

From “Criminal Citizens” to “Traitors”: The Last of the Kurdish Bandits in Modern Turkey, 1950–1970

AHMET ÖZCAN*

The mass banditry that emerged in Turkey's Kurdish regions between 1950 and 1970 was labelled a “national problem” in state discourse. Banditry and bandits were thus an integral part of the Turkish nation-state building process and the politico-moral economy of the region. Turkish state policies with regard to banditry, after the transformation of bandits from “criminal citizens” into “traitors” in state discourse, culminated in massive military operations to disarm and suppress the peoples of these regions. This last period of Kurdish banditry, the result of the destabilization of traditional Kurdish society, was a source of political contention between the state elite and Kurdish communities.

Le banditisme de masse qui a émergé dans les régions kurdes de la Turquie entre 1950 et 1970 a été qualifié de « problème national » dans le discours de l'État. Par conséquent, ce phénomène et les bandits faisaient partie intégrante du processus de construction de l'État-nation turc et de l'économie politico-morale de la région. Les politiques de l'État en matière de brigandage, après avoir fait passer les bandits du statut de « citoyens criminels » à celui de « traîtres » dans son discours, ont culminé avec des opérations militaires de grande envergure visant à désarmer et à opprimer les populations de ces régions. Cette dernière période de brigandage, résultat de la déstabilisation de la société kurde traditionnelle, a été une source de contentieux politique entre l'élite étatique et les communautés kurdes.

ON JULY 5, 1964, national newspapers in Turkey announced the death of the famous bandit Mehmet İhsan Kilit, a.k.a. Koçero. After several years of relentless pursuit, he was “captured dead” after he and his brothers-in-arms were ambushed by a gendarmerie battalion during an armed robbery at a Turkish Petroleum Corporation site. National newspapers proudly celebrated Koçero's death as the “predestined end” of a rebellion against the state and blamed local peasants for turning such

* Ahmet Özcan is a faculty member in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul Gedik University. This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, which was completed at Boğaziçi University in 2014. The author thanks Zeynep Gambetti, who supervised the dissertation.

an “enemy of the state” into a “champion of the people.”¹ Koçero’s life story, however, suggests that he was not a political figure who opposed the state but rather a successful smuggler and robber who enjoyed a relatively long criminal career thanks to the support of the local people and his talent for surviving numerous armed encounters with the gendarmerie. Why, then, did national newspapers construe the capture of an individual bandit as a matter of the state’s survival, and how did Koçero and the other bandit chiefs who had ruled Turkey’s eastern countryside until the early 1970s become controversial icons in the contentious politics between the state elite and Kurdish communities?

Scholars have divided the political history of the Kurdish people in Republican Turkey into three periods: (1) a period of Kurdish rebellions and state counterinsurgency military operations between 1920 and 1940; (2) a period of relative peace lasting until the second half of the 1970s; and (3) a period of organized armed struggle that continues to the present. According to this narrative, from the completion of the state’s military operations in the late 1930s until the emergence of militant Kurdish nationalist organizations in the late 1970s, most notably the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the people of Turkey’s Kurdish regions found themselves in a rare period of political calm. As Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, wrote, this “second period in Turk-Kurd relations” was a “period of great reticence.”² Hamit Bozarslan has similarly described this intermediate phase as a “period of silence.”³ And Mesut Yeğen, likewise, has argued that the Turkish state had already been consolidated militarily by the 1950s and that it “was not going to undertake massive military operations between the 1950s and the 1980s as it had done in the first two decades of the Republic.”⁴

Attention to the escalation of banditry during this period and the ensuing military operations of the state, however, suggests that this was anything but a period of political silence. In fact, Turkey’s Kurdish regions were de-pacified during this period; mass banditry emerged in the 1950s as a consequence of the socio-economic and juridico-political transformation of the region, and the portrayal of the Kurdish provinces as the “unruly lands of bandits” in state discourse assisted the process of Turkish nation-state building, sanctioning the penetration of the state apparatus, especially its military resources, into the Kurdish regions. As Kurdish peasants became “social rebels” in the eyes of the state elite on account of their unruly nomadism, illegal sources of income (i.e., smuggling), and moral codes of honour killing and blood feuding, state discourse reconstituted incidents of banditry as symptoms of ongoing mass crime in the “politico-strategically vulnerable” eastern provinces. In the twilight of Kurdish banditry, the state’s military operations

1 “Yıllardan beri aranan doğulu şaki Koçero Batman’da öldürüldü” [Wanted for many years, eastern bandit Koçero killed in Batman], *Milliyet*, July 5, 1964, p. 1; “Koçero öldürüldü” [Koçero killed], *Hürriyet*, July 5, 1964, p. 1; “Mukadder son” [Predestined end], *Cumhuriyet*, July 7, 1964, p. 1.

2 Abdullah Öcalan, *Bir Halkı Savunmak* [Defending a people] (İstanbul: Çetin Yayınları, 2004), p. 293.

3 Hamit Bozarslan, “Türkiye Kürdistanı’nda Şiddeti Anlamak” [Understanding violence in Turkey’s Kurdistan], in Güney Çeğin and İbrahim Şirin, eds., *Türkiye’de Siyasal Şiddetin Boyutları* [Dimensions of political violence in Turkey] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), p. 149.

4 Mesut Yeğen, “The Kurdish Question in Turkish State Discourse,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 34 (1999), p. 565; *Devlet Söyleminde Kürt Sorunu* [The Kurdish question in state discourse] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), pp. 165–166.

culminated in commando raids on Kurdish villages in 1970 that directly targeted rural communities and marked the beginning of a new phase in the contentious relationship between the state and Kurdish communities.

Kurdish banditry has been curiously neglected, for the most part, in the scholarly literature on the history of Kurds in Republican Turkey. Those who have written about it have tended to view it as a form of resistance. In the 1930s—almost 30 years before Eric Hobsbawm formulated his theory of “social banditry”—Hikmet Kıvılcımlı characterized banditry as a “primitive form of peasant rebellion,” while emphasizing the role of the state’s ongoing post–First World War “bandit hunts” in state suppression in Kurdish regions.⁵ Similarly, in 1969, İsmail Beşikçi called Kurdish banditry “compatible with the model of social banditry,” describing it as a “spontaneous form of social resistance” to the oppressive rule of state bureaucracy and local landlords.⁶ This view was popularized by Yaşar Kemal, who, in his novel *İnce Memed* (Slim Memed; 1955), portrayed banditry as a primitive form of rebellion against feudal oppression.⁷

Countering this romanticization of banditry, however, Kemal Tahir reinterpreted it, in his novel *Rahmet Yolları Kesti* (Rain closed the roads; 1957), as a means of terror used by local power holders against peasants.⁸ In a similar vein, more recent studies have underlined state bureaucrats’ patronage of Kurdish tribal bandits in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. Echoing Karen Barkey’s opposition to Hobsbawm’s social banditry thesis, which portrayed the banditry in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire as a mechanism of state centralization,⁹ these writers have emphasized the role Kurdish banditry played in Turkish state centralization by focusing on military alliances between pillaging Kurdish tribes and the Ottoman bureaucracy after the establishment of the Hamidiye Corps, the militia forces composed of Kurdish tribes, in 1891.¹⁰ For instance, framing Turkey’s modern state formation as a process of “selective pacification,” Uğur Ümit Üngör underlined

5 Hikmet Kıvılcımlı, *Yol* [The path] (İstanbul: Bibliotek Yayınları, 1992), pp. 290–292, 441–443. In 1959, 10 years before the publication of *Bandits*, Hobsbawm had already put forward his social banditry thesis in his work *The Primitive Rebels*. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971); and, Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (1969; New York: The New Press, 2000).

6 İsmail Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu’nun Düzeni: Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller* [Order in eastern Anatolia: Socio-economic and ethnic foundations] (İstanbul: E Yayınları, 1969), pp. 26, 100–101. Sabri Yetkin similarly portrayed the Aegean bandits (i.e., *zeibeks*) as “an indigenous example” of Hobsbawm’s model of social banditry. Sabri Yetkin, *Ege’de Eşkıyalar* [Bandits in the Aegean region] (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1996), p. 6.

7 See Yaşar Kemal, *İnce Memed* [Slim Memed] (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006). Hobsbawm wrote that Kemal’s work inspired him to develop his theory of “social banditry.” Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, pp. 52–53.

