KURDISH HIZBULLAH IN TURKEY

ISLAMISM, VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

MEHMET KURT

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Introduction

> Mehmet Kurt – You were *Hizbullahçı*,[1] then who were we? (*laughing*)
>
> Sermest – You were punks (*berduş*)! (*laughing*)
>
> Mehmet Kurt – So why were you going to fight the punks?
>
> Sermest – There were tensions. We had received orders. They had said 'tread on their dead bodies'. Even I had prepared myself. We tried to lure you into the school. But there was teacher X; because he was there you did not want to fight in the school. So the plan went like this. A group of us were in the schoolyard; it was only a few of us waiting there. Another group were in the backyard. The rest of the team were all in the halls. The incident was going to go down like this: those in the schoolyard were going to get into a fight with you. Then, pretending to be losing the fight, they were going to start running away toward the backyard of the halls. When you attacked them, the group in the backyard were going to come down from the top, the ones in the halls were going to come out and trap you at the stairs going down to the halls. Imagine this, they had said 'no one can leave there alive'. Tens of people![2]

If what Sermest told me is true, then I could have been killed in a fight in the late 1990s when I was a student at the boarding Mardin İmam Hatip[3] high school, the reason for which I do not recall, by students who were members of Hizbullah.

Turkey is a country of *partial confrontations*.[4] Routinely experienced within many domains of society, such as daily life, politics, academia, and interpersonal relationships, these partial confrontations constitute an important impediment to the development of a healthy public perception about Turkey. Similarly, the idea of such partial confrontations in academia is the claim for objectivity borrowed from positivist thought. However, it is clear that the ideal of objectivity in the natural sciences cannot be achieved in the same way in the social sciences given that it is impossible for the individual carrying out the research to completely isolate himself from the influence of the history, language, and culture around him. Michel Foucault's discussions (1994) of 'subjectivity', which

he positions antithetically to objectivity, and its relation to reality paved the way for in-depth investigations into the idea of 'absolute truth and reality' in social science research. This line of thought, which claims that absolute objectivity is, by its very nature, impossible to achieve in the social sciences, ensures that the researcher confronts his personal history and reveals his positionality, while recommending that potentially prohibitive or leading positions are excluded from analysis (Grbich, 2004, p. 83). Following the suggestion that knowledge is produced on a more accurate footing if the researcher is visible, I share my own history and positionality with the reader.

My confrontation with the fact that I could have been killed took place in the autumn of 2013 when I was carrying out fieldwork for this study. As an individual embedded within a family and a social environment marked by Islamic sensitivities, I had spent my high school years observing the violence unleashed by *Hizbullahçı* students and, on one or two occasions, being the target of such violence. The reasons violence had been turned on me on those occasions were my open dissatisfaction with the authoritarian and oppressive attitudes the Hizbullah students at school had adopted and my outspoken expression of discontent with practices that restricted my living environment. Life outside the school at the time was similarly marked by fighting between Hizbullah and the PKK and the climate of fear and polarisation that had developed on account of the frequent 'murders by unknown perpetrators' (*faili meçhul cinayetler*) in those years. I shared a room in the halls with someone whose *imam*[5] father had been killed by Hizbullah and in a neighbouring room there was another student whose elder brother, I later found out, had been one of the 'first martyrs' of Hizbullah. Being the only organised students at school, Hizbullah had the largest representation in the halls that housed 350 students and I remember being amazed at how easily these *Hizbullahçı* youngsters could find reasons to beat someone up. Approaching the end of my high school years, I was looking forward to leaving behind these dark times when everyone was woken up by *Hizbullahçı* students for morning prayers and those who refused could have been subjected to violence; when 'those who spoke with girls' were most certainly beaten up; when the TV set which had been newly brought into our canteen, resembling those in Turkish military bases, was smashed up by *Hizbullahçı* students on the premise that watching television was *haram*;[6] when the vice principal was attacked with iron rods and his arms broken by *Hizbullahçı* students in one of Mardin's

