


Self-Immolations by Kurdish Activists in Turkey and Europe

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 Although researchers have extensively analysed the guerrilla war launched 25 years ago by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against the Turkish state, practices of violence against oneself within the movement are less well understood. Nonetheless, since 1982 more than 200 activists or supporters of the party have tried to immolate themselves or commit suicide attacks (in the Middle-East and in Europe). This does not include the numerous hunger strikes that sometimes resulted in death. Thus, this paper examines the individual recourse to immolation, a singular action mode that could be part of a more general category: “violence against oneself.”¹

To analyse the self-immolations (or attempts at self-immolations) in support of the Kurdish cause, an exhaustive or quasi-exhaustive census of such acts was necessary. Two selective criteria were adopted: claims in support of the Kurdish cause or of the PKK leader, and/or affiliation to the PKK. Self-immolations by Kurdish illegal aliens demanding regularisation in Europe, or by Kurdish or Turkish inmates in Turkey who did not support the Kurdish cause were consequently excluded. We counted as an ‘attempt’ every action that was prevented by others and did not result in an effective self-immolation (e.g. drinking gasoline, splashing oneself with flammable liquid). All other cases were considered as effective self-immolations, even if the individual did not die. The mere threats of self-immolations were, on the other hand, excluded. In total, we found 183 self-immolations (or attempts) between 1982 and 2007, in 15 countries. Our census was taken from a huge variety of sources: ‘independent’ press, pro-Kurdish sources in French, German, English and Turkish, and humanitarian sources.

The hypothesis I suggest here is that self-immolation cannot be understood independently from the political culture instituted in the

¹ Olivier Grojean, “Violence Against Oneself,” in David A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans and D. McAdam (eds.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012.

partisan organisation. As with the Tamil Tigers or the People's Mujahidin of Iran, secondary socialisation in protest groups, "organisational modelling,"² strength of "role taking"³ and dependence on the activist group seem to be the main factors explaining the recourse to this practice. But there is no automatic connection between political culture and action (all PKK members are not ready to sacrifice themselves for the party): we will see that biographical and contextual factors play a catalyst role in the decision making. Verifying this hypothesis requires a multi-level analysis.

First, I begin with the history—or genealogy—of self-immolation within PKK circles. This practice first appeared in Turkish jails in 1982 (two years after the Coup), and progressively became less dependent on the prison environment. Some individuals who died because of their action were at the same time raised to the rank of martyrs and integrated in partisan historiography: by their extraordinary commitment to the cause, they showed the way of truth and victory. This permitted to build a "New Man" theory, which enjoins members to play a specific role and to conform to PKK ideals. I will now examine briefly statistical data concerning 183 attempts at self-immolations. Such an analysis can help us identify the social dispositions of those seeking to immolate themselves, and contextual factors that facilitate violent actions against oneself. This data suggests that the meaning of immolation varies significantly depending on where it takes place. However, such a macrological analysis reveals little about the dynamics of the transition to violence. Based on one interview with a survivor, on press reports, martyrs' testimonials concerning dead militants, and other partisan sources, the paper next examines practices of immolation in three activist trajectories, trying to link these actions with the role of secondary socialisation by the PKK.

Foundering sacrificial actions and martyrdom: the weight of the partisan institution

The first self-sacrificial violences appeared in number 5 prison of Diyarbakır, where the imprisonment conditions are especially harsh. Many hunger strikes were organised in 1980 and 1981. On March 4

² See Frédéric Sawicki and Johanna Siméant, "Décloisonner la sociologie de l'engagement militant. Note critique sur quelques tendances récentes des travaux français," *Sociologie du travail*, Vol. 51, n°1, 2009, pp. 97-125.

³ The term "role" refers to the set of behaviors, attitudes, practices and discourses bound to an institutionnal position, that permits it to exist, to be consolidated, and to be perceived par other people. See Jacques Lagroye, "On ne subit pas son rôle. Entretien avec Jacques Lagroye," *Politix*, 1997, 10(38), p. 8.