8 See Kemal Tahir, *Rahmet Yolları Kesti* [Rain closed the roads] (İstanbul: İthaki Yayınları, 2016).

9 See Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

10 Martin van Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet* [Ağa, sheik, and state] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), p. 286; M. Emin Ünner, *Aşiret, Eşkaya ve Devlet* [Tribe, bandit, and state] (İstanbul: Yalın Yayıncılık, 2010), pp. 127–129; Mehmet Beşikçi, “Topyekûn Savaş Çağında Askerî İşgücünü Seferber Etmek: Birinci Dünya Savaşı Öncesinde ve Esnasında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Zorunlu Askerlik Sistemi” [Mobilizing Military Labor in the Age of Total War: The Conscription System in the Ottoman Empire Before and During the First World War], in Eric Jan Zürcher, ed., *Askerlik “İşi” Askerî İşgücünün Karşılaştırmalı Tarihi (1500–2000)* [Fighting for a Living: A Comparative History of Military Labour (1500–2000)], trans. Dilek Şendil (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017), p. 527.

the patronage relationship between bureaucrats and Kurdish tribal banditry during the period 1914–1937.¹¹

What histories of Kurdish banditry as either peasant resistance or a tool of state centralization miss, however, is first, that bandits in the 1950s and 1960s emerged as important power holders and social brokers during a period of socio-economic and juridico-political instability in Kurdish communities and, second, that state elites mobilized banditry in this period as a pretext for Turkey's centralizing state to direct military resources and operations to the eastern provinces to pacify a Kurdish population they feared would be politically emboldened by Kurdish political developments in the region, particularly in Iraq. An analysis of archived state documents, assembly records and national newspapers, and oral history testimonies about the bandits of Siirt province reveals the political significance of the last of the Kurdish bandits in the history of Turkish nation-state building.

The emergence of mass banditry in Turkey's Kurdish regions after 1950 was the result of the destabilization of traditional Kurdish society; bandit gangs filled a power vacuum in the region, controlling a massive economy of illegal trade across Turkey's eastern borders and operating as long-term power holders and social brokers in their regions of influence. From the 1950s, the Kurdish provinces experienced a dramatic socio-economic and juridico-political transformation. The multi-party system and the ruling Democrat Party's (DP) free market strategy, backed by the Marshall Plan, led to the rise of political patronage and the industrialization of agriculture, which consolidated landownership in the eastern regions in the hands of a select few and accelerated the emergence of a landless peasant population. This impoverished and landless peasantry fuelled not only rapid urbanization but also the growth of banditry on a mass scale.¹² By the 1960s, dozens of bandit gangs operated in the Kurdish countryside, undertaking smuggling expeditions, committing highway robberies, raiding villages and state institutions, and kidnapping people for ransom. As the region's transformation fragmented the traditional tribal structure, many bandits became long-term power holders, managing local disputes between and among various tribes and bandit gangs. They thus not only controlled the massive illegal trade between Turkey and neighbouring Iran, Iraq, and Syria but also acted as "social brokers" in their regions of influence, providing security for their communities, arbitrating conflicts, and functioning as allies or enemies of the state's political elite.¹³

11 Uğur Ümit Üngör, "State Formation and Bandits in Turkey, 1914–1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 54 (2012), pp. 767–769.

12 Even though the main reference books on the history of Turkey's modernization explore this socio-economic transformation on the national level, they entirely neglect the mass emergence of banditry in the Kurdish regions. See Eric Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 224–229; Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey: A Study in Capitalist Development* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 117–140; Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 115–120; Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy (1950–1975)* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1977), pp. 122–140; and, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 310–312.

13 For the concept of "social brokerage," see Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 142.

The socio-economic and juridico-political transformation of the eastern provinces resulted in not only the emergence of banditry but also criminalization of Turkey's Kurdish peoples as a whole. Kurdish banditry in this period was reconstituted as a "national problem" in state discourse to advance Turkish nation-state building in the Kurdish region. The state's free market strategy in the region was accompanied by such modern infrastructural projects as a rapidly constructed network of highways, which brought the "civilizing" law of the centre into conflict with traditional Kurdish society's economic and cultural norms.¹⁴ Kurdish peasants, who had continued to live according to their own laws, including the moral codes of honour killing and blood feuding, became the principal obstacle to the central power's attempts to control the region. In the late 1960s, regional control was of particular concern for political elites who read the prospects of an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq and the politicization of Kurdish youth in Turkey's eastern provinces as evidence of a festering Kurdish rebellion.¹⁵ In this context, security rather than the economy became of paramount concern to the state elite, who recast "criminal citizen" Kurdish bandits as "traitors" plotting a Kurdish rebellion and associated the Kurdish peasantry with the bandits, criminalizing the rural population as a whole. The hundreds of bandits who took to the mountains—including such notable figures as Koçero, Hamido, and Hekimo—represented for the state elite the transformation of Kurdish peasants into "social rebels." For being bandits, fugitives, and smugglers, aiding and abetting bandits, or possessing unregistered firearms and contraband, Kurdish communities were accused of mass crimes.

Kurdish banditry thus possessed a political value in the conflict between the Turkish state elite and Kurdish communities. As Kurdish peasants, with their nomadic lifestyle, became "social rebels" in the eyes of the state elite, the Kurdish "banditry epidemic" was seized as an opportunity to not only eliminate bandit gangs but also disarm and suppress the Kurdish population in the interest of Turkish nation-state building. Examining a late nineteenth-century epidemic of banditry in Egypt, Nathan Brown has written that "banditry as a national problem was invented as a political weapon by Egypt's rulers as a part of the process of creating a stronger, centralized state apparatus."¹⁶ The situation was similar in modern Turkey. The Turkish state's "war on banditry" during this period enabled the state apparatus to

14 For a recent study on how Turkey during this early phase of the Cold War became an archetypal model of modernization through the construction of hotels and highways, see Begüm Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

15 While Iraqi Kurds waged a sporadic war of independence against the Baghdad government between 1961 and 1975, which internationalized in the early 1970s, the Turkish state elite felt insecure due to its potential spillover effects on Turkey's Kurdish population. Ayşegül Sever, "'Power Led' Outside Intervention in Kurdish Politics in Iraq and Turkey in the Early 1970s," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2013), pp. 263–264. As the Kurdish political movement gained momentum in Turkey in the second half of the 1960s, this feeling of insecurity intensified among the state elite. Ertuğrul Kürkçü et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Tarihi Ansiklopedisi* [The Encyclopedia of Socialism and Social Struggles], vol. 7 (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1988), pp. 2110–2133, 2304–2307.

16 Nathan Brown, "Brigands and State Building: The Invention of Banditry in Modern Egypt," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 32, no. 2 (April 1990), p. 260.

penetrate the Kurdish regions and assisted state elite's efforts to permanently settle nomadic communities.¹⁷

Linking banditry to "separatism," state elites affirmed violence as a central component of the state's control of the Kurdish population. Military bureaucrats exposed the dead or chained bodies of captured bandits via the national print media to reaffirm the state's "monopoly of legitimate physical violence."¹⁸ When Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP), and the Baghdad government came to an agreement for the autonomy of Iraqi Kurds in March 1970,¹⁹ the Turkish state elite conducted massive commando operations in the eastern provinces, which, by directly targeting Kurdish communities, refocused state coercion from the *banned* bodies of the bandits to the *legal* bodies of the peasants.²⁰ Terrorizing Kurdish peasants via a systematic humiliation of their ethno-political identity, the commando operations would be followed by the "Eastern Trials" of 1971, which aimed at strangling the emerging Kurdish nationalist movement at its birth.²¹ Even though Kurdish resistance to escalating state oppression would find full-fledged expression in urban areas, the myth of the rural outlaw hero persisted as a form of social protest countering bureaucrats' own hegemonic myth of the state's invincibility and immortality. Koçero's story demonstrates how the state's struggle against one bandit was politicized by both the state elite and Kurdish communities. When Koçero was killed, national newspapers celebrated the death of an "enemy of the state," a political criminal, while the Kurdish people mourned the death of their hero, a rebel. The recasting of "bandits" as "terrorists," on one side, and "*mehkûms*" (convicts) as "guerrillas," on the other, marked a new phase in the long struggle between the state and Turkey's Kurdish population.

Turkey's Age of Banditry, 1914–1950

Turkish, and before that, Ottoman, authorities had been grappling with banditry since the First World War, when public disorder seized Turkey's war-torn countryside,

17 For the significance of the "sedentarization" of the population in the state-building process, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 185.

18 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in Max Weber, ed., *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Classics, 2004), p. 33.

19 Ayşegül Sever, "Beyond Vulnerability? Turkey and the 1970 Kurdish Autonomy Deal in Iraq," *The International History Review*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2020), p. 870; and, Kürkcü et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, pp. 495–496.

20 Deriving from the Italian *bandito* (banned), the English term "bandit" originally referred to those who were banned from their community due to their wrongdoings. As Hobsbawm emphasized, bandit is the "out-law" to whom law cannot be applied and thus who can be killed by anybody. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. 14. In this sense, the term *bandito* reverberates Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, a figure of Roman law, "who may be killed and yet not sacrificed." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 8. For a detailed analysis of the original meaning of banditry in terms of its implications for the "sovereign power," see "The Ban and the Wolf," in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 63–66. For a shorter but an earlier analysis of the banned criminal, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 50–51.

