdish diaspora, seen as a reservoir of financial and human resources. Some of the political exiles of 1971 and 1980 see a model in this movement, which continues to fight against the Turkish state at all costs, both underground and in the face of torture. This feeling became even more pronounced after 1984, with the official start of the armed conflict between the Turkish government's armed forces and the Kurdish guerrilla group PKK. From that time onwards, Kurds living in countries



bordering Türkiye or in Europe began to join the ranks of the PKK, while party militants continued to move in the opposite direction to consolidate the structuring of their networks abroad.

However, this logic of transposing the movement to the diaspora was accompanied by an import of the conflict's violence, and on December 23, 1985, a presumed PKK member was murdered in the 10th arrondissement of Paris. A murder of uncertain motive : an attack by ultra-right-wing Turkish nationalists commissioned by the military junta's representatives abroad, or a settling of scores in the political competition for influence among the Kurdish diaspora? Either way, the victim is honored by pro-PKK activists in France, who regularly visit his grave in the Père Lachaise cemetery. The fact remains that this incident is part of a wider dynamic of violent actions surrounding PKK activities in Europe and the Middle East, and that the French authorities are beginning to view this organization from a security rather than a political angle.

At the end of the 1980s, the self-managed libertarian community of Longo Maï in the Alpes de Haute-Provence, one of whose spokesmen was interviewed as part of this investigation, was the subject of a large-scale police raid on suspicion of having hosted a PKK training camp on its land. This accusation is based in part on the fact that the exiled Kurdish lawyer Hüseyin Yıldırım, then considered to be one of the PKK's representatives in Europe, stayed at Longo Maï for a time in 1987. Yet Hüseyin Yıldırım is suspected by French police of having a link with the 1988 assassination of two other Kurdish activists in the Paris region, one of whom was the leader of the Association des travailleurs du Kurdistan in Paris's 10th arrondissement.

Despite this mortifying dynamic, Kurdist demands continue to widen their audience in France, and their supporters continue to weave their web within the diaspora and the French social movement space. This is the case, for example, of Mehmet Ali Dogan, a political refugee encountered in the course of this research who arrived in France after the 1980 coup d'état in Türkiye, following which he was imprisoned and tortured for six years by the military junta. Welcomed in Paris by the Comité inter-mouvements auprès des évacués (CI-MADE), where he learned French, he became involved as an intermediary for Kurdish exiles who, unlike him, were not fortunate enough to be granted refugee status quickly. Became a truck driver before resuming his studies, and in parallel with his militant activity, he shares the daily life of those he accompanies, sometimes living with up to twenty people in the same studio in the Gare de l'Est district of Paris, where they take turns to sleep.



Backed by his language skills and his militant experience as a human rights activist in Türkiye, and not affiliated to the PKK despite his personal relations with some of its militants, he helped to make the party's demands audible beyond its repertoire of actions, by discussing the situation of the Kurds of Türkiye within French political movements to which he himself was close as an activist. His stature as an intermediary and the process of connecting cadres (Benford and Snow 2000) enabled him in turn to meet Danielle Mitterrand, who had not ceased to be interested in the Kurds since her meeting with Kendal Nezan (Carcèlès 2025) ; then the environmental activist José Bové, with whom he befriended and eventually organized meetings on non-violence between Kurdish activists and European pacifists on the Plateau du Larzac. Close to the founders of the Kurdistan Information Center (CIK) at 127 rue Lafayette in Paris' 10th arrondissement in 1993 - which became infamous twenty years later following the triple assassination on its premises of Fidan Doğan, Leyla Soylemez and PKK co-founder Sakine Cansiz - he acts as a link between these French political figures and Kurdish militants categorized as pro-PKK. In 1998, in this capacity, he accompanied Danielle Mitterrand to Rome, as part of the negotiations with the Italian Prime Minister for the reception in Europe of the PKK's main leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

In the meantime, pro-PKK associations have federated within the Federation of Patriotic Workers' Associations and Cultural Associations of Kurdistan (FEYKA, *Federasyona Yekîtiya Karkerên Welatparêzen Çandîya Kurdistan*), which brings together all the organizations close to the party in France and Germany, and whose creation was officially recorded in Paris in 1995 in the Journal Officiel. Although considered a terrorist organization by Türkiye, and by extension treated as such by its European allies such as France, the PKK has a growing network of associations in the diaspora, most of which are tolerated by local authorities. These organizations play a social and not just a political role among Kurds in France, insofar as the PKK sees itself as a mass organization concerned with all aspects of its militants' daily lives. Which is particularly appealing in the case of migrants, who by definition lack reference points. Representing both a place to help with integration, through support in settlement processes such as obtaining a job, housing or residence permit, these associations also represent places of sociability for Kurds living far from home and not necessarily having access to the activities of an organization like the Kurdish Institute.

