

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

A Relational Perspective on Land in Armed Conflict: Analysing the Village Guard Mobilisation in Turkey

Francis O'Connor¹  | Adnan Çelik²  | Ayhan Işık³ | Joost Jongerden¹ 

¹Rural Sociology, Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands | ²École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, France | ³Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, the Netherlands

Correspondence: Joost Jongerden (joost.jongerden@wur.nl)

Received: 17 August 2025 | **Revised:** 1 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 5 January 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the Turkish state's Village Guard system, revived in the 1980s as part of its counterinsurgency strategy against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). While often framed as a defensive militia, the Village Guards became central to the state's exceptional governance in Kurdistan, both facilitating military control and enabling significant socio-economic and demographic transformation. Drawing on scholarship on paramilitarism and fieldwork in the village of İslamköy, the article offers a relational perspective that understands the Village Guards not merely as instruments of state violence, but as active political actors who reshaped local power dynamics, gained access to land and resources and reconfigured rural livelihoods. It argues that paramilitary mobilisation in Kurdistan reflects complex, locally embedded power relations rather than tribalism or state repression alone.

1 | Introduction

In the mid-1980s, the Turkish state revived a historical practice of levying Kurdish militias by initiating the Village Guard system¹ to help combat the emerging insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK). Theoretically, the Village Guards were entrusted with the defensive task of protecting their villages from roaming PKK units, ostensibly little different from locally mobilised paramilitary forces in other conflicts such as the Ronda Campesinas in Peru (Fumerton 2001). Yet, the Village Guards rapidly grew to number tens of thousands of fighters, became a key pillar in the state's counterinsurgency strategy and, importantly, came to fill a key role in the Turkish state's practice of colonial governmentality in Kurdistan. The Kurdistan region has been intermittently ruled through 'exceptional governance' since the 1920s (Koçak 2003), most notably under the so-called Emergency Law (Olağanüstü Hal, OHAL) between 1987 and 2002 (Jongerden 2007, 53;

Yavuz 2001, 13), which provided the juridical basis that facilitated the Village Guards' establishment.

Considering the scale, scope and duration of its mobilisation, the Village Guard system remains understudied, with some notable exceptions. To date, the literature has assessed the military effectiveness of the system (Balta 2007; Gurcan 2015), has documented Village Guards' involvement in human rights abuses (Göral et al. 2013; Işık 2021), examined its role in intra-Kurdish conflict (Çelik 2021a), and attention has been dedicated to the consequences of village expulsions and the efforts—formal and informal—of village resettlement (Jongerden 2007). There has been less focus on the Village Guards as political actors, exerting agency and striving to obtain local political and economic advantage. This article posits that they are a clear, violent incarnation of the exceptionality of state rule in Kurdistan and that they have been key actors in the region's military, political, economic and demographic transformation since the conflict's onset.

Submission for the special issue: Rural Protest and Contentious Politics: Land, Nature, and Infrastructure in Kurdistan (edited by Francis O'Connor and Joost Jongerden).

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Scholarship on paramilitarism has often focused on high-profile cases in the former Yugoslavia (Schlichte 2010), or the entrenched position of Colombian paramilitaries within both the narcotics trade and political economy (Gutiérrez Sanín 2019; Steele 2017; Vargas 2009). These studies increasingly emphasise that paramilitary mobilisation is not merely a function of state policy or economic calculus, but a deeply political process, shaped by specific social and institutional contexts. This perspective challenges earlier econometric models that dominated conflict research in the 2000s (in Gutiérrez Sanín 2008) and critiques simplified ethnicised explanations (Kalyvas 2008). Research on militias argues that, even more so than with insurgent movements, ‘preexisting cultural practices’ are the basis of their establishment (Jentzsch et al. 2015, 762), and the prevailing system of tribal affiliation in Kurdistan provided a fertile social context for the Village Guards. Paramilitary mobilisation should be better understood as part of a broader ‘complex, sometimes overlapping, complementary, or conflicting zones of control and hybrid forms of domination’ (Malthaner and Malešević 2022, 7)—a relational configuration shaped by interactions among insurgents, state actors, local communities and economic elites. The Village Guard system exemplifies this political complexity. It aligns with Kalyvas’ (2003) insight that local armed actors often instrumentalise national-level conflicts for their own purposes. As observed in the Sri Lankan civil war, ‘villagers did not simply have politics thrust upon them; rather they appropriated politics and used them for their own purposes’ (Spencer in Kalyvas 2003, 479). Armed conflict also generates distinct social processes (Wood 2008) that provide multiple opportunities for the reallocation of resources, the reshaping of intergenerational power dynamics within (and between) communities and the pursuit of class mobility, which would be difficult to imagine in peaceful circumstances (see also Fearon and David 2003, 88; McAdam et al. 2001, 99; Weinstein 2007, 40). This perspective has not been widely applied to the Village Guards, with the notable exception of Çelik (2025), who has examined the Village Guards system using the concept of *reciprocal instrumentalisation*—a concept that facilitates a nuanced analysis of the diverse motivations, constraints and opportunities shaping both individual and collective participation in the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state.

This article adopts a relational perspective on the phenomenon, not simply disentangling the Village Guards’ vertical relationship with the state but rather engaging with their locally embedded horizontal relations on the ground in Kurdistan. This approach considers ‘political violence as a phenomenon embedded in a complex web of socio-political relations, involving multiple parties and actors within parties such as political and social institutions, elites and pressure groups, and movement and counter-movement organizations’ (Alimi et al. 2015, 14). It emphasises the emergent and dynamic nature of violent political actors, focusing on kinetic interactions between them, rather than actors’ predetermined characteristics or inherent traits, such as in the case of Kurdistan, a tribal proclivity for factional violence. Building on insights from social geography, which assert that ‘there are no purely spatial processes, neither are there any non-spatial social processes’ (Massey 1995, 51), it is necessary to consider the tangible spatiality of such processes. And in the case of the Village Guards, this inevitably leads one to question the land on which and over which this antagonism

with the PKK has developed. The conflict has led to arguably the most substantial reconfiguration of land access and ownership since the mass confiscation and redistribution of Armenians’ property in the wake of the genocide in the early 20th century (see Çelik 2021a; Von Bieberstein 2025). Many of the forced expulsions and village destruction were conducted by Turkish army units and special forces. Yet, participation or indeed non-participation in the Village Guards has been the key criterion in determining which Kurds got forcibly displaced from their lands and condemned to an existence of urban penury, and which Kurds got to benefit by seizing the displaced people’s land, trees and water.