narrow *abbaras*[7] on account of their belief that he mistreated *Hizbullahçı* students and took disciplinary action against them; and finally, when a senior student aimed a Kalashnikov rifle at one of our teachers. My goal was to pass the university entrance exams, head off to do a course which would get me away from Hizbullah and help me reach my 'secular aspirations', and remove myself from the suffocating monotony of provincial life. But these last years in high school also coincided with a period in which a major confrontation took place between the Turkish military and the government, culminating in what is referred to as a post-modern coup on 28 February 1997. As a result, the Refah-Yol coalition government was forced to resign from power and amendments were made to the laws and regulations of higher education whereby those who graduated from occupational high schools (*meslek liseleri*) could apply for undergraduate courses only in their own area of specialty. These amendments were essentially to prevent graduates of İmam *Hatip* schools from applying for any course other than Religious Studies. Like my friends who continued at İmam *Hatip* high schools for the accommodation opportunities they offered and/or on account of the 'decision' made by their religious provincial families, I was not on either side of this social polarisation. Although some associations in western Turkey sent graduates of İmam *Hatip* schools abroad to study the courses they preferred, no one seemed concerned about students in the provincial İmam *Hatip* schools. In the end, as one of those 'fortunate' students who managed to pass the university entrance exams, I had no option but to apply for the Religious Studies course.

I spent my undergraduate years doing extensive reading in all areas of the discipline of Religious Studies and especially about religion as a social phenomenon. After graduation, I completed a Master's degree in Sociology of Religion at Selçuk University where I focused on religion–state relations in Turkey and European Union countries within the context of secularism, cultural policy, and religious institutions and services. I continued my education at the Konya *Yüksek* İhtisas *Eğitim Merkezi*[8] where I received high-level religious training for three years. Here, I had the opportunity to study traditional religious approaches to contemporary issues as well as classical religious texts. Over these three years, my academic interests were focused on religious groups that I either observed in my own social surroundings or discovered through lectures, and the way their religious discourses were constructed. Although my insatiable scientific curiosity and inclination to question things led to

me being known as someone who at times 'tried the lecturers' patience' or even 'spoiled the faith' of rather more traditional lecturers, I realised during this period that sociology as a discipline could provide me with the answers to my questions. This period of acculturation, in which I focused heavily on sociology and subsequently during my PhD on anthropology culminated in this book.

My return to high school, this time for academic research, was mainly motivated by curiosity to learn the mechanisms that produced the violence, which I found so hard to make sense of, and analyse them from a sociological/anthropological perspective. No analytical studies on Hizbullah had been carried out from such a perspective and I was the first to write a doctoral dissertation on the subject. I was sufficiently equipped to analyse religious literature from a sociological perspective. Lectures, workshops, and conferences attended and reading done over two years at Yale University's Department of Anthropology as well as time spent at the Columbia Center for Oral History provided the necessary anthropological and ethnographic framework. The fact that I spoke Kurdish would make it easier for me to build rapport and dialogue with my informants. I could find my high school friends, whom I had not seen for years, and finally ask them the question 'why'.

I had the advantages of a command of Islamic terminology and fluency in Kurdish. But with long hair and a goatee, not a look that members of Hizbullah were used to seeing in daily life, I was clearly an outsider to my informants (Agar, 1980). Despite my proximity to the *etic* perspective within the dichotomy of emic/etic often discussed in the literature, my approach was also inclusive of an *emic* perspective within my efforts to understand Hizbullah (Headland et al., 1990). For this reason, I told my informants that instead of considering the knowledge they shared with me as absolute truth, I would analyse this knowledge in a comparative framework as part of their discourse. As a result, I sometimes had to wait months to do an interview. I was initially hoping to discover the patterns of religious and ethnic belonging among members of Hizbullah, analyse the means by which it justified violence, and fill in the gaps in its known history while correcting misinformation therein through field research. However, I was provided with much more and discovered an area reaching far beyond my expectations. As accounts of many carrying out fieldwork confirm, in the field I had to reflect on what I previously knew and realised that the commonly shared public knowledge about Hizbullah was not adequate to understand the organisation. Public

knowledge about Hizbullah was fraught with partial considerations that were based on an Orientalist reading of violence. Today, with its more than 100,000 followers, Hizbullah is a social movement and should be investigated beyond a single focus on violence using the perspectives of sociology of religion and politics, anthropology of the state, social memory studies, discourse analysis, and visual anthropology.