Based solely in Paris and founded by personalities from migratory and social backgrounds that are often quite different from their own, the association headed by Kendal Nezan may appear, in some respects, remote from the everyday life of this

population. However, the IKP continues to be very active, despite this new competition in the representation of the Kurdish movement in France, and the threats to its funding in times of governmental cohabitation at the top of the French state. Although François Mitterrand remained in power until 1995, the Socialists have not governed the country continuously since 1981, and the right-wing governments led by Jacques Chirac (1986-1988) and then Édouard Balladur (1993-1995) have been far less supportive of the Kurds than the Socialists. Yet the IKP is heavily dependent on public subsidies from the French state for its operations. Its very existence was thus threatened by these governmental changes, until financial support was obtained from Norway and Sweden, enabling the Institute to continue its work. This international governmental support illustrates the position acquired by the IKP in the transnational space of Kurdish mobilizations. As did its organization in 1991 of an international inter-parliamentary conference on the Kurdish problem before the US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in Washington, and its participation in a comparable event in Moscow the same year. This new dimension led the American political scientist Nicole F. Watts to define the IKP as a quasi-diplomatic representation (Watts 2004), particularly in the context of the establishment of regional autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan following the international intervention against Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991. Because of its historical proximity to the Barzani movement, the IKP is increasingly seen as one of the main foreign partners of this new Kurdish political entity, whose ideological dogma, political interests, repertoire of action and demands are not necessarily the same as those of the PKK.

### **An antagonism that reflects the changing context in both Kurdistan and France.**

In Iraq, as in Türkiye, the 1990s saw both the legalization of political action and the transformation of armed struggle for Kurdish militancy. While the first autonomous institutions of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq were being set up following the local elections of 1992, four deputies of the Democratic Party (*Demokrasi Partisi*, DEP) were imprisoned in Türkiye for treason and alleged membership of the PKK. Among them was Leyla Zana, a Kurdish activist who had already been arrested and tortured in 1988 for her commitment to the PKK, and who had dared to speak in her mother tongue rather than in Turkish when she took the oath of office to become an elected member of the Turkish Parliament. Her incarceration sparked a wave of support for her, particularly abroad and in France.

This is particularly true of Sylvie Jan, head of the *Fédération internationale des femmes* and the *Femmes solidaires* association. Interviewed as part of this re-

search, she mobilized the activist resources of her network, firstly to provide legal assistance to the Kurdish Deputy, then to take charge of the reception of her children in France, in partnership with the Institut Kurde de Paris (IKP), the Danielle Mitterrand Foundation (France Libertés) and a Communist municipality in the Paris region. A feminist activist, Sylvie Jan has also been close to the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) since her youth, marked by an interest in international causes, and as such will be one of the architects of this party's rapprochement with pro-PKK Kurdish militancy. Having promised Leyla Zana to publicize her demands in France following their meeting during her trial, Sylvie Jan was accompanied in this endeavor by another communist activist in the late 1990s, following the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan.

After the failure of negotiations to bring him to Europe, in which Danielle Mitterrand and Mehmet Ali Dogan took part in 1998, the PKK leader was arrested in Kenya the following year, then extradited to Türkiye to stand trial. However, the conflict in which his organization had been engaged with the Turkish army since 1984 had in the meantime caused tens of thousands of victims in the country, where the death penalty was requested. However, the risk of lynching that hung over him and his defense lawyers prompted human rights activists to organize international delegations to come and ensure that the legal proceedings were proceeding properly. Among them was Joël Dutto, elected Communist councilor for Marseille's 15th arrondissement and PCF general councilor for the Bouches-du-Rhône department, interviewed as part of this research. Influenced by his experience as an observer on this trip, Joël Dutto went back and forth to Türkiye many times over the following years to meet the Kurds, whose practices continue to be violently repressed by the state, even though Öcalan's arrest was at the origin of a ceasefire between the Turkish army and the PKK.