This article will focus on one individual qualitative case study, the village of İslamköy (Kuyê in Kurdish) in the district of Kulp (Pasûr in Kurdish), a mountainous area and an epicentre of clashes between the PKK and state forces, thus representing an area of high conflict intensity. Though a systematic analysis of changes in control over land and resources in Kurdistan is beyond the scope of this article, the case does serve to illustrate the relational dynamics that furthered the consolidation of the Village Guards system, a theoretical approach that will likely prove useful in further analysis of the system. The article empirically outlines the transformation of İslamköy’s land ownership and access, a fundamental reconfiguration of property ownership and access that has recurred across Kurdistan.

The article is based on the pooling of empirical data from three of the coauthors who conducted extensive fieldwork in Kurdistan, focused on the practices of forced displacement and resettlement, and the mobilisation of Village Guards and paramilitary forces. This fieldwork was conducted in the early 2000s (Jongerden 2007, 2010) and in the mid and late 2010s (Çelik 2018; Işık 2023, 2024). These data have been embedded in the comprehensive human rights reports and the secondary literature on the conflict, and triangulated, when possible, with publicly available government land registers and demographic data. This empirical foundation facilitates the elaboration of our theoretical arguments, where we analyse the Village Guards system not as simply a vestige of a tribal past, nor as passive victims of state and insurgent violence, but rather as an apparatus through which its participants—and not just elites but also those at the bottom of social hierarchies—have been able to enforce a new social order and guarantee access to land and resources. The article proceeds by outlining the context of the Village Guards’ re-emergence in the 1980s. It continues by considering the specific case of İslamköy and argues that participation in the Village Guard system should be analysed through a political economy perspective, focusing on the struggle over (scarce) resources at the local level.

2 | Theorising Village Guard Mobilisation

During the political tumult of the 1970s in Turkey, numerous armed revolutionary Kurdish movements were active across Kurdistan. This cycle of contention was brought to a halt by the 1980 military coup; repression was particularly noted in the Kurdish region: A PKK sympathiser explained that after the 12th of September ‘not even the leaves on the trees could be heard, such was the terror that gripped Kurdistan’ (in O’Connor 2021,

95). The PKK was one of the few Kurdish movements to effectively survive the wave of state violence and launched an insurgency in 1984. Thereafter, small armed PKK units composed of three to five militants² began to move through the region, spreading propaganda, launching armed attacks and recruiting local youths. By the beginning of the 1990s, roughly from 1990 to 1992, the PKK established control over much of the countryside in the (primarily) Kurdish region of Turkey. In PKK terms, these were considered ‘semiliberated zones’. In these areas—large parts of the provinces of Hakkari, Van, Şırnak, Siirt, Batman, Diyarbakır and Bingöl—the PKK established a permanent presence. These had their own local bases but were also in regular (near daily) contact with other adjacent guerrilla forces and sometimes even lodged in the many small rural settlements in these areas.

Though the PKK had a well-organised network of militants in the towns and cities in the region, the build-up of its forces took place where the state was weakest, that is, the peripheral countryside. The party aimed to take over the rural areas first, with the towns and cities to follow only in the final stage of the war. Initially, the Turkish Armed Forces decided just to defend the larger villages and towns. In doing so, they allowed the PKK establish a guerrilla network throughout the Southeast, and unintentionally facilitated the fulfilment of the PKK’s strategy. The hamlets and villages provided not only shelter but also intelligence, recruits and food supplies, as well as political legitimacy, or in other terms, a supportive constituency (O’Connor 2021). These were the material and political components of the network that facilitated the PKK’s swift and informed movement throughout the region (Jongerden 2010). It was in this spatial context—a well embedded insurgent movement with a growing supportive constituency and adequate access to local resources—that the Village Guards were introduced to combat as part of the army’s counterinsurgency strategy. Their paramilitary role—surveillance of the area, provisions of intelligence and participation in combat operations—took place in the context of a reorganisation of the army into a mobile fighting force and the evacuation and destruction of more than 3000 rural settlements affecting approximately 3 million people. This evacuation and destruction of villages was paradoxically both haphazard and territorially inconsistent but also centrally orchestrated as part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy. At first, the army put pressure on the villagers to become Village Guards. When villagers refused to become part of the militia, the military evacuated the village. Village Guards from nearby villages appropriated and plundered the evacuated villages, which remained intact. Wheat stocks, tools, animals and personal possessions were stolen, even window frames and doorposts broken out of the houses and seized (Jongerden 2007, 253–254).