The case of Sermest was certainly worth investigating from the perspectives of psychology and social psychology, sociology and anthropology. He said, 'I could not even tell myself the fact that I was in love for five years', adding he 'still could not get over the negative effects of the past'. How could I explain the case of Azad, who after so many years still retained a vivid image of his 5 foot 7 inch tall, 25 year-old 'imaginary supervisor', Ahmet, whom he had manufactured to tell the police about in case he was arrested and tortured during interrogation? How can we account for the fact, from the perspective of religious and ethnic belonging, that the same Azad told me, 'I would like a Kurdish name' in a quiet voice when I asked him what alias he would prefer me to use for him in my dissertation given that he still 'makes a wide turn' when he walks into a street to see whether someone is following him and that he observed me for the whole duration of our interview in hesitant silence? One might find it ironic that I named this informant Azad, after the Kurdish word meaning 'free', given the image of his imaginary supervisor Ahmet is still strong in Azad's mind. What can we learn from the case of Mahmut, who was rebuked by the provincial representatives of the National Salvation Party on the grounds of being a nationalist after he chanted '*Azadî*[9] is in Islam' and who said, 'two things are forbidden in this country: Being Kurdish and being Muslim'? How can we make sense of the case of Kamuran, from the perspectives of gender segregation, daily life practices, and different forms of religiousness, who studied at two universities and was imprisoned several times, when he says in a regretful tone, 'now we've turned 30 years old; we could have made healthier choices' and the only women he interacts with are close relatives? How can we comparatively analyse the experiences of the informant who was a member of Hizbullah and stayed in the same room for three years for fear of getting caught and another who carried a gun for three years because of death threats from Hizbullah? How can we consider Ahmet's statement, in terms of Hizbullah's confrontation with the past, 'I swore not to talk about this subject until on the Day of Judgement in the presence of Allah' given that Ahmet used to receive

death threats from Hizbullah and some of his friends had been killed by it? What does the case of Yusuf tell us about theories of the state and state crime, when he responded to my enquiry about the link between the Turkish state and Hizbullah by saying, 'if the state was protecting us, why did I suffer so much torture, spend so many years in prison?' (Green and Ward, 2004)? And how can we interpret the case of the Turkish informant from the perspective of the relationship between religion and ethnicity who stated, 'when you dig a bit below the surface of Turkish Islamists you find Turkish nationalism and Turkish Islamists carry the same venom'?

During my fieldwork, I met more Hizbullah members than those who eventually agreed to be interviewed by me. Like Yiğit, who still carried a razor blade scar across his face after getting involved in a fight with a group of young drug addicts for smoking marijuana in the mosque yard, many preferred to meet me and listen to what I had to say, but did not agree to an interview. Despite this, my observations from high school years chimed with observations of those who refused to give me an interview and are presented to the reader at various points in this study. In order to ensure the confidentiality and safety of those who agreed to talk to me under the condition that their identity should not be disclosed under any circumstance, I chose to present certain information in this study without any reference to its source. The literature (Felbab-Brown, 2014; Goldstein, 2014) shows that in the case of studies which take violence as a subject matter (Aras et al., 2013) such measures must be taken to ensure the safety of the researcher and his informants. Therefore, I have tried to take every precaution to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the informants who contributed valuable data to this study. In addition to two informants who allowed me to use their real identities as they gave interviews in their official capacity and on behalf of the institutions they worked for, I should express my gratitude to all my anonymous informants not only for the information they imparted but also for sharing their life stories and hence making this study possible.

After this long introduction, I may finally ask the main question the study aims to answer: What is Hizbullah and how can it be analysed as a form of belonging?