(only three days after the beginning of Bobby Sand's strike, but I never found any confirmation of a link between the two events), a first hunger strike until death (*ölüm orucu*) was launched. It stopped after 45 days. On March 21 1982 (day of *Newroz*, the Kurdish spring festival), the PKK executive in charge of propaganda Mazlum Doğan hung himself in his cell, and on May 18 four lone activists of the PKK died after their self-immolation (in PKK historiography, this event is called *Dörtlerin gecesi*, the "Night of the Four"). In September of the same year, four activists (including two from the Central Committee) died after a long hunger strike.

The initial self-immolations took place in prison environment and are thus strongly influenced by this context. But the spreading of this practice outside prison occurred in 1988 with the actions in Diyarbakır, and then İstanbul, of three PKK inmates' mothers, who wanted to protest against the imprisonment conditions of their sons during simultaneous protest action (demonstration or press conference). Thus, on March 21 1990 and March 22 1992, that is, eight and ten years after Mazlum Doğan, two young female PKK supporters set themselves alight in Diyarbakır and İzmir to protest against the Turkish repression of the Kurds. Last, in 1989 and 1992, two young women fighting in PKK guerrilla are said to have committed suicide to escape capture (with grenades for the former, jumping from a mountain for the latter).

Three spreading trends can be noticed here. While the first self-sacrificial actions appeared in a prison environment and concerned the imprisonment conditions, self-immolation was appropriated outside by the inmates' mothers who put forward the same claims, and then by young women with more general and political demands. This phenomenon could also be seen as an empowerment process from the prison space. Second, there is a strong evolution of the action's context. While the first actions occurred in prison, the next ones appeared in a region under special administration (Diyarbakır) and the following ones in far less repressive and ethnically more heterogeneous regions (İstanbul and İzmir, and even Europe, as we will see below). While the first actions were collective but took place without any simultaneous collective action, the next ones were individual ones (after 1988) and are no longer lonely actions. Last, the third trend concerns the social identity of the actors: while the first actions were exclusively launched by young men, self-immolation was soon appropriated by relatively old women and then by young women; while the *Dörtler* were all PKK members, the following activists were members' mothers and then lone supporters.

It is not to say that these three trends will determinate the perspectives, the contexts and the participants of the next sacrificial practices:

most self-immolations will continue to appear in prison, to be committed by men and by young activists (and not supporters). But the foundering actions can be considered as a toolbox from which activists and supporters will choose their tools, according to the circumstances. Because above all, some of these "sacrificial martyrs" (*fedai şehitler*), as witness and examples, help the PKK to build a system in which commitment and readiness to die are the highest values.

After the establishment of a training academy in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon in 1986, a new model of PKK militant was in fact founded and exported to the guerrilla, to the prisons, and to all the places where the PKK was active (i.e. Middle East and Europe). It concerned the clandestine activists rather than lone supporters, but could be understood as an ideal for the population at large, with a view to creating a "New Kurdish Man." This "New Man" is highly disciplined along the principles of the party, and obedient to his superiors (and ultimately to the leader); he has to love Öcalan and to develop a new personality liberated from Turkish colonialism and domination. The theory of the "Free Woman" is in charge of framing the new behaviour of women in the 'new' Kurdish Society.

These are not merely theoretical principles, but have to be put into practice: the activist has to cut all his earlier relations and forego marriage and sexual relationships, he has to speak well and be normally dressed, and he cannot drink nor smoke. Self-criticism, biographical rewriting and family supervision of the clandestine activists permit to re-normalise the militants. I put forward the hypothesis that this control and supervision had a real impact on PKK activism and on the social representations of PKK supporters.

Nevertheless, the weight of the partisan institution varies according to spaces. The hold of the party over the activists is stronger in the guerrilla and in Turkish jails. On the contrary, the interviews I conducted with ex-activists show that they had more chance to keep their autonomy in the Turkish metropolitan areas on the one hand, and in the Kurdish regions non-controlled by the guerrilla on the other hand. Europe enjoys an intermediate position, with its network of pro-PKK associations in all capitals where Kurds are living, and with regular meetings and mobilisations, which permit to try to control the Kurdish population at large, and not only the PKK members.