In the subsequent counterinsurgency strategy developed in the early 1990s, the Turkish Armed Forces disrupted the ability of the PKK to operate (Özdağ and Aydın 2003). The armed forces abandoned the approach of garrison line-of-defence as their primary military tactic. As part of the new strategy of spatial control, commando brigades and special forces became key elements in the fight against the PKK. Soldiers were obliged to stay in the field day and night, searching for PKK units and camps. In addition, special teams under the authority of the police and the gendarmerie were created as rapid response

units in cities and the countryside respectively. This new field domination strategy, aimed to contract insurgent space and disrupt guerrilla mobility (Jongerden 2010). The military strategy went hand in hand with the concentration of executive power in the hands of special governors, who had the authority to order the evacuation of villages and the displacement of their populations. This built upon a long tradition of exceptional governance arrangements in the southeast of Turkey, which had been ruled under martial law and emergency regulations since 1927. Until 1952, most of the area (Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Siirt, Urfa and Van) was administered by an Inspector General, an office established in 1927 to bring ‘order and discipline’ (Koçak 2003). In 1935, two further inspector generals were appointed to administer Kurdish populated areas, one for the ‘Murat and Munzur’ region, covering Dersim/Tunceli, and the other for the northern part of the East, covering Ağrı, Çoruh, Erzincan, Erzurum, Gümüşhane, Kars and Trabzon. The Southeast was closed to foreigners until 1965, and the region subsequently ruled under martial law or state of emergency laws from 1980. The OHAL state of emergency area was created in 1983, before the PKK started its military campaign, and the office of the Regional Governor established in 1987, maintaining military authority over the Southeast after executive power had been transferred back to the civilian authorities elsewhere in Turkey following the 1980 coup d’état. Civilian rule was later returned to the area, slowly and piecemeal, until the final lifting of OHAL law from the remaining four provinces to which it applied in 2002 (Jongerden 2010). The case we discuss in this article covers the 1984–2003 period.

3 | The Relational Nature of Village Guard Mobilisation

One of the most detailed accounts on the Village Guard mobilisation in Kurdistan (Çelik 2021a, 434) argues that there have been seven key dimensions to its emergence.³ This article focuses on the two dimensions most relevant to the İslamköy case: the first emphasises the role played by tribal cleavages as openings for the Village Guard system to embed itself in the region. The second focuses on the horizontal restructuring of power dynamics, with a particular focus on access to land and changes in the rural economy. Tribal structures in Kurdistan have some ascriptive characteristics but are largely socially produced and maintained, rendering their ‘the fictive and real boundaries’ more difficult to assess (Yalçın-Heckmann 1989, 625). Importantly, tribal dynamics in this context are not some vestiges of a primordial past, but rather a modern political rearticulation of local power dynamics, shaped by relations (or the absence thereof) with the state and other relevant political actors. For example, upon the return of parliamentary democracy in the 1950s, most mainstream political parties used tribes as collective sources of block votes (Barkey and Fuller 1998, 77). Indeed, even the PKK, which often expressed its opposition to feudal landowners, also harnessed tribal tensions to obtain support (Jongerden and O’Connor 2025). The Village Guards were accordingly products of particular local political orders, characterised by prevailing norms related to the tribal division of power, emergent opportunities vis-à-vis transactional arrangements with the state and the local political economy.

As mentioned in the introduction, this article makes use of a relational ontology that depicts ‘social reality in dynamic, continuous and processual terms, and sees relations between social terms and units as pre-eminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substance’ (Emirbayer 1997, 289). When considering armed conflict or specific armed actors’ mobilisation, a relational perspective is important because it rejects the deterministic perspective dominant in much conflict literature. It opposes the notion that ‘the emergence of violence lies with some quality intrinsic to or developed by [...] actor[s], rather than as the result of the complex web of relational patterns and practises that shape and are shaped by the interactions among a variety of actors and parties involved in contention, as well as by surrounding, at times contingent, events, and circumstances’ (Alimi et al. 2015, 14). These relations of course develop in concrete social environments with established social norms and expectations, and are shaped and influenced by them. As Kasper Hoffmann (2015, 159) explains, ‘no matter how radical the political vision of a rebel group, its practices are always embedded in historically contingent values, norms, beliefs and forms of governance’. Accordingly, the emergence of both the PKK and the Village Guards was certainly shaped but not necessarily determined by prevailing tribal balances of power.

Village Guard recruitment and mobilisation has been a highly idiosyncratic and territorialised phenomenon, varying topographically and geographically, embedding itself in pre-existing economic, political and cultural contexts and according to the timing of their enlistment. Reflecting once again, the need for much more comprehensive empirical and theoretical analysis of the subject, given the huge role Village Guards have played in the conflict. Notwithstanding its spatial variation, they can be roughly divided into two categories, ‘temporary’ and ‘voluntary’. The former ‘acquire[d] licensed guns, a monthly salary in which they are obliged to join the guard duties and operations in return’, while the latter ‘do not receive any payment. They own a licensed gun provided by the gendarmerie and are charged with the protection of their own villages’ (Özar et al. 2013, 10; Göral et al. 2013, 17).⁴ However, both terms are misnomers: Many ‘temporary’ Village Guards have been in existence for almost 40 years, and many ‘voluntary’ Village Guards were violently forced by state forces to participate at the pain of forcible deportation.⁵ Crucially, they were not simply tools to militarily bolster the fight against the insurgents, but as a means to filter communities that were potentially sympathetic to the PKK and forcibly deport them. The first recruits in the 1980s were tribal families led by landlords in areas where PKK units had mobilised and supported landless workers and villagers. Among these were the Bucak in Siverek-Hilvan region (Işık 2021). Other early joiners were landlords in the region close to the Iraqi–Turkish border in the Şırnak and Hakkari area that had been granted impunity to continue with their involvement in the booming smuggling sector (Balta 2007, 130; Balta Paker 2009, 4). Another example was the seminomadic Jirkan tribe headed by the pro-Kurdish TKDP supporter Tahir Adiyaman, who had been forced to live as an outlaw after a previous deadly armed clash with soldiers.⁶ He was offered a pardon by the state so long as he participated in the system and prevented PKK guerrillas from passing through Jirkan land (van Bruinessen 2003, 174).

As we outline in the case of İslamköy, this sudden strengthening of tribal–political forces unleashed waves of social contention and conflict caused by newly empowered actors using their political and military enhancement to displace local rivals. Rather than focusing on these reconfigurations as simply tribal articulations, it is better to consider them as ‘embedded practises’ [in this case embedded in the prevailing Kurdish tribal milieu] rather than ‘already constituted identities/entities’ (Massey 2005, 10). Accordingly, as the system took root in Kurdistan through the 1980s, it completely transformed local balances of political, coercive and economic power. And although many Village Guards did not initially mobilise on the basis of opposition to the PKK, spirals of escalation between them and the guerrillas did lead to the consolidation of a politicised antagonism, thereby ensuring that the system evolved from being a tool of military necessity to one that acquired dimensions of colonial governmentality.