Without its leader, the Kurdish organization was in the midst of questioning its internal model, and the Turkish government also seemed ready to negotiate for peace, after more than fifteen years of fighting. Öcalan's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, in part due to the end of the death penalty in Türkiye as part of the country's bid to join the European Union, and the PKK co-founder theorized from his cell a new dogma for his organization: democratic confederalism (Öcalan 2011). An ideology that moves away from its initial Marxist-Leninist discourse and demands for independence, to advocate the autonomy of peoples and direct democracy inspired by libertarian municipalism. As a result, the PKK no longer adheres to a political logic derived from the Cold War context, but is all the more appealing in international altermondialist circles, from which part of the French left is also seeking inspiration, as part of its own ideological moult following the collapse of the USSR.

The institutions that relay the PKK's demands abroad echo this development, and in so doing reinforce the pre-established links between the French actors most receptive to this new trend. Like José Bové, mentioned above and also met in the course of this survey, who is one of the main representatives of this altermondialist movement in France and internationally. Yet Kurdish activists who are members of the PKK or its associative branches in France have already taken part in the meetings he organizes with Mehmet Ali Dogan on a regular basis in Larzac, such as Sakine Cansiz, for the party leadership, and Fidan « Rojbîn » Doğan. This Kurdish activist, who grew up in France following her parents' exile, is a rising star within the pro-PKK structure in Europe : both as a member of the Kurdistan National Congress (*Kongreya netewî ya Kurdistan*, KNK), which brings together representatives of organizations close to the party in Europe, and of the Centre d'Information du Kurdistan (CIK) in Paris.

With this double role, she is in charge of creating links with non-Kurdish political actors to support the cause internationally, while the PKK is still considered terrorist by the European Union and Türkiye itself accuses her of being one of its recruiters. Rojbîn nonetheless approached Joël Dutto and Sylvie Jan, as well as all the activists personally committed to the Kurds of Türkiye, in order to structure the network of supporters receptive to the PKK's evolution in the form of the Coordination Nationale Solidarité Kurdistan (CNSK). A gathering of associative activists as well as political parties, including the PCF, Europe écologie - Les Verts (EELV), the Parti de Gauche (PG) and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA). This gave Rojbîn the opportunity to meet some of the leading figures on the French political scene, including the future President of the Republic, François Hollande.

Yet activists suspected of close links with the PKK continue to live under the constant threat of the party's terrorist characterization. In 2010, for example, Mehmet Ali Dogan was arrested by French police at the request of the Turkish authorities, who accused him of having set up a PKK training camp in Larzac, rather than a political meeting place for militants. Supported in particular by Danielle Mitterrand and José Bové, the Kurdish activist did not remain in prison for too long, but his incarceration illustrates Franco-Turkish police cooperation. In the years that followed, it was Rojbîn who experienced the realization of this threat, during the triple-assassination on the night of January 9-10, 2013, in the CIK's Parisian office at 127 rue Lafayette. Shot in the mouth, Rojbîn, whose talent had been to take the conversation about the Kurds to the highest level of the French state, was found dead alongside PKK co-founder Sakine Cansiz and young activist Leyla Soylemez.

Their deaths, however, did not halt the development of pro-PKK mobilizations in France, quite the contrary, insofar as this affair acted as a kind of electroshock for activists supporting the Kurdish cause and, more broadly, for the French social movements, shocked by this triple political assassination in the middle of Paris. At the same time, the international situation of the Kurds was also evolving : in parallel with the repression of the Syrian popular revolt movement by Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Kurds of Syria had taken up arms and set up an autonomous administration in three cantons on the Syrian-Turkish border, where the precepts of democratic confederalism are being implemented by the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD). But Daech is also taking advantage of the situation in Syria to impose its views on the country, having begun to conquer territories in eastern Iraq, notably by defeating the armed forces of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Kurds on the other side of the Iraqi-Syrian border soon found themselves in the clutches of the terrorist organization, whose atrocities were being seen around the world. Against this backdrop, the town of Kobane became a symbol of the clash between two completely opposed models of society, when it was besieged from all sides by fighters from the terrorist organization.