A structural analysis of the recourse to self-immolation

In the introduction, I suggested the hypothesis that the socialisation by the PKK, via the theory of the “New Man” and of the “Free Woman,” and the rules instituted in the organisation, which enjoins members to play one specific role and to conform to PKK ideals, could help to understand sacrificial actions by PKK members and supporters. This can be first verified by a structural analysis of the recourse to self-immolation.

According to my data, 55% of the self-immolations took place in Turkish prisons, 28% in Europe, 16% in the Middle East and only 1% in the guerrilla. This repartition can of course be explained by the sociological context of the engagement. The action forms are very rare in prison and the very bad imprisonment conditions are the cause of many suicides in Turkey (and elsewhere). In Europe, it is more difficult for the activists to influence directly the course of the conflict. In the Turkish cities or the Kurdish regions on the contrary, there are undoubtedly more possibilities to join the guerrilla, the militia or the political branch of the party. And self-immolation makes probably less sense in the guerrilla where the guerrillas risk constantly their lives and are trained to kill.

But we saw that the hold of the partisan institution over the activists was stronger in the guerrilla and in Turkish jails, intermediate in Europe and weaker in the Turkish metropolitan areas and in the Kurdish regions not controlled by the guerrilla. These different zones of influence intersect with the repartition of the self-immolations in favour of the Kurdish cause—except in the case guerrilla where fighters could after all launch suicide attacks. This leads to think that if the geographical context has an influence on the action repertoire of the party, the organisational variable plays a major role in the explanation of the commitment of the activists.

If we keep in mind that the failure of the military strategy could not be blamed on Öcalan but affected the fighters who lapsed through lack of faith or commitment, the same seems to be true when observing the temporality of the sacrificial actions. Thus, most of the PKK's forms of sacrificial action take place when the party strategy suffers defeat: 4 attempts of self-immolation in Germany just one month after the end of the first unilateral ceasefire on the part of the PKK; 12 self-immolations in several German cities in 1994, a few months after the ban of the PKK in Germany; 3 suicide bombings (and probably 3 attempts) in Turkey and 9 self-immolations between June and October 1996, a few months after the failure of the second unilateral ceasefire; a wave of 92 self-immolations and at least 11 sui-

cide bombings (and probably 4 to 5 attempts) after the PKK's third ceasefire and then Öcalan's arrest and public regrets in 1998–1999.

It is difficult to compare the social characteristics of immolated individual because of lack of information, but my data permit me to compare the gender and age of the activists, and the geographical sites of their self-immolation. First, self-immolation is mainly a male phenomenon (60%). But women constitute a strong minority in the two spaces. How can we explain this ratio? We have to keep in mind that in some rural areas in Turkey self-immolation was and is still a means used by women who are suspected of adultery to restore the honour of the group ("private" or "social" suicide). Additionally, self-immolation outside prison was a female action mode only until 1994 too. But finally this could certainly be explained by the "Free Woman" theory developed by Öcalan and spread within militant circles after 1987. In Turkish prisons, the ratio is lower (23% are females), but given that women are often in mixed dormitories (with the Turkish left), this could consequently be explained by a weaker hold of the institution (competition between PKK and other parties rules and norms). The contrast is important with the guerrilla, where 30% of the fighters are women and where the "Free Woman" theory was first put in practice: two-thirds (65%) of the PKK's 17 suicide attacks incidentally were carried out by women, who were all guerrilla fighters. And apart from one ambivalent case, the 8 suicide attacks between June 30 1996 and March 4 1999 were all carried out by women before the technique came to be appropriated by men.