4 | Historical Antecedents of Pro-State Militias in Kurdistan

There has been much historical precedent in the region for locally recruited militias fighting at the behest of the political centre. As early as 1891, the Ottoman state established the Hamidiye Cavalry Regiments, which predominantly consisted of Kurdish tribes and were deployed as proxies for the state (Işık 2024; Klein 2011, 2012). In the first years of the republican period, the new regime legally institutionalised the system in the Village Law (*Köy Kanunu*) (1924), which allowed for the establishment of a paramilitary force under the name of the Temporary Village Guard System (Özar et al. 2013). According to this law, every village had to have at least one Village Guard under the orders of the village headman; however, the number of Village Guards could increase depending on the size of the village. Although the establishment of these paramilitary units was justified as necessary for local security (Işık 2021), it was related more broadly to state building and the colonisation of rural areas with limited state presence (Yılmaz 2024). The region has been ruled under variations of martial law and emergency regulations since 1927, incarnating what Agamben (2005) has referred to as the ‘perpetual state of emergency’.

The Village Guard system was effectively put into practice from 1987 onwards under the command of local military commanders. Village Guard units were armed and supervised by the local gendarmerie and were not only expected to take defensive positions against the PKK but also to participate in operations, some of which involved cross-border incursions into Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq. About 5000 men joined this paramilitary force in its first year, and by 1995, this number had increased to 67,000 (HRW 1995, 25). In 2003, during a prolonged multi-year PKK ceasefire (1998–2004) and a marked decline in armed actions, the number of paramilitaries had only decreased to about 59,000 strong (Jongerden 2007), yet, in the 20 years that followed, their number increased to 75,184 (Kaya 2023). Thus, their size and importance are not necessarily correlated to their military function, confirming that they are rather an element in the broader governance of the region. Village Guards are commanded by a local tribal leader but supervised by the nearest army post, thus enjoying substantial local autonomy on a day-to-day basis. The Village Guards have enjoyed virtual immunity,

using their arms for the exercise of private violence and personal gain. This is consistent with wider patterns of pro-state militias, using their enhanced status and capacity for violence for private ends (Jentzsch et al. 2015). There have been widespread instances of Village Guards reviving old feuds, killing and looting, seizing land and property and kidnapping women. This has resulted in a sharp increase in intra-Kurdish conflicts, feuds between tribes or villages, many completely unrelated to the PKK or politics, and often between different Village Guard factions (Özar et al. 2013; Acar 2019; Işık 2021, 2023).

In late 1987, the state declared a state of emergency, which granted the regional governor formal authority to order the temporary or permanent evacuation of settlements in the interest of 'public security'. However, in real terms, locally based military commanders decided about the evacuation of specific rural settlements. The PKK did not anticipate the Village Guards system's relative success, initially expecting to overcome it swiftly. The PKK responded by violently targeting Village Guard villages throughout 1987 in bloody attacks, which also included their family members (Masullo and O'Connor 2020; Serxwebûn 1987, 2). The campaign did lead to a short-term decline of Village Guard mobilisation (Aydin and Emrence 2015, 56–57). Although these PKK campaigns were not indiscriminate, rather collectively targeting villages and tribes who adhered to the system (Masullo and O'Connor 2020), the massacres did generate local and international reputational damage to the PKK. This led the PKK to formally abandon its explicit targeting of Village Guards at the Fourth Party Congress in 1990 (Imset 1992, 345). However, in many parts of Kurdistan, the antagonism between the PKK and the Village Guards had taken on elements of a 'blood feud', ensuring that localised campaigns of reciprocal violence had taken root, regardless of broader political cleavages. In light of the PKK's increasingly successful deterrence of Village Guard expansion, state forces adopted more repressive recruitment practices, increasingly characterised by pressure, threats and intimidation. Notwithstanding the immense risks of joining, by the late 1980s, the Village Guard system had become established in the region, and was an active armed force in its own right rather than merely serving as guides and providers of local intelligence (Balta 2007, 129–130).

Village Guards were far from being a homogeneous, unitary group. Apart from belonging to the very broad category of men aged between 18 and 60, there is little in common between a peasant who agreed to become a Village Guard under the threat of violence and expulsion from their land and a tribal leader motivated by criminal incentives or political ambition, and much in between. A whole range of circumstances came into play: the method and timing of recruitment, the local military balance of power, the role of tribal or family affiliation in the decision to join, socio-economic factors, personal experience of violence and confrontation, and the degree of emotional and ideological involvement with either side (Çelik 2021a, 441). A critical distinction is between tribes who joined in the first wave of mobilisation (usually so-called temporary Village Guards) and those who joined in the 1990s under the explicit threat of expulsion by state forces (usually so-called voluntary Village Guards). Importantly, in the former case, it was tribal elites who made the decision to join, guaranteeing a certain number of their fellow tribesmen who had no individual say regarding joining or not

and who were not directly paid for their role. Recruitment was negotiated between the authorities and tribal leaders directly. 'The [tribal] chieftains had received the arms and pay for their men, usually keeping a certain percentage of the salary of each guard to themselves. Their crucial role in the negotiation process as well as in the distribution of benefits had enormously strengthened the position of tribal chiefs in the region, socially, politically, and economically' (Balta 2004, 6). But by the 1990s, the PKK's perception of and relationship with Village Guards became more nuanced. PKK commanders often conferred with village leaders and permitted them to join the Village Guards rather than be subject to expulsion, with the proviso that they did not actively take part in operations against the guerrillas (O'Connor 2021, 153–154). Such villages continued to be viewed by the guerrillas as *welatparêz*⁷ and continued to offer other forms of support for the PKK. There is ample evidence that, in some cases, Village Guards covertly supported the PKK and in other cases were even actively involved in PKK operations against the state (Belge 2016). There are also several instances of Village Guards being violently punished by security forces for real or alleged PKK sympathies, such as the 1996 Güçlükönak massacre (Amnesty International 1998). Accordingly, the manner of recruitment to the system and how they interacted with the PKK is extremely heterogeneous and cannot be a priori assumed, thus demanding detailed microlevel analysis at the district or village level.