21 The leading Kurdish intellectuals and politicians of the period were imprisoned in the Eastern Trials of 1971. İsmail Beşikçi, *Devletlerarası Sömürge Kürdistan* [The interstate colony Kurdistan] (İstanbul: Alan Yayıncılık, 1990), pp. 75–77.

and many soldiers who had deserted the Ottoman army formed gangs of bandits.²² Desertion had been a growing problem throughout the war, weakening the Ottoman army and threatening public order and security. Armed deserters often formed gangs based on a common religion and ethnicity, committing murders and robberies and raiding villages. Although military law stipulated the death penalty for all deserters, in reality, most deserters were sent back to their units after serving time in prison, such was the Ottoman's need for soldiers; death was reserved for those who repeated the crime of desertion or participated in banditry.²³ Nevertheless, when the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, the total number of deserters was nearly equal to the number of soldiers under arms, around 560,000.²⁴

In 1920, the newly founded Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) in Ankara enacted two laws aimed at suppressing armed opposition to its political power and combating the growing banditry epidemic fuelled by desertion. The Law on Treason defined any activities in opposition to the National Assembly as "high treason," while the Law on Deserters led to the establishment of Independence Tribunals throughout the country, which wielded both judicial as well as executive power for the immediate trial and execution of deserters, bandits, and rebels.²⁵ The preamble of the latter law stated the gravity of the situation, reporting that only three to four soldiers remained in some battalions that had comprised 80 to 100 men.²⁶ Even though certain measures proposed by the government to eliminate the desertion problem were rejected during assembly meetings—such as confiscating deserters' houses and livestock, banishing their families, sentencing their villages or neighbourhoods to pecuniary fines—the National Assembly endowed the Independence Tribunals with extraordinary powers to both address the problem and consolidate political legitimacy during the Turkish War of Independence.²⁷

22 Unlimited terms of military service, the impossibility of taking home leave, and the harsh conditions at the front were the main reasons for the high desertion rate. In this sense, novelist Kemal Tahir aptly described the Ottoman soldier at the end of the First World War as the "tired warrior." See Kemal Tahir, *Yorgun Savaşçı* [Tired warrior] (İstanbul: İthaki Yayınları, 2007). For the roots of the desertion problem in the Ottoman army, see Eric Jan Zürcher, "The Ottoman Conscription System, 1844–1914," *International Review of Social History*, vol. 43 (1998), pp. 437–449.

23 The Sultan granted amnesty to deserters three times during the war, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced in 1918 that surrendering deserters would be recruited into the gendarmerie to fight against bandit gangs. Thousands of convicts were also granted amnesty to be employed in paramilitary groups waging the "unconventional warfare" of the *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization), which especially targeted the Armenian population. Beşikçi, "Topyekûn Savaş Çağında Askerî İşgücünü Seferber Etmek," pp. 534, 551–552.

24 The Ottoman army mobilized 3 million soldiers in total during the First World War, and approximately 500,000 deserted during the war. Beşikçi, "Topyekûn Savaş Çağında Askerî İşgücünü Seferber Etmek," pp. 534, 549, 552. Ergün Aybars claims that the number of deserters in the Ottoman army had reached 300,000 by 1918. Ergün Aybars, *İstiklal Mahkemeleri* [Independence Tribunals] (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2018), p. 65.

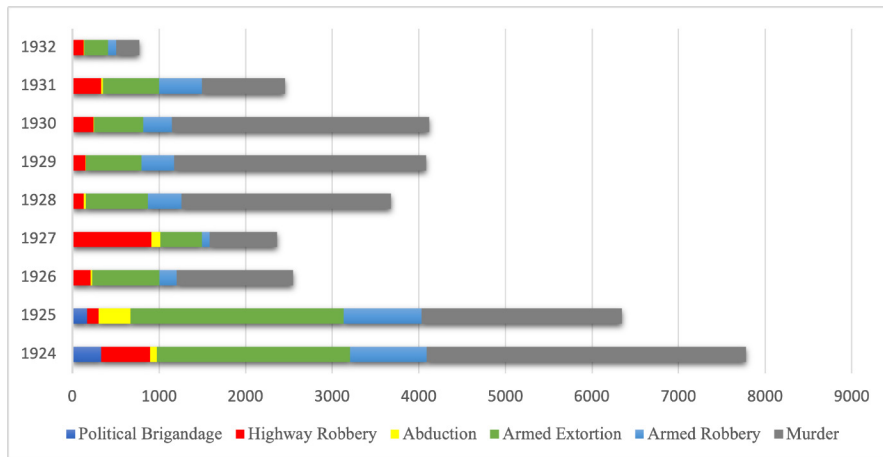
25 "No 2: Hıyanet-i Vataniye Kanunu" [No 2: Law on treason], *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi* [TBMM records], 1st Term, 1st Legislative Year, 7th Session (April 29, 1920), pp. 137–145; "No 21: Firariler Hakkında Kanun" [No 21: Law on deserters], *TBMM Records*, 1st Term, 1st Legislative Year, 63rd Session (September 11, 1920), pp. 93–101.

26 *TBMM Records*, 1st Term, 1st Legislative Year, 61st Session (September 8, 1920), p. 23.

27 *TBMM Records*, 1st Term, 1st Legislative Year, 61st Session (September 8, 1920), pp. 24–25. The Independence Tribunals performed roughly 1,500–2,000 executions between 1920 and 1923. It sentenced only those who repeatedly deserted or participated in banditry movements to the death penalty, sentencing 43,464 to other punishments and acquitting 11,744. Aybars, *İstiklal Mahkemeleri*, p. 221; Mehmet Semih

Because the military forces of the splintering empire were in disarray, the Ankara government mobilized bandit gangs against both the occupying Greek army and local insurrections; it was common practice during this period to suspend the legal proceedings of bandits to co-opt them into the regular army established in 1920.²⁸ As a result, numerous bandit gangs were assimilated into the regular army, while others who refused to participate—even when supporting the national resistance, as was the case for the militia leader Çerkez Ethem—were proclaimed “traitors” and treated as principal enemies of the state.²⁹ Assimilating some of the major bandit gangs in the Aegean provinces into the regular army while disbanding or eliminating the rest, the new Republican regime succeeded in extricating itself from the long-standing threat of the *zeibeks*, the Aegean bandits of the late Ottoman Empire. One columnist in the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* wrote in 1936 that the contributions of some of the *zeibeks* to the resistance movement against the occupying Greek army led the new Republic not only to pardon their crimes and treat them as national heroes but also to transform them from “barbaric bandits” to “civilized men.”³⁰

Graph 1. Number of Recorded Crimes in the Gendarmerie Zones of Responsibility (1924–1932)



Source: BCA, 30.10.128.923.6, “Jandarma Teşkilatı, yaptığı çalışmalar ve elde edilen sonuçlar hakkında rapor” [Report about the gendarmerie, its activities, and the results obtained], 1933.

Gemalmaz, *Türkiye’de Ölüm Cezası (1920–2000)* [Capital punishment in Turkey (1920–2000)], vol. 1 (İstanbul: Beta Yayınları, 2001), p. 59.

28 See the following resolutions of the National Assembly: “Kürt İsmail, who was a brigand in Kalecik, will serve on the western front in the case of his pardon, suspending his legal proceedings,” Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivleri [Republican archives of the Prime Ministry] (hereafter BCA), 30.18.1.1.7.20, August 4, 1920; BCA, 30.18.1.1.3.19.12, “Suspending the legal proceedings against Ali of Aksaray, who is being dispatched to the front for national service while being a detainee at Niğde Prison for the crime of highway robbery,” February 11, 1921; BCA, 30.18.1.1.3.29.17, “Suspending the legal investigation into Kara Ahmed of Aziziye, who is serving in the army while having been a brigand previously,” July 3, 1921.