However, some differences between Europe and the Middle East can be noticed. While the great majority of self-immolations in Europe are committed by young adults between 21 and 30 (59%), self-immolation is practiced mostly by young people under 21 in the Middle East (42%); one could explain this difference by an earlier politicisation process and engagement in the Middle East and notably in Turkey. Another specificity of self-immolation in Europe lies in its agenda. As in the Middle East (36%), most sacrificial actions occurred during the years 1998 and 1999, that is Öcalan's arrest.⁴ But 37% of self-immolations took also place in 1993-1994, when the relationships between the PKK and the European governments (and especially Germany) deteriorated. And if most European countries have been affected, more than half of the self-immolations (55%) occurred in Germany and none—apart from one in Denmark in front of German border guards—happened in other European countries before Öcalan's arrest. We have to consider here demographic factors (half of Kurdish migrants in Europe live in Germany), organisational factors

⁴ In Turkish jails, 70% of the self-immolations took place in 1998-1999.

(the PKK is more structured there than elsewhere in Europe), and above all political factors and interactions (the ban of the PKK in 1993). This context favoured self-immolations during political demonstrations or occupations: in 1993-1994, only two self-immolations (10%) occurred in a hidden and deserted place; and between 1993 and 2007, only 30% occurred in the same conditions. If we consider that in 1998-1999, *all* self-immolations in Europe took place during a simultaneous collective action, the difference is obvious with the Middle East, where 74% of the self-immolations were lonely acts.

Consequently, while nearly two third of the actors survived in Europe because comrades cried for help and tried to save them, in the Middle East, nearly three quarters died. Even if the activists are certainly not aware of such statistics, the meaning given to these actions doubtless differs between an individual who prepared his or her immolation days or months in advance and an individual who decided on the spot to sacrifice himself or herself during a demonstration. Only a qualitative analysis could help us understand what makes the unity and the diversity of self-immolation within PKK circles.

The practice of self-immolation in activist trajectories

To test the hypothesis of the role of PKK secondary socialisation in self-immolations, one can examine some biographical trajectories and look how activists and supporters concretely take an interest in the Kurdish cause, commit themselves for the party, handle their role in the PKK system, and finally decide to set themselves alight. But here comes the question of the adequate sources for such an analysis. 'Martyrs' testimonies' are naturally a useful source. But we are faced with at least three problems. First, we saw that more than half activists and supporters survive their immolation; but the testimonies concern only individuals who died, and this excludes all the actions of those who survived.⁵ Moreover, out of 67 cases of death due to self-immolation, I only found 36 testimonies. Last but not least, we only know very little about the conditions under which these testimonies were written: some could be institutional biographies, others are probably institutional autobiographies, and others (from supporters, ex-activists, or members dead before 1994) seem to be real individual testimonies which however could fit into the scheme of "bio-

⁵ I never found any testimonial of a survivor.

graphical illusion.”⁶ So as to explore the social construction of the wish to die for the cause as part of a group, I resorted to testimonies, press reports, other partisan sources and one interview.

In my PhD dissertation,⁷ I analysed at length three biographical trajectories (see their very short summary below). I chose them because I thought they represented the diversity of trajectories leading to self-immolations (activists and supporters, men and women, faithfulness to the party and treason, lonely action or self-immolation during simultaneous collective action, death or survival, timing, etc.), and could be seen at the same time as “ideal types” in a Weberian sense, permitting to compare them with other trajectories. The analysis of these trajectories enabled me to discover some ‘universal’ factors (willingness to fight more effectively, faithfulness to Öcalan, suffering violence or imprisonment, etc.) and more ‘individual’ factors (willingness to transform their personalities, with or without premeditation, slow process engagement or fast ‘conversion’ to the cause, etc.).

Berjin

Born in 1975, Berjin [the name has been changed] comes from Midyat, in the Kurdish region of Mardin (near the Syrian border). Her parents were members of the pro-PKK militia: they were in charge of helping and supplying the guerrilla. From the age of 10-12, she regularly walked around the clash zones to find the wounded and to bury dead fighters and civilians. At the age of 15-16 (1990-1991), she wanted to join the guerrilla but her family was under threat, so she had to leave the region with one of her brothers. She arrived in Germany in 1992 and got involved in the political branch of the PKK, the ERNK. On February 16 1999, during a demonstration against the Greek Embassy in Copenhagen (Greece is said to have helped the arrest), she poured petrol on her head and shoulders and set herself alight. She underwent surgery more than fifty times, but survived and still carries out some responsibilities within the organisation. Nevertheless, she is always criticized by numerous members and supporters of the party, who take her for a backward peasant.⁸

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “L’illusion biographique,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n°62-63, 1986, pp. 69-72.