5 | Forcible Rural Displacement: The Case of İslamköy

As part of its counterinsurgency operations, Turkish Armed Forces evacuated and destroyed rural settlements on a large scale. According to official figures, 833 villages and 2382 small rural settlements, totalling 3215 settlements, were evacuated and destroyed (Jongerden 2007). The evacuation and destruction rapidly intensified with the adoption of the new counterinsurgency doctrine in the early 1990s, which focused on breaking the link between the PKK and its constituency in rural areas. Beyond political legitimacy and intelligence, the PKK also depended on its local constituency for many basic necessities like food, medicine and boots. The military's new field strategy was to deny the guerrillas these resources by 'draining the sea' of PKK support and burning and evacuating vast swathes of the countryside (Van Etten et al. 2008).

İslamköy (Kuyê in Kurdish) is located some 25 km north of the district town of Kulp (Pasûr in Kurdish), and 130 km northeast of the provincial city Diyarbakır (Amed in Kurdish). Until the 1915 Armenian genocide, it boasted a substantial Armenian population who cohabited with Kurdish tribes. The district of Kulp is characterised by volcanic soils and precipitous mountain slopes. Traditionally, its inhabitants earned a living with arable farming on small plots measured in tenths of a *dönüm*,⁸ animal husbandry, and silk production. The village itself is a patchwork of small settlements. It falls into four main parts, referred to as quarters (*mahalle*) by its inhabitants, located at a distance of one to three kilometres from each other. There are also seven dependent settlements, referred to either as hamlets (*mezra*) or settlement cores (*iskan çekirdeği*) (see Table 1 for an overview of settlements in the composite village İslamköy). The

TABLE 1 | Population of İslamköy before evacuation in 1994.

Location	Houses	Inhabitants
Kuyê (Centre)	36	290
Vank	37	274
Xoş	25	185
Diyarê Tûr	20	148
Goma Şewat/Sote	9	67
Wesik	8	60
Hemek	8	59
Lexsor	7	52
Lerk	7	52
Axdat	7	30
Mezradîv	6	44
Total	170	1209

four settlements (quarters) that form the centre of İslamköy are Kuyê, Vank, Xoş and Tûr, each had 20 or more houses prior to evacuation. The peripheral settlements (hamlets or settlement cores)—Goma Şewat/Sote, Wesik, Hemek, Lexsor, Lerk, Axdat and Mezradîv—ranged in size from six to nine houses. Altogether, the population numbered some 1200 people.

Before Kuyê evacuation in 1992, it had a nursery, a primary school, a health clinic and a mosque. The pattern of land ownership contributed to its dispersed housing pattern, with most families building houses on their own land, usually small plots of two to five *dönüm*. The land in İslamköy was not particularly productive contributing to substantial out-migration from the village, in particular since the second half of the 1980s.

In a case taken to the ECHR by residents of İslamköy who were expelled in June 1993, two families (Selçuk and Asker) outlined what was to become a pattern of expulsion that recurred across the region. In early 1993, a gendarmerie unit commanded by Recep Cömert visited İslamköy and threatened the village with destruction if its residents did not abandon their homes. On June 16th, the unit returned and burned several houses, food stocks, trees and sheds. They returned on June 26th and then burned the local flour mill and several more homes. The affected families were then obliged to flee to the relative safety of Kulp before eventually settling in Diyarbakır city (ECHR 1998, 12/1997/796/998–999).⁹ One of the villagers witnessed the burning of İslamköy standing on the roof of a house in a nearby village. He recalls:

‘An airplane flew low over the village. It looked as if it sprayed some kind of smoke over the houses, which burst into flames a moment after. The fire it produced was so hot that stones melted’

(in Jongerden 2007).

The destruction of houses by the army and forced migration of villagers began in 1993 with the targeting of families who had

not become Village Guards and were suspected of sympathising with the PKK. Many sought refuge in Kulp, where they were forced once again by the state to relocate further afield because of their suspected political affiliation.¹⁰ However, although alleged PKK sympathisers had all been exiled, in May 1994 the Turkish armed forces returned to evacuated and destroyed all of İslamköy, including properties of Village Guards. There were unanticipated local dynamics that guided the decision to ultimately destroy the village. As long as the village stood and people (Village Guards’ families) lived there, the Village Guards were obliged to stay and protect it. Yet, the area retained a high presence of insurgent units and the lightly armed Village Guards, distant from the nearest army bases were easy targets for PKK ambushes. In fact, nine of them succumbed to PKK attacks in this period. Accordingly, the local Village Guards lobbied for the evacuation of their own village, preferring to permanently settle in Kulp¹¹ and essentially commute back to the village on patrol rather than living there. This once again illustrates the ambiguous and somewhat unanticipated dynamics impelling military developments in the conflict, demanding thick analysis at the local level to understand how the conflict evolved in Kurdistan.

By 1990, the PKK had strongly established itself in the district of Kulp. The party controlled large parts of the rural and mountainous areas in the district and had some presence in the district town itself. The district is renowned for its many caves, which were ideal for guerrilla units to use as hideouts and to store provisions. Between 1990 and 1992, the PKK was able to control the area where İslamköy was located. The nearest army base was in Kulp, some 25 km away. The PKK provided a form of rebel governance (see Loyle and Onder 2023; O’Connor 2021; O’Connor and Akin 2023; O’Connor and Jongerden 2023). Guerrilla presence was so routinised that in the course of fieldwork, villagers from İslamköy showed the authors the field in the village where they had played football with guerrillas in the early 1990s, thus illustrating the sense of security the guerrillas felt there. State forces were limited to occasional raids on İslamköy by large gendarme contingents, occasionally burning houses (ECHR 1998).