29 BCA, 30.18.1.1.2.27.3, January 8, 1921.

30 Refik İnce, “Efelikten Efendiliğe” [From banditry to civilization], *Cumhuriyet*, July 27, 1936, p. 7.

Based on a detailed report produced by the gendarmerie in 1933, Graph 1 depicts the magnitude of public disorder in the first two years following the proclamation of the Republic in 1923.³¹ Despite the three-year effort of the Independence Tribunals, 80 major gangs, composed of 1,840 bandits and deserters, still roamed Turkey's countryside in 1923.³² To eliminate these bandit gangs, the National Assembly enacted the Law on the Elimination of Brigandage in 1923. Decriminalizing the killing or wounding of bandits, Article 1 of the law codified bandits as "traitors" who were to be universally hunted. The law also enabled the National Assembly to pit bandits against each other. Article 6 promised the suspension of all legal proceedings against bandits who cooperated with state officials by killing other bandits or assisting the government in their capture.³³ After the outbreak of the Sheik Said rebellion in the Kurdish provinces in 1925, the National Assembly enacted the Law on the Maintenance of Order to provide absolute authority to the central government to crush any opposition to the new regime.³⁴ The state elite recast the Sheik Said rebellion and the Kurdish rebellions that followed in the second half of the 1920s as "political brigandage." While the concept of "political" in state discourse referred to the "reaction of sheiks" and "tribal resistance" backed by a "foreign plot" against the "Republican civilization project," Kurdish rebels were sentenced to death not for rebellion but brigandage.³⁵

By the early 1930s, banditry incidents had been considerably reduced due to the state's military consolidation in the eastern provinces. While some tribes continued to cross the southeastern borders to realize large-scale livestock thefts in the region, in 1932, as Graph 1 shows, there was a drastic decline in the incidence of six categories of crimes committed in the gendarmerie zones of responsibility, which the report attributed to the success of the military operations launched against bandit gangs and a nationwide campaign of disarmament.³⁶ As the great majority of firearms were collected in the Kurdish provinces, it was actually a regional campaign with the goal of pacifying those "unruly" lands.³⁷ "Except for the existence of a few

31 BCA, 30.10.128.923.6, "Jandarma Teşkilatı, yaptığı çalışmalar ve elde edilen sonuçlar hakkında rapor" [Report about the gendarmerie, its activities, and the results obtained], 1933, p. 46.

32 BCA, 30.10.128.923.6, "Jandarma Teşkilatı, yaptığı çalışmalar ve elde edilen sonuçlar hakkında rapor" [Report about the gendarmerie, its activities, and the results obtained], 1933, p. 40.

33 "No 356: İzale-i Şekavet Kanunu" [No 356: Law on the elimination of brigandage], *TBMM Records*, 2nd Term, 1st Legislative Year, 38th Session (October 18, 1923), pp. 757–763.

34 "No 578: Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu" [No 578: Law on the maintenance of order], *TBMM Records*, 2nd Term, 3rd Legislative Year, 69th Session (March 4, 1925), pp. 131–149.

35 Yeğen, "Kurdish Question," pp. 555–568.

36 BCA, 30.10.112.760.14, "Aralarında Ermenilerin de bulunduğu bir gurup ve Cenup Aşireti'nin sınırda askeri birliklerle çatışması" [Skirmish between military units and Cenup Tribe, along with a group including Armenians], August 10, 1931; BCA, 30.10.128.922.8, "Suriyelilerin sınır tecavüzleri hakkında rapor" [Report about border violations of Syrians], May 23, 1932; BCA, 30.10.128.922.22, "Suriyeli aşiretlerin sınır tecavüzleri hakkında rapor" [Report about border violations of Syrian tribes], October 11, 1932.

37 The number of collected firearms quintupled from 1931 to 1932. From a total of 14,949 firearms, 13,099 were collected in the eastern provinces in 1932. BCA, 30.10.128.923.6, "Jandarma Teşkilatı, yaptığı çalışmalar ve elde edilen sonuçlar hakkında rapor" [Report about the gendarmerie, its activities, and the results obtained], 1933, p. 31. The Kurdish regions had been severely de-pacified during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to the establishment of the Hamidiye Corps, the militia forces composed of Kurdish tribes, in 1891, the ruling Committee of Union and Progress' reliance on paramilitary

bandits here and there who think of nothing but survival,” the report concluded, “today all gangs are wholly annihilated, and peace and security in the strict sense are established throughout the country,” proclaiming the campaign’s success.³⁸ The security reports pertaining to the second half of the 1930s confirmed the continued drop in the number of recorded crimes at the national level, which was accompanied by a steady decrease in the number of fugitives. Recorded murders fell from 1,719 in 1934 to 1,209 in 1937, while the number of fugitives shrank from 5,143 in 1935 to 1,576 in 1940.³⁹ However, the number of convicts executed by hanging peaked during this decade. Between 1930 and 1939, 256 convicts, of which 28 were political criminals, were executed, constituting almost 36% of the total 712 convicts who were executed between 1920 and 1984 and illustrating the state’s employment of the harshest of methods, despite the decrease of criminal incidents.⁴⁰ After the completion of the state’s massive military operations in Dersim in the late 1930s, the ruling political elite celebrated the newfound tranquility in the eastern provinces.⁴¹ In 1938, journalist Peyami Safa praised the Republican regime for eliminating banditry: “Reaching everywhere from remote mountain tops to secluded edges of the soul, the air [of peace and order] has eradicated the banditry nightmare from both the Turks’ land and their sleep. It seems that highway robbery, kidnapping, and home raids have disappeared.”⁴² During this period of “peace and order,” 32 smugglers were executed in 1943 by a gendarmerie firing squad in an eastern province.⁴³ In the second half of the 1940s, while security reports documented a slight increase in livestock theft in the eastern regions, Minister of Internal Affairs Şükrü Kaya heralded the “total extinction of banditry” in 1947.⁴⁴ Referring to a

violence during the First World War led to a wave of mass brigandage in the region. Van Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet*, p. 286; Üner, *Aşiret, Eşkya ve Devlet*, pp. 127–129.

- 38 BCA, 30.10.128.923.6, “Jandarma Teşkilatı, yaptığı çalışmalar ve elde edilen sonuçlar hakkında rapor” [Report about the gendarmerie, its activities, and the results obtained], 1933, p. 44. A report of public order in 1933 stated that although most of the criminal incidents occurred in the eastern provinces, several bandit gangs were also eliminated in the region. BCA, 30.10.128.923.4, “I. Umumi Müfettişlik bölgesinin asayiş durumu hakkında rapor” [Report on public order in the First Inspectorate-General], February 25, 1933, pp. 2, 7.
- 39 BCA, 490.1.227.898.3 “CHP tarafından verilecek Cumhuriyet devrinde asayişle ilgili konferans metni” [Conference on public order in the Republican period by the CHP], February 15, 1938, p. 17; BCA, 490.1.1407.656.1, “İstatistik Genel Müdürlüğü’nün hazırladığı istatistik yıllıkları” [Statistical annuals prepared by the General Directorate of Statistics], 1942, p. 85.
- 40 This data comprises only death sentences approved by the National Assembly. Thousands of death penalties imposed by the Independence Tribunals in the 1920s and the execution of seven convicts during the Dersim incidents in 1937 are not included in this data. Gemalmaz, *Türkiye’de Ölümlü Cezası*, pp. 20, 166, 177.
- 41 In the late 1930s, the state elite continued to organize military operations in various eastern provinces in pursuit of bandits, arms, and contraband. BCA, 30.10.54.360.14, “Siirt vilayetinde silah toplama işinin yapılmasına gerek olduğu ve işin gerçekleştirme planı” [On the need and plan of disarmament in the province of Siirt], September 3, 1938, p. 1; BCA, 30.10.111.751.34, “Kalan ve Koç yasak bölgelerine giren şakilelere karşı yapılan baskın hakkında” [On the raids against the bandits who trespassed on the forbidden zones of Kalan and Koç], March 22, 1940, p. 1.
- 42 Peyami Safa, “Türk asayışı” [Turkish public order], *Cumhuriyet*, August 1, 1938, p. 3.
- 43 On this so-called “incident of 33 bullets,” see Neşe Özgen, *Van-Özalp ve 33 Kurşun Olayı* [The incident of Van-Özalp and 33 bullets] (İstanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2011).
- 44 BCA, 30.1.65.407.11, “1947 yılı Ağustos ayına ait asayiş raporu” [Report of public order for August 1947], December 11, 1947; BCA, 30.1.66.408.1, “1948 yılı Ocak ayına ait asayiş raporu” [Report of public order for January 1948], March 6, 1948; Şükrü Kaya, “Emniyet ve demokrasi” [Security and democracy], *Cumhuriyet*, September 1, 1947, p. 2.

robbery incident in 1951, a columnist likewise assured the public that the “age of banditry is gone”: “The age when governors were primarily occupied with the security of a province and hunted for bandits with the gendarme is long gone.”⁴⁵

Gone? Resurgence of Banditry in Turkey’s Kurdish Regions, 1950–1970

The leadership of the Democrat Party (DP), which had come to power in 1950, was eager to depart from the security-oriented policies of the Republican People’s Party’s (CHP) one-party rule regarding the “eastern question.” In assembly meetings, members of the government emphasized their determination to overcome the underdevelopment of the eastern provinces and eliminate the collective feeling of social exclusion among the provinces’ inhabitants, whom they declared to be “noble and solid Turks.”⁴⁶ The DP government immediately abolished the administrative forbidden zones in the region—allowing displaced peasants, who had been subjected to forced migration by the Settlement Law of 1934, to return to their villages—and disbanded the Inspectorates-General, the state’s pivotal means of authoritarian control over the eastern provinces.⁴⁷ They also began to transfer financial resources to the region for agricultural mechanization and various infrastructure investments, including the construction of highways, dams, schools, and hospitals.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the opposition CHP posed parliamentary questions on the breakdown of public order in the east. In a 1952 assembly meeting, a CHP member of Parliament (MP) asserted a “dangerous rise of banditry” and described the eastern peasants as “an army ready to act,” leading DP MPs to denounce the CHP’s “Kurdish paranoia,” stating that they would treat the eastern people as “citizens” rather than “bandits.” Nonetheless, Deputy Prime Minister Samet Ağaoğlu ensured that the government was intransigently advancing the policy of disarmament of the one-party period by referring to a recent rise in the number of collected firearms in the eastern provinces.⁴⁹ Similarly, while Minister of Internal Affairs Fevzi Lutfi Karaosmanoğlu attributed the increasing gunfights between the gendarmerie and bandits to the state’s determination to eradicate banditry—rather than the further spread of criminality—, in 1953, the government enacted a law to restrict the ownership of firearms and regulations in the penal code to increase the severity of punishment for violent crimes.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Burhan Felek, “Şehirde soygunculuk” [Robbery in the city], *Milliyet*, October 3, 1951, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 1st Legislative Year, 10th Session (June 19, 1950), pp. 200–201; *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 2nd Legislative Year, 8th Session (November 20, 1950), p. 178.