Numerous demonstrations are held abroad to call for international support for the defenders of Kobane, and particularly in France, where the network structured by Rojbîn is particularly active, in support of the FEYKA associations, which in 2014 became the Centre Démocratique Kurde en France (CDK-F). The French state, which is taking part in the international coalition against Daech in Iraq and then Syria, has since drawn closer to certain members of the CDK-F, due to their links with the PKK and therefore the PYD, to which the defenders of the besieged city belong. As a result, the PKK and its relays in France became interlocutors with the government, while remaining on the list of terrorist organizations. A new legitimacy for the CDK-F, which now finds itself in a position comparable to that of the IKP, whose international stature has meanwhile grown stronger, alongside that of the KRG.

Iraq's Kurdish autonomy became a major player in the Middle East following the American intervention against Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, as the Kurds collaborated with the US-led coalition against Baghdad and, as such, obtained a reinforcement of their autonomous status in the new Iraqi system set up after the fall of the regime. The IKP, with its historic links to the leaders of this autonomous region, has benefited in return from this new stature, through the multiplication of its partnerships with the KRG and the assumption of part of its financing by the autonomous administration, which draws its wealth from oil. A new source of income that removes the regular threats to the IKP's survival that arose with each

change of government in France, but which increasingly assimilates it as a representation of the KRG abroad. If the KRG is rich in oil, it is partly thanks to Türkiye, which enables it to export this resource without going through the central Iraqi state, with which the Kurdish autonomy's relations remain strained.

But in exchange for this commercial way out, Türkiye expects in return a form of collaboration from the KRG in its fight against the PKK, some of whose militants operate from the Turkish-Iraqi border zone, and whose self-administration in Syria also depends on the opening of the Syrian-Iraqi border, which is partly managed by the KRG. While Türkiye resumed its fight against the PKK in 2015 following the failure of peace negotiations, and is multiplying military interventions in northern Syria against the Kurdish fighters who finally defeated Daech in Kobane, the KRG minimizes the passage between its territory and that of the PYD, while at the same time allowing Türkiye to intervene directly on its territory against the PKK. This collaboration is seen as a betrayal by the party's militants and supporters, particularly in France, where the IKP's close relationship with the KRG is particularly denounced by members and support of the CDK-F.

Developed in different contexts, both historically, politically and sociologically, the two poles of pro-Kurdish mobilization in France today - the Centre Démocratique Kurde en France (CDK-F) and the Institut Kurde de Paris (IKP) - have thus also developed an antagonistic relationship in relation to the evolution of the geopolitical situation of the actors of Kurdish militancy in the Middle East, in whose continuity of struggle they are respectively inscribed. Categorized as « bourgeois » in an interview with a CDK-F spokesperson and denounced for what is seen as a betrayal of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, to which it is close, the IKP nevertheless represents an institution whose historical heritage and diplomatic posture make it a key player in support of the Kurdish cause for a whole section of the French political scape. As illustrated, for example, by the presence of former French President François Hollande, former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, former Minister Jack Lang, Senators Patrick Kanner and Rémi Féraud, and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo at the 40th anniversary celebrations of its creation in April 2024. For its part, the CDK-F continues to be treated ambiguously by the French authorities, as it maintains the terrorist label of the PKK, which it claims to support, and which serves as justification for the arrests, and even extraditions, of some of its militants by the French police. But the organization and its representatives also receive implicit support from French elected officials, insofar as members of the CDK-F were received by the government after the new triple murder of Kurdish militants, which took place at the association's Paris premises at 16 rue d'Eng-hien on December 23, 2022.

It would therefore be interesting to see whether this kind of opposition, studied in the French context, can also be observed in other areas of development of Kurdish activism abroad, and particularly in other European countries where Kurds are present in diaspora. While this division between Kurds in France can be seen in the positioning of activists and the structuring of their organizations, it has not prevented the French social movement space and political scape from having been a particularly fertile breeding ground for Kurdish mobilizations and demands in recent years. The symposium at the origin of this article, held at the French Senate in October 2023, which is only the fourth to focus on the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, is one illustration of this trend.

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