6 | Dynamics of Village Guard Mobilisation in İslamköy

Village Guard mobilisation in İslamköy has been primarily driven by two dynamics: firstly, the village’s tribal cleavage between the more dominant Etmankan and the weaker Tavşî tribes. The Etmankan were more powerful, not only because they outnumbered Tavşî, but they also took advantage of their stronger integration into the local bureaucracy. Secondly, it was propelled by the Tavşî seizing the opportunity inherent in the emergence of the Village Guards to reset the economic and social balance of powers between them and the Etmankan. Every family from Tûr and Hamik joined the Village Guards, all of which were members of the Tavşî tribe. Their ancestors had been migrants from Solhan (Bingöl), most likely in the 1930s, and had established the two settlement cores (Jongerden 2007). As Çelik has explained, the recruitment of members of a tribe often favours the subsequent decision of other members to join (Çelik 2021a). In this case, the enlistment of İslamköy’s Tavşî followed the collective recruitment of members of one of the main branches of the Tavşî residing in Solhan, which is around

150km away from İslamköy, thus highlighting the intertwined nature of local and regional dynamics. In the early 1990s, while the districts' plateaus were dominated by the PKK, the aforementioned Recep Cömert, Kulp's military commander, decided to settle (i.e., sedentarise) the Tavsi of the plateaus in lower lying Tûr. This increased the number of Tavsi in Tûr to over a hundred. The arrival of the semi-nomadic Tavsi upset the previous balance of power, and serious tensions soon arose between the Tavsi of Tûr and the villagers of the chief village of Kuyê.

The paramilitarisation of the Tavsi has had several consequences in terms of local relations. On the one hand, the enmity between Tavsi and Etmankan was exacerbated, while at the same time partially changing its character from an inter-tribal feud to one with political elements, as the Tavsi suddenly enjoyed the advantages reserved for friends of the State, while the Etmankan loyal to the PKK were classed among the latter's enemies. This had immediate consequences. Kenan, born in Kuyê in 1955, recounts, for example:

Before, these people begged from us, they were the most miserable in the village. But once they had weapons in their hands, they began to use them as a force against us.¹²

From the accounts gathered in Kuyê, it became clear the Tavsi, previously considered the bottom of the social ladder (particularly those who had remained semi-nomadic, stigmatised for their lack of education and their lack of 'good morals' - according to a widespread assimilation between sedentariness and civilisation), relied on their Village Guard status to completely reverse the situation. Emboldened with their new power, they confronted the Etmankans, by ceasing to respect the established irrigation rotation and cutting off other villagers' water supplies, as well as provoking them by gatecrashing weddings and impeding guests from singing pro-Kurdish songs.

In addition to this inflaming of relations between the village's tribes, there was a strong dynamic of economic reordering and class mobility. About fifty families joined the Village Guard system in İslamköy. But according to numbers provided by the governor, the number of Village Guards in İslamköy was about 500, an improbably high number for fifty families. As only males were eligible to participate, the cited numbers were likely a result of falsified participation rates to illicitly claim salaries for non-existent Village Guards. The Tavsi families from Tur had been among the poorest in the village. They had been either entirely landless or owned very small pockets of land, earning low incomes labouring for others in the village. The Village Guard system offered an alternative and secure source of income.¹³ Furthermore, as armed Village Guards, with the backing of the army, the Tavsi could enforce access to the much-wanted summer pastures (Jongerden 2007; Çelik 2021a). A family from Tur, which had left the village in 1992 after a violent incident and laboured as seasonal workers in Bismil, triumphantly returned to İslamköy as Village Guards in 1993 (Jongerden 2007). Accordingly, the prevailing social, political and economic order of the village was completely upended by the emergence of the Village Guards system there. As one villager inhabitant remarked:

In the village, every single Village Guard has a power equal to that of the chief of the general staff. A Village Guard can decide over matters of life and death, as long as he can categorize his conduct as 'anti-terrorism'.

Notwithstanding, their enhanced economic position in the village, İslamköy's Village Guards have also suffered significant costs. The PKK has militarily targeted them, indicative of the fierceness of the violence, according to the PKK's journal *Serxwebûn* in July and August 1994 alone, the PKK killed six and wounded 10 Village Guards in İslamköy (Serxwebûn 1994). Many inhabitants of İslamköy call them *çaş* (donkey foals), historically also used to designate the Kurdish armed collaborators with the Iraqi regime (Jongerden 2007). They are despised by many of their neighbours and viewed as outcasts. Although they could request army support whenever it was deemed necessary, they were often left on their own to fend off guerrilla attacks. Even though they are employed by the state and paid a wage, they have no social security or pension rights. And most significantly when the army ultimately destroyed the village of İslamköy in 1994, they also made no exemption for the property of the Village Guards. The Tavsi were left to find their own shelter elsewhere; ignominiously expelled, just like the Etmankan who had been accused of collaborating with the PKK. The state did eventually provide them with low quality housing shelter in 'new' İslamköy village, but not until 7 years later, in 2001.