Hizbullah in Turkey is largely populated by Sunnis compared with Hizbullah in Lebanon, whose followers are mainly adherents of the Shiite sect of Islam, more specifically by Shafi'i Kurds. Public opinion concerning Hizbullah in Turkey and the literature on the group, with

the exception of a few works, are ridden with partial confrontations and operate on an Orientalist simplification that presents violence as unforeseeable and uncontrollable, and considers Islam to be the sole mechanism through which Hizbullah's violence is perpetrated. Even a quick search on Hizbullah in the print or visual media, on the Internet, or elsewhere reveals traces of these partial confrontations and social polarisation. Therefore, one is invariably stuck between the Hizbullah-affiliated media that present Hizbullah as proposing an ideal model of society and the majority of the rest of the media that uses the word Hizbullah almost synonymously with horror, atrocity, violence, and state, both of which display a considerable lack of analytical engagement with the subject. With the exceptions of Ruşen Çakır's *Derin Hizbullah* (*Deep Hizbullah*, 2011) and Gareth Jenkins's *Political Islam in Turkey* (2008), as well as a few other books, articles, and reviews, an overwhelming majority of the literature on Hizbullah is reluctant to look at it as a social phenomenon.

Furthermore, academic research into Hizbullah is similarly limited and a large part of the literature produced in Turkey is written in police academies and predominantly from a perspective prioritising security issues.

The available information, especially given its disproportionate engagement with violence and resulting one-dimensionality, is not sufficient to provide an understanding of Hizbullah. Besides, as mentioned earlier, a considerable proportion of such studies is inclined to present violence simply as unmanageable, unpredictable, and purposeless instead of focusing on the motivations that lead to the production of violence.

I embarked upon this study with the objective of analysing the violence that Hizbullah was both involved in and a perpetrator of, from a sociological and anthropological perspective and mainly with a qualitative focus. It acquired new dimensions with the onset of my fieldwork. The need for a theoretical and methodological framework that would reflect these new dimensions without subscribing to the reductiveness of violence-centred analyses led me to adopt Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in this study. Grounded Theory, which is widely used especially in European and North American sociology, suggests that instead of starting fieldwork from theoretical postulations, a theoretical abstraction may be performed by comparing the data produced in fieldwork and the categories that emerge from such comparison. In the first chapter where I describe the theoretical and methodological framework used in this study, I will explain why I chose to carry out a qualitative investigation (Berg,

2008) in addition to Grounded Theory and why I employed ethnographic methods (Agar, 1985), life histories (Atkinson, 1998), and oral history (Dunaway, 1996) in data collection.

No sociological phenomenon can be imagined outside the immediate historical conditions within which it is embedded and any study in the social sciences is inevitably written from a historical perspective. Therefore, following a brief explanation of the theoretical and methodological tools that I employ in this study, in the first chapter I turn to the historical and sociological conditions of the period, which witnessed the emergence of Hizbullah. Here I investigate Hizbullah's history in a chronological fashion on the basis of testimonies from my informants while correcting misinformation and providing new information where there are gaps in knowledge. This chapter is a first attempt to provide a socio-historiographical approach to the texts written on Hizbullah and introduce the organisation to various intersecting literatures such as the literature on Islamism, Islamic movements in the Middle East, Islamism within the Turkish state, and state crime in Turkey.

The second chapter is dedicated to a Grounded Theory-based analysis of the interviews I conducted with individual members of Hizbullah and presents summaries and analyses of their narratives produced across various thematic areas. The common themes that emerge from these narratives are used to provide the reader with information and analyses concerning daily life practices of Hizbullah members, (in)security generated by feelings of group belonging, and the psycho-social consequences of ceasing to feel part of a group. Moreover, in this chapter I give a detailed account of the stages of the transformation of violence perpetrated by Hizbullah from the level of discourse to that of action through the testimonies of my informants. Taking into account that Hizbullah's membership is predominantly Kurdish, the second chapter also presents an analysis of the ways in which religion and ethnicity are reconciled in Hizbullah as an organisation. The chapter thus aims to fill a lacuna in Kurdish studies and facilitate new studies on the subject.