⁴⁷ *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 1st Legislative Year, 14th Session (June 28, 1950), p. 292; “No 5990: Umumi Müfettişlik Teşkiline dair Kanun ile Ek ve Tadillerinin Yürürlükten Kaldırılması hakkında kanun” [No 5990: Law on the abrogation of the law and its amendments on the organization of Inspectorates-General], *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 4th Legislative Year, 7th Session (November 21, 1952), p. 245. Three of a total five Inspectorates-General, the first of which was established in 1928, covered the eastern provinces. For an archive study on the subject, see Cemil Koçak, *Umumi Müfettişlikler* [Inspectorates-General] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010).

⁴⁸ *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 2nd Legislative Year, 17th Session (December 11, 1950), p. 133; *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 2nd Legislative Year, 24th Session (December 27, 1950), pp. 339–342; *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 2nd Legislative Year, 44th Session (February 16, 1951), pp. 175, 177.

⁴⁹ *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 3rd Legislative Year, 69th Session (May 7, 1952), pp. 105–106.

⁵⁰ “No 6136: Ateşli Silahlar ve Bıçaklar Hakkında Kanun” [No 6136: Law on firearms and knives], *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 4th Legislative Year, 106th Session (July 10, 1953), pp. 881–883; *TBMM Records*,

In the first half of the 1950s, reports of banditry incidents—such as armed highway robberies, the killing or capturing of bandits, and the gendarmerie’s gunfights with bandit gangs—appeared quite sporadically in national newspapers.⁵¹ According to some columnists, these crimes were “isolated incidents” that could swiftly be ended if the government took harsh, but necessary, martial measures. These columnists described the bandits as “coward murderers, robbers, and rapists” who targeted defenseless travellers, as the Republic had—supposedly—transformed peasants into “self-sufficient” communities who could defend themselves against bandit gangs.⁵² One DP MP exclaimed in an assembly meeting that, as opposed to zeibeks, who had been embraced as national heroes due to their chivalric deeds during Turkey’s War of Independence, the “bandits of today confront us as treacherous and corrupt masked gangsters.”⁵³ Interpreting popular myths about “outlaw heroes,” such as the legend of Koroğlu, as symbolic of people’s “anarchic longing to rebel against the state,” several columnists proposed publishing images of captured bandits in chains in the national printed press in order to unmask those criminals as mere “miserable and servile creatures.”⁵⁴ However, contrary to their predictions, banditry incidents in the eastern provinces proliferated in the second half of the 1950s.⁵⁵ Sensationalized reports of these incidents—bloody gunfights between the gendarmerie and bandit gangs, major highway robberies (sometimes ending with the death of travellers), and tens of captured bandits—were front-page stories in national newspapers.⁵⁶

Along with a wave of bandit romanticism in Turkish cinema, banditry became one of the main themes of Turkish literature during this period.⁵⁷ Published in

9th Term, 3rd Legislative Year, 48th Session (February 26, 1952), pp. 862–863; *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 4th Legislative Year, 90th Session (June 1, 1953), pp. 5–28; *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 4th Legislative Year, 95th Session (June 22, 1953), pp. 169–191.

51 “Azılı bir katil öldürüldü” [Ferocious murderer killed], *Cumhuriyet*, July 22, 1951, p. 3; “Bir otobüsün yolu kesildi” [Bus intercepted], *Cumhuriyet*, June 11, 1952, p. 5; “Malatya civarında soygunculuk yapan eşkiya yakalandı” [Bandit committing robberies around Malatya captured], *Cumhuriyet*, November 7, 1953, p. 3; “Diyarbakır’da kaçakçılarla silahlı çatışma” [Gunfight with smugglers in Diyarbakır], *Milliyet*, September 6, 1954, p. 3; “Diyarbakır’da şakilerle çarpışma” [Clash with bandits in Diyarbakır], *Cumhuriyet*, November 15, 1954, p. 1.

52 Pençe, “İbret aynası” [Parable], *Milliyet*, December 14, 1950, p. 2; F. Nevruzoğlu, “Bu nasıl erkeklik?” [Is this manhood?], *Milliyet*, May 22, 1952; “Yiğitlik bu mu?” [Is this valor?], *Milliyet*, December 18, 1952, p. 3.

53 *TBMM Records*, 9th Term, 4th Legislative Year, 47th Session (February 19, 1953), p. 534.

54 F. Nevruzoğlu, “Eşkiyalığa dair” [On banditry], *Milliyet*, December 9, 1951; Ulunay, “Eşkiyalık vak’aları” [Banditry incidents], *Milliyet*, October 20, 1953, p. 2.

55 The number of recorded crimes in the gendarmerie zones of responsibility at the national scale were as follows: 181 in September 1946, 184 in September 1947, 841 in September 1954, 630 in September 1955, and 605 in September 1956. BCA, 30.1.65.407.12, “1947 Eylül ayına ait asayiş raporu” [Report of public order for September 1947], December 11, 1947; BCA, 30.1.68.427.3, “1956 Eylül ayına ait asayiş raporu” [Report of public order for September 1956], November 9, 1956.

56 “Bir jandarmayı öldüren eşkiya kaçtı” [Bandit who killed one gendarmerie runs away], *Milliyet*, October 31, 1955, p. 5; “Siirt ile Mardin arasında kanlı soygun” [Bloody robbery between Siirt and Mardin], *Cumhuriyet*, May 16, 1956, p. 3; “4 kişiyi öldüren 3 eşkiya yakalandı” [3 bandits who killed 4 captured], *Milliyet*, June 12, 1957, p. 5; “Mardin yolunda şakiler yüz yolcuyu soyup soğana çevirdiler” [Bandits on Mardin highway sack 100 travellers], *Milliyet*, July 4, 1958, p. 3; “Jandarmalar 5 şaki ile çarpıştı” [Gendarmerie clash with 5 bandits], *Milliyet*, May 24, 1959, p. 5.

57 These movies focused exclusively on the historical or fictional stories of Aegean bandits. For an article analyzing this first wave of bandit romanticism in Turkish cinema, see Turan Tanyer, “1950’li Yıllarda

1955, Yaşar Kemal's debut novel, *İnce Memed* (Slim Memed), portrayed banditry as a primitive form of rebellion against feudal oppression.⁵⁸ In 1957, Kemal Tahir countered Yaşar Kemal's romanticization of banditry in his novel *Rahmet Yolları Kesti* (Rain closed the roads), which attempted to debunk the myth of "outlaw heroes" by reinterpreting banditry as a means of terror used by local power holders against peasants.⁵⁹ While Yaşar Kemal was conducting research for his next novel on the Aegean bandit Çakırcalı Mehmet Efe, journalist Vâlâ Nureddin warned him not to deify such a "ferocious criminal" as a "hero of the people" at a time when the nation was shaken by the vicious crimes of the eastern brigands.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, columnists accused the government of incompetence and demanded the application of stricter measures for the prevention of banditry. One columnist insisted upon the imposition of flogging and the death penalty for violent crimes and the constitution of specialized military units to hunt bandits.⁶¹

Although the DP's new economy-oriented discourse tempered state coercion in the region, in the second half of the 1950s, the DP government conducted a series of military operations to eliminate bandit gangs and disarm the Kurdish population.⁶² In early 1960, while Minister of Internal Affairs Namık Gedik confessed in an assembly meeting that the government had failed to put an end to eastern banditry due to financial difficulties and promised to accelerate military operations in the eastern provinces, he also reported that a massive fugitive hunt in three eastern provinces successfully concluded with the capture of 278 fugitives, including 145 murder suspects.⁶³ The intensification of these military operations toward the end of the decade coincided with Barzani's short-lived alliance with the Iraqi President Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958–1963) after the 1958 coup in Iraq.⁶⁴ Following the violent suppression of a Turkmen uprising in Kirkuk by the Baghdad government in 1959, leading Kurdish intellectuals were arrested in December 1959, five months before the military coup; these arrests were an attempt to suppress the emergence of a Kurdish nationalist intelligentsia from the political and economic dynamism

Türk Sineması'nın Efeleri" [Swashbucklers of Turkish cinema in the 1950s], *Kebikeç*, vol. 34 (2012), pp. 209–225.