7 | The Aftermath of the Village Evacuation in İslamköy

By 1998, 4 years after İslamköy's evacuation and substantial destruction, plans were made for the return of some of its population. In these plans, the village was not to be rebuilt in its old location, but after consultation with the gendarmerie, a couple of kilometres to the north, at a high altitude overlooking the valley where the old village had been located (Jongerden 2007). Families who had refused to become Village Guards rejected resettlement in the new village, preferring to return to their original homesteads. They pitched tents amid the ruins of their old houses through the spring and summer of 2001 until weather conditions worsened, and they returned to Diyarbakır upon winter's onset. These villagers autonomously organised their own resettlement, rebuilding their houses and connecting them to the regional electricity grid. As a consequence of, on the one hand, the authorities' reconstruction of İslamköy at a new location (New İslamköy), and its habitation by Village Guards, and, on the other, the other villagers' rebuilding of their old houses in the old village, two different settlements have arisen. Each set of inhabitants claims their settlement to be *the* village, the civilian returnees¹⁴ because they have reconstructed what had always been the village in the past, and the Village Guards because they have earned their entitlement to village through the blood they spilled in 'defence' of the village, with nine deaths or martyrs fallen in the war against the PKK.¹⁵ The two sets of villagers maintain their own, separate, minibus connections to Kulp and Diyarbakır, and they neither trust nor cooperate with one another, rather coexisting in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and tension. The Etmankan do not feel comfortable in

the village due to the ongoing threat posed by the armed Village Guards; on the other hand, the Village Guards are on the alert in Diyarbakır where the PKK retains significant support among the masses of rurally displaced that flocked to the city.

8 | Change of Land Usage in İslamköy

The resettlement and reconstruction of İslamköy is characterised by a spatial division based on political animosities that emerged endogenous to the conflict (Jongerden 2007). This fragile arrangement is embedded in substantial changes to the local economy and a reconfiguration of previous patterns of land ownership, access and usage. We will look at three specific dimensions of changes to the land in İslamköy: the silk industry; cattle husbandry and pasturing rights; and access to water.

Before 1984, silk was an important source of income in İslamköy and the surrounding area, but production in Turkey collapsed as a result of Prime Minister Turgut Özal's 'open door' policy, when cheap silk from China started to enter the Turkish market. Nevertheless, families returning and resettling in the area since the early 2000s are still involved in silk production. The production cycle is short (40 days from the beginning of May), and production costs are low (the silk larvae are raised on leaves from local mulberry trees). As the silk is produced inside a room or shed, only Village Guards were able to produce silk in the early 2000s because they were the only inhabitants with proper houses and buildings. Over the years, as civilian returnees started to reconstruct houses, they gradually became involved again in silk production, resulting in an increased production of silk in the region. But conflict-derived consequences persist; the main bottleneck for silk production is the shortage of mulberry trees, which had been cut down during the destruction of the village.

Conflict over the summer use of the highland pastures for animal grazing had pitted the Tavsi and the Etmankan against each other for generations. As mentioned, the Etmankan had limited and prohibited access to the Tavsi. For the Tavsi, becoming Village Guards represented a means of overturning this unfavourable balance of power and securing access to the plateaus (Çelik 2022, 439). The tensions between the two were exacerbated by the fact that around 50 Tavsi families had retained a seminomadic lifestyle: summering on the plateaus and wintering in hamlets attached to the village of İslamköy. Therefore, access to the pastures was critical to their economic survival, further clarifying why they perceived the opportunities offered by participation in the Village Guards as such an attractive proposition.

Water resources are particularly scarce in the high ground of New İslamköy. With the construction of the new settlement, a water pumping system was also installed to pump the water up from the old village to the new site for both domestic household consumption and agricultural use. The inhabitants of the old village claim that this has jeopardised their water rights. The villagers had earlier developed a 17-day rotation system of irrigation for the land, through which every owner of land was supplied with water for a period of 3–12 h, depending on the size of his land. The residents of the original village now feared the

water supply to New İslamköy would exhaust the resource and disrupt their own irrigation system.

9 | Discussion

In addition to the mass human suffering, the conflict in Kurdistan has dramatically scarred its land. It has been fundamentally damaged by the use of landmines, the erection of military infrastructure, the construction of dams and the flooding of mountain valleys, and the destruction of huge swathes of its forests. But Kurdistan's rich countryside and water sources remain a potential source of massive wealth, and the conflict has witnessed a transfer of this collective wellbeing to select local allies of the state. This article has demonstrated that this great transformation of land ownership and access has been largely implemented through the prism of adherence (or not) to the Village Guard system. Our article focussed on one single case, İslamköy, analysing how the Village Guard system infiltrated existing tribal cleavages and completely reconfigured prevailing power dynamics in the area. As mentioned, the Village Guard mobilisation is a heterogeneous phenomenon, taking on very different forms across the vast areas it operates in. Accordingly, İslamköy's experience as outlined in this article has limited generalisability, but it does have specific implications and indicate avenues of further research into how the system became embedded and developed across Kurdistan. Most notably, the use of a relational perspective can be applied to analyse the Village Guards on a broader scale.

Firstly, it was influenced by tribal dynamics: but it should not be reductively considered as a tribal phenomenon per se, the Village Guards exist because of their utility to the central state as a counterinsurgent force. If tribal institutions had been weaker, it is most likely that the state would have leveraged other societal divisions to mobilise a paramilitary force, which is arguably what it did with its support of a radical Islamist movement Hezbollah in the early 1990s (Çelik 2021b; Işık 2023; Kurt 2017). The tribal dynamics which embedded the system in İslamköy were shaped by the marginalised inhabitants of the village in their efforts to obtain relative local advantage. The case of İslamköy demonstrates that the Village Guards provided opportunities for the rural poor—with limited access to land and resources—to overturn existing power relations and force access to land and water. This was reinforced by the statement from the Head of Diyarbakır branch of Goc-Der¹⁶: 'the weak have a tendency to become Village Guards. I am not just talking about economic weakness, but also weakness in terms of the social power. They might have thought of it as a way to react to the authority of the "strong." In that regard, village guardianship might have transformed the social relations in favour of the "weak"' (in Balta 2004).

Secondly, the case shows how the establishment of the Village Guards needs to be analysed not simply from a military perspective but also from a political economy one. Although a significant segment of the participants in the system have likely been seeking to preserve their livelihoods and prevent the displacement of their villages, this article helps to also reframe the Village Guard system as an apparatus through which its participants are able to redefine social hierarchies and acquire access to land and

resources. Reinterpreting intra-Kurdish conflict through this lens, particularly within a colonial framework, foregrounds the interactions between colonial and colonised actors, emphasising the agency of each party in relation to their respective projects, interests, priorities and constraints. The widespread presence of the Village Guards system in Kurdistan can only be fully understood by accounting for local dynamics and the active role of the Village Guards themselves, who are not merely instruments of Turkish state politics. This perspective suggests that state-created paramilitary organisations cannot be fully understood through a purely top-down lens. Analysing these structures solely in terms of state intent obscures the complex and often contradictory local power dynamics that shape their emergence and operation.