The third chapter focuses on the role of stories and novels written by Hizbullah members in the construction of social memory and, through discourse analysis, traces common themes across these narratives, which are in essence non-fictional, 'autobiographical' accounts, with usually only the names of persons and places changed.

In the conclusion chapter I present a comparative summary of the data I examined in previous chapters and bring the findings together in an effort to reach general conclusions before offering suggestions for future research on Hizbullah.

1
Historical Overview of Hizbullah

History is what hurts.
Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

THEORY, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY

A study into Hizbullah requires a multidimensional approach, ranging from the history of the organisation's name to its activities; its supporter base to its alleged connections with the Turkish state and the deep state in the 1990s; the Hizbullah-affiliated NGOs to the officially recognised Hüda-Par party; and from the *Kutlu Doğum* (Blessed Birth) celebration to the development of publishing activities. Despite the fact that Hizbullah appears in newspapers, features in political debates, and is relevant to both daily life and the agendas of other political organisations, information about it is scarce and often contradictory. This is because Hizbullah remained underground and was very careful not to publicise its activities until 2002. Although there was some change to the organisation's clandestine nature following its engagement with civil society (even forming a political party) Hizbullah continues to retain its almost secretive nature and there is reluctance by members to talk to outsiders about the inner workings of the organisation.

The qualitative methodologies employed in this study aim to reveal hidden or implicit sociological meanings, properties, and implications, facilitate layered interpretations, and render unheard 'voices' audible (Have, 2004, pp. 4–5). My motivation to adopt an ethnographic perspective within a qualitative research paradigm relates to the nature of the research topic. The most important advantage of using the ethnographic method is that the researcher, after some time in the field, 'becomes invisible' (Berg, 2001, p. 147). What I mean by becoming invisible is the minimising the influence of the researcher on the production of data by virtue of his 'presence' and position in interactions. It is crucial that the researcher spends sufficient time in the field to allow

rapport to be developed between the researcher and the informants. Only then can informants begin to trust the researcher.

In the search for appropriate methods for researching the secretive realm of Hizbullah, I realised that Grounded Theory responded well to my methodological considerations and challenges. The researcher uses Grounded Theory practises with the focused attention of a surgeon and runs a constant analysis of the concepts and signifiers emerging from the data. In studying a 'closed' organisation like Hizbullah it is crucial to provide more than just descriptive information. I wanted to move beyond external appearances, to grasp Hizbullah's organisational sense of itself, and the motivation of its members – beyond that superficiality offered by the media, public opinion, and the justice system. When using this method, one is not required to consider every piece of data as 'true'. As Ingersoll points out, researchers embark on a process of continuous comparison as they analyse the first field data; contrary to the other popularly used methodologies in social sciences, this process facilitates the integration of newly emerging, important information into the study in the ensuing phases of research. In that sense, Grounded Theory is in keeping with the essence of ethnography as it allows for continuous development of the research subject throughout fieldwork and a comprehensive analysis of the emergent concepts (Ingersoll and Ingersoll, 1987, pp. 93–7).

Having discussed the theoretical and methodological tools employed in this study, I would like to move on to the difficulty of problematising the history of a political and religious movement whose structure and past have been the subject of much debate. This difficulty is exacerbated by the constant repetition in the literature of incomplete or even false information and its presentation as historical data.

My aim in this chapter is to reveal the different stages that Hizbullah has undergone since its foundation using references to Hizbullah's own publications (books, theses, and other resources), the information published in the media on Hizbullah, and the interviews conducted with former or present members of the organisation who have personally witnessed various periods of Hizbullah's history.

In terms of sources and data selection I must emphasise that at times I had to select between contradictory information with a critical eye and using a complicated analytical process. In addition, a number of Master's theses on Hizbullah,[1] mostly written by students at police academies, have been used as resources in this study, albeit only rarely and after