⁵⁸ Kemal, *İnce Memed*, pp. 304, 338.

⁵⁹ Tahir, *Rahmet Yolları Kesti*, pp. 369–374.

⁶⁰ Vâlâ Nureddin, "Eşkiya mı kahraman mı?" [Bandit or hero?], *Cumhuriyet*, February 24, 1956, p. 2. Published in 1972, Yaşar Kemal's novel would indeed describe the famous zeibek as a "noble robber." Yaşar Kemal, *Çakırcalı Efe* [Çakırcalı Efe] (İstanbul: Toros Yayınları, 1990), p. 115. In contrast, Kemal Tahir questioned, in another novel published in 1965, the role of zeibeks during Turkey's War of Independence, emphasizing their cruelty and savagery. Tahir, *Yorgun Savaşçı*, pp. 451–452.

⁶¹ Refi Cevad Ulunay, "Cürüm ve ceza" [Crime and punishment], *Milliyet*, October 3, 1955; "Dayak Cezası Mecliste" [Corporal punishment in the assembly], *Milliyet*, January 14, 1956; "Vilayetlerde Asayiş" [Security in provinces], *Milliyet*, November 21, 1958, p. 3.

⁶² "Diyarbakır'da 21 firarı katil yakalandı" [21 fugitive murderers captured in Diyarbakır], *Cumhuriyet*, June 24, 1957, p. 1; "Doğu'da şakilerin takibi" [Hunt for bandits in the east], *Cumhuriyet*, July 27, 1957, p. 3; "Güneyde 22 firarı suçlu yakalandı" [22 fugitive convicts captured in the south], *Milliyet*, December 8, 1959, p. 1; "Güney-Doğuda dört şakî daha ele geçti" [4 more bandits captured in the southeast], *Milliyet*, December 11, 1959, p. 3; "Doğu illerinde 5 şakî daha ele geçirildi" [5 more bandits captured in the eastern provinces], *Cumhuriyet*, December 19, 1959, p. 1.

⁶³ *TBMM Records*, 11th Term, 3rd Legislative Year, 47th Session (February 25, 1960), pp. 486–488.

⁶⁴ Sever, "Kurdish Politics in Iraq and Turkey in the Early 1970s," p. 263.

of the 1950s.⁶⁵ After the DP government was overthrown by the military coup on May 27, 1960, the state elite's struggle against the new Kurdish activism continued in the following months with the arrest of 485 Kurdish notables and the exile of 55 tribal chiefs.⁶⁶ As the bandit controversy spread from literature to cinema, the state's bandit hunts accelerated in the following years. Nonetheless, the gendarmerie reported in 1966 that at least 900 bandits operated in the hills of Siirt province alone, a testament to their intractability.⁶⁷

The massive resurgence of banditry in the 1960s resulted from a dramatic juridico-political and socio-economic transformation sweeping through Turkey's Kurdish provinces from the 1950s onward. Turkey's receipt of economic aid under the Marshall Plan led to a development strategy based on private enterprise and foreign financial sources. Thus, the DP's free market strategy denounced "railway-led, state-owned industrialization policies" and embraced privatization, agricultural mechanization, and the construction of a highway network.⁶⁸ The number of tractors grew dramatically from around 10,000 in 1950 to 44,000 in 1957, while the aggregate length of all-weather roads increased from 9,264 kilometres to 22,000 kilometres between 1948 and 1958.⁶⁹ The distribution of development resources under the multi-party system, however, was increasingly subject to political patronage as competing political parties made the state's resources available to their electorates in exchange for political support.⁷⁰ In the Kurdish provinces, traditional local power holders—primarily aghas, sheiks, and tribal leaders—made use of clientelist networking to acquire these resources. Political patronage, the effect of which was combined with that of the industrialization of agriculture, led to large-scale private landownership in many parts of the region, resulting in a large landless peasant population, the disintegration of traditional tribal structures, massive rural-to-urban

65 Blaming the Iraqi Kurds for complicity in the massacre, CHP MP Asım Eren openly proposed in the assembly to retaliate in kind (*mikabele-i bilmisil*) by killing as many Kurds in Turkey as the number of Turkmens murdered in Iraq. For this pivotal event, called the "arrest of 49s," see Kerem Yavaşca, "Ellili Yıllarda Kürt Sorunu" [The Kurdish question in the 1950s], in Mete Kaan Kaynar, ed., *Türkiye'nin 1950'li Yılları* [Turkey in the 1950s] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), pp. 585–588; Ahmet Aış, "The Process of the Politization of the Kurdish Identity in Turkey: The Kurds and the Turkish Labor Party (1961–1971)" (Master's thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2009), pp. 56–58.

66 Kürkçü et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, pp. 2112–2113.

67 Kürkçü et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, p. 2122. "Bandit movies" in the 1960s and the 1970s focused almost exclusively on the eastern bandits, either romanticizing them or mocking the myth of "outlaw heroes." In this respect, Kurdish actor and director Yılmaz Güney, who in his early movies treated the eastern banditry as a chivalric form of peasant rebellion against feudal landlords, interpreted it in his later movies as a spontaneous social reaction against the state oppression in the region. See *Ağıt* [Requiem], dir. Yılmaz Güney (Güney Film, 1971); *Yol* [The path], dir. Şerif Gönen and Yılmaz Güney (Güney and Cactus Film, 1982).

68 Adalet, *Hotels and Highways*, pp. 7, 86. About 35% of the aid was allocated to agricultural mechanization, 22% to mining, and 13% to infrastructural investments. Feridun Cemil Özcan, "Ellili Yıllarda Türkiye Ekonomisi" [Turkish economy in the 1950s], in Kaynar, ed., *Türkiye'nin 1950'li Yılları*, p. 48.

69 Ahmad, *Turkish Experiment*, pp. 134–135; Adalet, *Hotels and Highways*, pp. 238–239. Between 1950 and 1961, investments in highways reached 75% of public investments in the transportation sector and 35% of total economic development investments. Özcan, "Ellili Yıllarda Türkiye Ekonomisi," p. 52.

70 Sabri Sayari, "Clientelism and Patronage in Turkish Politics and Society," in Binnaz Toprak and Faruk Birtok, eds., *The Post-Modern Abyss and the New Politics of Islam* (İstanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2011), pp. 81–94.

migration, and flux in social classes.⁷¹ Despite the fact that the area of land under cultivation increased from 10 million hectares to 15 million hectares in 1960, landlessness among Turkey's Kurdish population rose from 26% in 1950 to 36% in 1967.⁷² Landless and impoverished peasants not only fuelled rapid urbanization, but they also constituted the primary source of recruits for the massive resurgence of banditry.⁷³

During this same period, the centralizing Turkish state penetrated further into the Kurdish periphery through the construction of civil and military institutions and such infrastructures as a rapidly constructed highway network. The “civilizing” law of the centre conflicted with the economic and cultural norms of traditional Kurdish society, and the changing socio-economic and juridico-political dynamics of the region led effectively to the criminalization of the rural population. In particular, Kurdish nomadic tribes—which, in addition to agriculture and husbandry, relied on smuggling for their livelihoods—were troubled by the advance of state centralization, as their social organization resisted any regulation of the central administration and included “heretical” religious beliefs, such as Yazidism, as well as increasingly outlawed customs, such as honour killing and blood feuds. The following statement by an anonymous local state official published in a national newspaper in 1964 illustrates how the state elite assessed these nomadic tribes: “Do not listen to them, they do not want to settle down. Could they find a better livelihood than this? They do every kind of smuggling, and on top of that, they do not pay any taxes. Does the government have any interest in aiding them?”⁷⁴ Throughout the 1960s, the state's military operations occasionally targeted those “social rebels,” which were, in the civilizational discourse of the state elite, nothing but the “remnants of the reactionary Ottoman society.”⁷⁵

The Twilight of Kurdish Banditry, 1964–1970

In the decade prior to his death in July 1964, the bandit Koçero had built a career as a smuggler and robber, surviving numerous armed encounters with the gendarmerie. During the gendarmerie's relentless pursuit, national newspapers transformed him into the most infamous criminal of the day by describing the ongoing search for him as a hunt for a bloodthirsty murderer. Koçero first appeared in national printed press in 1961, when the “murderer of twenty innocent people” was falsely reported to have been killed by the gendarmerie. He quickly became a fixture of reporting on banditry, however, and received such widespread media coverage in 1962 that one national newspaper declared him, along with Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, “man

71 Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey*, pp. 135–140; Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, pp. 224–227; Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, pp. 115–117; Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, pp. 310–312.