Importantly, examining the Village Guards system through the relational lens of local micropower dynamics goes beyond state-centred analytical frameworks that interpret the system in primarily moral, ideological or abstract terms. This localised micro perspective also opens the door to a materialist political economy analysis by centring pragmatic anthropology. Focusing on a single case, the village of İslamköy/Kuyê, offers an opportunity to conduct precisely this kind of grounded research by examining how the Village Guard system transformed local power relations, reshaped both existing and emerging conflicts over the redistribution of pasture and water resources, and altered dynamics along tribal and class lines.

As we have argued elsewhere (Çelik 2025), and against the backdrop of conversations between the state and the PKK over a just and peaceful political solution to the Kurdish issue, any proposed settlement must address not only the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK but also the fractures within the Kurdish community itself. The Village Guard system has operated as a key instrument through which the Turkish state has produced dependence and subordination within Kurdish society, but, as we have shown, also as a mechanism that has deepened existing cleavages and created new ones within Kurdish communities over the past 40 years. As the İslamköy case illustrates, these dynamics revolve around the very means by which people sustain their livelihoods in rural areas—land and water—and must therefore be explicitly addressed.

10 | Conclusion

In sum, Turkey's Village Guard system, created in 1985 as part of the state's counterinsurgency against the PKK, has evolved beyond its original purpose. Rather than operating only as a tool of top-down control, it has become an arena of local contestation where actors at multiple levels renegotiate power, capture resources and claim authority. A ground-up view shows that paramilitary institutions are not simply imposed by the state but coproduced through local dynamics—dynamics that can reinforce and reconfigure local hierarchies and intra-Kurdish relations. This challenges state-centric narratives and points to the need for more nuanced accounts of how paramilitary forces operate within—and transform—the socio-political environments in which they are embedded. More broadly, regimes have long relied on pro-state militias to suppress insurgencies, and Turkey is no exception. While existing scholarship on the Village Guards has emphasised recruitment,

operational roles and human rights violations—often framing the force as an instrument of state strategy—our analysis builds on insights such as Kalyvas' (2003) to show how local armed actors leverage national conflicts for parochial aims, and how those local aims, in turn, shape paramilitary structures themselves.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

- ¹ The force is formally known as *Türkiye Güvenlik Köy Korucuları* (Security Village Guards of Turkey).
- ² Theoretically, a unit was composed of a commander, a vice-commander, a political commissary, someone operating a machine-gun and someone operating an RPG rocket launcher. In PKK terminology, this was named a *manga*, or squad. Three squads formed a *takım*, or platoon, and three platoons a company or *bölük*.
- ³ The seven dimensions he listed were as follows: (1) topographical and geostrategic factors; (2) historical links with the state; (3) the material dimension; (4) the ideological or religious dimension; (5) the interethnic factor; (6) the continuation of former internal conflicts thanks to the new resources provided by the Village Guards system or the gain of power on a local scale; (7) tribal dynamics, including the mobilization of the *asabiyya* and the spirit of vendetta.
- ⁴ The system's earliest recruits tended to be 'temporary' and those compelled to join in the 1990s were more commonly 'voluntary', however recruitment was shaped by local conflict imperatives and cannot be rigorously chronologically categorized.
- ⁵ On April 4, 1985, Prime Minister Turgut Özal added two further articles to the existing Village Law, which made it possible for the government to hire 'Temporary and Voluntary Village Guards' (*Geçici ve Gönüllü Köy Korucuları*) and giving legal sanction to the Village Guards.
- ⁶ The TKDP (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê—Bakur/Turkey Kurdistan Democratic Party) was a Kurdish Nationalist party with close ties to the KDP headed by the Barzani family in Southern Kurdistan.
- ⁷ Generally taken to mean being a Kurdish patriot and having a supportive attitude for the PKK.
- ⁸ In Turkey, nowadays one *dönüm* is officially fixed at 1000m²; 10 *dönüms* are one hectare. In different places, however, the area considered to be a *dönüm* may still vary according to local tradition.
- ⁹ The court's judgement stated: 'Their homes and most of their property were destroyed by the security forces, depriving the applicants of their livelihoods and forcing them to leave their village. It would appear that the exercise was premeditated and carried out contemptuously and without respect for the feelings of the applicants. They were taken unprepared; they had to stand by and watch the burning of their homes; inadequate precautions were taken to secure the safety of Mr and Mrs Asker; Mrs Selçuk's protests were ignored, and no assistance was provided to them afterwards'. Although the court's judgement was rejected by the state, the Asker and Selçuk families were given substantial financial settlements for the damages inflicted on them.
- ¹⁰ Many of İslamköy's displaced villagers moved to Diyarbakir, settling in and around Koşuyolu, in the Bağlar quarter, before subsequently relocating once again to Mersin, İstanbul and İzmir.

- ¹¹ The PKK also targeted Kulp itself in 1993, ensuring Village Guards safety there was relative rather than absolute.
- ¹² Interview conducted on August 30, 2013, in Kuyê by Adnan Çelik.
- ¹³ In 2004 this was about 250 million Turkish liras a month, approximately 150 euros.
- ¹⁴ See (Masullo and O'Connor 2020) for a discussion of civilian status and the Village Guards.
- ¹⁵ Actually, although nine Village Guards died a violent death, the cause of death of one of them is not clear. The authorities claim that he stepped on a mine, but some of the villagers say that he died as a consequence of an internal fight among the Village Guards.
- ¹⁶ A human rights NGO primarily occupied with internally displaced persons in Turkey.

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