⁷ Olivier Grojean, *La cause kurde, de la Turquie vers l’Europe. Contribution à une sociologie de la transnationalisation des mobilisations*. Paris: EHESS, PhD Dissertation, 2008.

⁸ Interview and observations: Berlin, June 2004.

Eser Altınok

Eser Altınok was born in 1974 in Berlin. At the age of 17, he was a petty criminal who had already been arrested several times and was treated through group therapy. In 1991, he began to attend the pro-PKK association and joined progressively the political branch of the party, even though he would have preferred to go to the mountains. But his militant work was not very successful and he was constantly criticised for his failures. In October 1995, Eser was arrested for crimes committed before joining the PKK. The police threatened to deport him to Turkey if he refused to become the most important witness in a trial against PKK activists... and he finally accepted to cooperate. But he could not bear that situation. On January 5 1998, he set himself alight in a street of Görlitz near Duisburg in Germany and died one month later. In a letter sent to his mother, he wrote that his treason was the consequence of his refusal to engage himself into the process of building a new personality. He is today cited as a hero in PKK press.

Necla Kanteper

Necla was born in 1985 in Northern Cyprus. Her (Kurdish) family was repeatedly harassed by (Turkish) police. In 1993, the family took refuge in London. Necla did well at school (she wanted to become a lawyer), but her teachers said that she was very committed to the Kurdish cause. According to her friends, she dedicated all her free time to the local pro-PKK association. On February 15 1999, in the night, the family heard that Öcalan had been arrested. Necla, her brother and father went to the Greek embassy. At 4 AM, demonstrators learned that Öcalan had been transferred to Turkey. She bought a gasoline can and came back to the demonstration site. Suddenly, she saw her brother being manhandled by policemen. She poured gasoline onto her body (not her head) and set herself alight. Seriously burnt, she stayed one month at the hospital and underwent surgery many times. Today, she is married, has a child and is active in (or close to) the political branch of the PKK. Numerous European Kurdish activists have still close contacts with her.

In the three studied cases, individuals consider one precise situation as intolerable and unbearable and have the feeling that they can (or have to) change the course of events, according to the image of the heroic martyrs. All three were willing to join the guerrilla, to fight more effectively for the cause, but were prevented to do so, because of an organisation decision or due to their young age. Here, the fear of not having been able to make a strong enough commitment seems

to motivate the action. Öcalan's arrest is indeed seen as a personal failure too. The socialisation of the young activists and supporters, who can only see the world through the prism of the cause and the party and can only project themselves into a pure, 'true' ideal, tends to produce extremely precarious psychological situations, as soon as doubt arises. If their social identity is absolutely and completely bound up with Abdullah Öcalan and the cause, the young male or female militants or supporters are all the more afraid of survival than of death when all their points of reference collapse. If they have internalised the leader's discourse on personal responsibility and perfection—always sought-after but unattainable—, then only death makes them capable of the commitment required and of the love owed to the leader. This intense feeling of despair—possibly linked with their experience of violence or imprisonment—can also lead to a form of communion with Öcalan and the martyrs, especially for the members of the party.

One has to distinguish between member and lone supporter, who probably do not give the same meaning to their action. Without a doubt, the former has been giving many thoughts to the possibility of his or her self-immolation and has theorised his or her action; the latter has a less intellectualised relationship with the institution and its leader. Similarly, it seems that the militants harbour a stronger feeling of culpability than lone supporters: because they do not succeed in holding their role, because they do not succeed in transforming their personality, they are guilty of the party's failures. Self-immolation can also be occasionally considered as a real purification by fire, which has—in a sense—an emancipatory dimension. But in some other cases, the goal is not to affirm one's individuality as an autonomous subject: the body is only the place of a fight between the enemy and the 'new humanity' advocated by Öcalan.