72 Özcan, “Ellili Yıllarda Türkiye Ekonomisi,” p. 51; Ahmad, *Turkish Experiment*, p. 135; Kırkçü et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, pp. 2111–2112.

73 Turkey's urban population ratio increased from 25% in 1950 to 32% in 1960. Özcan, “Ellili Yıllarda Türkiye Ekonomisi,” p. 44.

74 “Dağ başında kültür savaşı” [War of culture on mountain tops], *Milliyet*, December 25, 1964, p. 5.

75 Mesut Yeğen, *Cumhuriyet ve Kürtler* [The republic and the Kurds] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2009), p. 54.

of the year.”⁷⁶ Henceforth, he became the subject of heated debate in the National Assembly. Members of the opposition parties submitted several parliamentary questions regarding the unsuccessful hunt for Koçero, accusing the government of harming the state’s image as the sole sovereign body in the “politico-strategically vulnerable” eastern regions by failing to capture a lone bandit.⁷⁷ In response to these accusations, Minister of Internal Affairs Hıfzı Oğuz Bekata of the CHP claimed that Koçero had been in hiding in the mountains since 1956 and held the overthrown government of the DP responsible for the rise of banditry in the eastern provinces.⁷⁸

With the troublesome bandit’s death in 1964, journalists heralded the “predestined end” of rebellion against the state by publishing the photograph of his corpse, while columnists celebrated the death of a “murderous robber” who was made a hero by “ignorant peasants.”⁷⁹ One reporter expressed his frustration at not being able to convince the local Yazidi peasants about Koçero’s murderous deeds; they believed, in line with “their heretical religious beliefs,” that he was the champion of the oppressed, “the prophet of Satan”: “They claim that he was cutting down the villains and ill-gotten gainers, protecting the poor and good, and annihilating those intruding on the honour and chastity of women.”⁸⁰ One columnist found Koçero a “vicious and charmless bandit,” while lamenting that the age of *zeibeks*—the age of “eastern chivalry”—was gone.⁸¹ Describing the state’s struggle against the eastern brigands as an “unnamed national war,” this columnist decried the Koçero legend as “pure ignorance,” while crowning the gendarmerie as “the true heroes of the people, the lions of a war in which there can never be armistice or tolerance.”⁸² Meanwhile, government members were relieved to finally succeed in putting down such a “ferocious brigand,” as his death could allay the fierce criticism from the opposition parties of the breakdown of social order in the eastern provinces.

In the country’s mostly Kurdish-populated eastern provinces, the local people mourned the death of their hero. According to dozens of peasants who visited his grave, Koçero had become a *mehkûm* (convict) after he “honourably” murdered the son of a headman in his native village who had molested Koçero’s wife.⁸³ He was at that time an 18-year-old agricultural worker who was *meçbûr* (doomed) to take to the mountains to become a bandit. They claimed that Koçero earned his income mainly from opium smuggling, carried out robbery raids only sporadically, and committed two or three murders, all supposedly justified.⁸⁴ He was known for his benevolence toward local peasants, who in turn supported him despite

76 “Kaatil Koçero öldürüldü” [Murderous Koçero killed], *Milliyet*, June 28, 1961, p. 1; “Koçero: Yılın bir başka adamı” [Koçero: Another man of the year], *Milliyet*, January 1, 1963, p. 5.

77 *Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi* [National Assembly Records], 1st Term, 2nd Legislative Year, 67th Session (April 5, 1963), p. 52.

78 *National Assembly records*, 1st Term, 2nd Legislative Year, 51st Session (February 16, 1963), p. 84.

79 “Mukadder son” [Predestined end], *Cumhuriyet*, July 7, 1964, p. 1.

80 Yılmaz Çetiner, “Şeytana tapanlar” [Demonists], *Cumhuriyet*, September 5, 1964, p. 6.

81 Refi Cevad Ulunay, “Su destisi” [Water jug], *Milliyet*, July 8, 1964, p. 3.

82 Refi Cevad Ulunay, “Meçhul kahramanlar” [Nameless heroes], *Milliyet*, October 29, 1964, p. 3.

83 “Koçero’nun öldüğüne kimse inanmıyor” [Nobody believes in Koçero’s death], *Milliyet*, December 25, 1964, p. 5.

84 Halit Çapın, “Röportaj: Doğu’da Yazidiler ve eşkıyalar” [Interview: Yazidis and bandits in the east], *Milliyet*, March 17, 1962, p. 3.

the suppression of the gendarmerie in the region, which was escalated by the state elite to capture the elusive bandit. They admired Koçero for courageously defying the laws of the state and upholding the values of the “straight society” or “moral economy of the crowd.”⁸⁵ Remarkably, people in the region continue to regard him as an honourable mehkûm, a “noble robber” in Hobsbawm’s terms. During the in-depth interviews that I conducted in several Kurdish provinces in the summer of 2013, I spoke with Şemsettinê Îskender, a local wise-man from Hasankeyf who met Koçero several times and a close relative of another famous bandit, Hikmet Zeren, a.k.a. Hekimo. Îskender explained the longevity of Koçero’s criminal career by underlining that local people protected him because he was considered an “honourable man” who treated all women as his “sisters.” In contrast, “dishonourable and degenerate” bandits from the same region—for example, Osmanê Gevrê, who kidnapped and raped a woman—were promptly killed by the gendarmerie, whom local peasants tipped off. Ramazanê Botî, a local historian and storyteller from Cizre, described Koçero as the modern Elo Dîno (Mad Ali), the sixteenth-century “Kurdish Robin Hood” from the Cizîra Bohtan region (today Cizre). According to *kılam*s (Kurdish oral narratives), Elo Dîno—an “immobile bandit” who forcefully taxed the passing boats of merchants on the Tigris from his pavilion while also protecting and supporting local peasants—nobly stood against and was brutally killed by a tyrannical *mir* (Kurdish prince). However, this heroic image held by the peasants of the bandit was, unsurprisingly, not shared by the rulers. Prince Süreyya Bedirhan—one of the exiled members of the influential Bedirhan family, the last of the Azizan dynasty—described Elo as the “murderer of countless people” who was eventually burned at the stake for his crimes.⁸⁶ Koçero was similarly portrayed as either a hero or enemy of the people.

Long before his death, Koçero had already been consecrated as a tragic hero in the eastern villages. His fate, condemned to live as an outlaw, represented the sweeping criminalization of his people, with their unruly nomadism, illegal sources of income (i.e., smuggling), and notorious moral codes. His *nom de guerre* was derived from the Kurdish term *koçer* (nomad), in reference to the Kurdish nomadic tribes whose lifestyle and morals were antithetical to the centralizing power of the Turkish state. With every ambush Koçero miraculously escaped, his mythical status in the eyes of local peasants grew further. They began to speak of him as a *cengawer* (warrior) who was as swift as a horse, as cunning as a fox, and as strong as a wolf.⁸⁷ For a brief period, he truly seemed to be invulnerable. When national newspapers announced his death, his mythical image was remade into a politico-cultural symbol of traditional Kurdish society, which had experienced massive socio-economic and juridico-political transformations since the early 1950s. His fable would soon spread beyond the Kurdish regions and propel him posthumously as a national symbol of rebellion. In 1964, Yılmaz Güney wrote a screenplay

85 Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. 180. For the concept of “moral economy,” see E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, vol. 50 (1971), pp. 76–136.

86 Bazil Nikitin, *Kürtler: Sosyolojik ve Tarihi İnceleme* [Kurds: Sociological and historical investigation] (İstanbul: Özgürlük Yolu Yayınları, 1991), pp. 160–161.

87 Halit Çapın, “Röportaj: Doğu’da Yezidiler ve eşkıyalar” [Interview: Yazidis and bandits in the east], *Milliyet*, March 18, 1962, p. 3.

based on Koçero's life story, romanticizing him as a rebel who fought against the oppression of landlords, while Hasan Hüseyin Korkmazgil's book of poetry on Koçero, published in 1976, cemented the bandit's status as an icon of the radical leftist movement of the 1970s.⁸⁸ While this politicization of Koçero did not occur until the second half of the 1970s, he had long been embraced by the Kurdish people.

In the west of Turkey, journalists attempted to decipher the Koçero legend by viewing it through the lens of the east. One columnist claimed that eastern peasants were mourning the death of their protector, in whose absence they feared they would be the victims of ferocious brigands. Emphasizing the despair of peasants who were being protected from bandits by other bandits, this columnist aimed to expose the state's military weakness in a region where it should have been particularly strong against the deadly threats towards its *beka* (eternal survival), hinting at the ever-present possibility of the eruption of a Kurdish rebellion.⁸⁹ For another columnist, sympathy in the eastern provinces for the bandit reflected the people's antipathy toward the state. He contemplated that the eastern peasants took "unconscious but heinous delight" in the failure of state forces to capture Koçero.⁹⁰ What these journalists understood was that Koçero, talented as he may have been, was in life no more than a smuggler and robber, but he was in death resurrected a hero, a counter-myth, piercing the foundational hegemonic myth of the state's *beka*. Therefore, publishing the photograph of his corpse in national newspapers delivered a stunning blow to the national morale of Kurds, a long-suffering people now losing their icon. However, the movement was larger than one man and Koçero was merely a widely recognized symbol of a broader social phenomenon: the massive resurgence of banditry in Turkey's Kurdish provinces from the 1950s onward. Many bandits would share the rule of the eastern countryside until the early 1970s when the state's military operations targeted not only the banned bodies of the bandits but also the legal bodies of the peasants, and the reign of the Kurdish mountains was eventually assumed by "political bandits"—"terrorists" to some and "guerrillas" to others.

Koçero's story demonstrates the transformation of a simple fugitive into not only a local power holder but also a controversial icon in the political battles between the state elite and Kurdish communities. In this sense, the life stories of notable bandits shed light on the last Kurdish banditry. In Kurdish, a bandit was called a *fırar* (fugitive), a *mehkûm* (convict), or a *neçar* (person in despair), this was a person hunted by the law and *meqbûr* (doomed) to wander the mountains. Indeed, the careers of bandits began with a criminal act, which transformed the perpetrator into a fugitive. Active in the first half of the 1960s in Siirt province, Koçero (1933–1964) became a bandit after committing an honour killing. Another bandit, Hamit Aldemir, a.k.a. Hamido (1914–2018), who operated in Siirt province in the second half of the 1960s, began his criminal career with a series of highway robberies and later formed a gang after starting a blood feud with the rival gang

88 *Koçero*, dir. Ümit Utku (Kervan Film, 1964); Hasan Hüseyin Korkmazgil, *Koçero: Bir Vatan Şiiri* [Koçero: A motherland poem] (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1976).

89 Mehmet Mercan, "Komandolar geliyor" [Commandos coming], *Cumhuriyet*, August 16, 1967, p. 5.

90 Burhan Felek, "Küçük işlere bakalım" [Let's look at little things], *Cumhuriyet*, July 11, 1964, p. 4.

of Mehmet Emin Özbay and Reşit Özbay, a.k.a. the Özbay brothers.⁹¹ The enmity between these two gangs rapidly escalated into wholesale war to control the mountains and smuggling routes of Siirt province, the heart of Kurdish banditry and the state's military operations.⁹² Another bandit active in the region in the late 1960s, Hekimo (1943–), formed his gang after he abducted a woman for marriage, leading to a fierce blood feud between two major tribes of Cizre. Crimes that led to life as a fugitive were thus motivated by economic interests (i.e., smuggling, robbery, kidnapping for ransom) and cultural norms (i.e., honour killings, blood feuds, desertion, abductions of women for marriage). Once a fugitive became a member of a bandit gang, he could profit from various illegal economic activities. Smuggling was one of the primary sources of income for bandits, who played critical roles in the massive illegal trade between the southeastern regions of Turkey and northern Iraq and Syria, and northeastern Iran, areas mainly populated by Kurds. Apart from sporadic robbery raids, Koçero mainly earned his income from opium smuggling between Siirt and northern Syria. Hekimo undertook smuggling expeditions between Cizre and northern Iraq and worked with another bandit chief, Ahmedî Osman, providing security for caravans smuggling sheep across the Iraqi border.⁹³ As Beşikçi has described, large-scale sheep smuggling was conducted in the 1960s through a network of bandit gangs.⁹⁴ Furthermore, highway robbery became one of the most dependable sources of income for bandits. The newly constructed highways in secluded areas of the eastern provinces delivered the quarry directly to the bandits' doorstep. Articles in national newspapers demonstrated that robberies on eastern highways rose uncontrollably throughout the 1960s. Donning military uniforms to disguise themselves as soldiers, bandit gangs conducted daring highway raids.⁹⁵ In a 1966 Senate meeting, Minister of Internal Affairs Faruk Sükan openly acknowledged the impotence of state forces in controlling the eastern highways.⁹⁶ Finally, bandits occasionally carried out robbery raids on villages and kidnappings for ransom. These raids became so frequent in Siirt in the 1960s that 32 villages were

91 Fikret Otyam, "Kaymakam babo ve korku" [Father district governor and fear], *Cumhuriyet*, July 4, 1968, p. 5.

92 "Siirt bölgesinde soyguncu avı" [Brigand hunt in Siirt region], *Cumhuriyet*, December 22, 1961, p. 1; "Jandarma kuvvetleri Siirt'in dört büyük çetesinin peşinde" [Gendarmerie forces on the track of four major gangs of Siirt], *Cumhuriyet*, December 26, 1961, p. 1; "Siirt'te asker elbiseli soyguncular türedi" [Brigands in military uniforms proliferate in Siirt], *Cumhuriyet*, June 9, 1962, p. 5; "Siirt ilindeki 600 jandarma ... ili kordon altına almıştır" [600 gendarmerie cordon city to capture bandits in Siirt], *Milliyet*, July 4, 1962, p. 3.

93 Celaleddin Çetin, "Hekimo'nun gerçek hayat hikayesi" [True life story of Hekimo], *Hürriyet*, August 20, 1975, p. 3.

94 Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni*, pp. 159–160.

95 "İçişleri Bakanı valilerle toplantı yaparken Tatvan'da yol kesen 4 şaki 60 kişiyi soydu" [4 bandits robbed 60 people while Minister of Internal Affairs meets governors], *Milliyet*, July 29, 1962; "Jandarma elbiseli 10 şaki 30 yolcuyu soydu" [10 Bandits in gendarmerie uniforms rob 30 passengers], *Cumhuriyet*, September 28, 1968, p. 1; "Doğu'da otomatik silahlı eşkıya güpegündüz yol kesti: Muş–Tatvan yolunda 50 kişi soyuldu" [Bandits with automatic weapons block highway in broad daylight: 50 people robbed in Muş–Tatvan highway], *Milliyet*, July 2, 1967, p. 1.

96 *Cumhuriyet Senatosu Tutanak Dergisi* [Republican Senate records], 6th Term, 17th Session (December 22, 1966), p. 529.

abandoned in the province in 1967.⁹⁷ In addition, the sites of the Turkish Petroleum Corporation proved to be easy targets for raids, though bandits were somewhat dissuaded after Koçero was killed in a gendarmerie ambush at one of those sites.⁹⁸

Bandit gangs maintained separate regions of influence where they secured a local support base. As each bandit chief came from an individual tribe, tribal relations constituted the main social apparatus of local support. As was the case for Hamido and Hekimo, a blood feud between two rival tribes could be initiated by but a few of their outlaw members. While bandits were in the hills, they were constantly in contact with nomadic tribes who traditionally provided support to mehkûms. In order to ensure the support of local communities, however, a bandit chief had to conform to traditional norms; otherwise, he could quickly become a persona non grata in the eyes of local communities. The longevity of Koçero's criminal career was due to the unbending support of local peasants, who respected him as an honourable mehkûm. As a sign of his position in his region of control, a bandit was able to act as a "social broker" by resolving local problems through mediation between conflicting parties.⁹⁹ In my in-depth interview with Hekimo, the former bandit claimed that the Zahuran tribe, which was famous in Cizre for hosting fugitives and smugglers, assisted him in forming his gang by enlisting their outlaw members in his service after he resolved a Zahuran intertribal blood feud. According to the testimony of Melé Necmettin, his brother-in-arms from Diyarbakır, Hekimo also resolved a protracted blood feud between the Hevêrkî and Dekşûrî, two other large tribes of Cizre. At the same time, landlords could employ bandit gangs to intimidate and suppress local peasants and then seize their land. In 1965, according to first-hand accounts, 280 peasants were forced to leave their villages in Siirt province due to threats bandits in the region made on behalf of a local landlord.¹⁰⁰ As transnational actors, bandits occasionally crossed borders to escape from the state's military operations and replenish their supplies and equipment. Ezizé İskender, a relative of Hekimo from Nusaybin, told of Haco agha, a famous local power holder in northern Syria who provided shelter and support for bandit chiefs, including Koçero and Hekimo. In the late 1960s, the Justice Party (AP) government negotiated with Hamido for his surrender, carrying out military operations against his rivals as part of the deal, forcing the Özbay brothers to turn to Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the northern Iraqi Kurdish leader,

97 "6 eşkiya 14 köylüyü para için dağa kaldırdı" [6 bandits kidnap 14 peasants for ransom], *Milliyet*, June 29, 1962, p. 1; "Eşkiya korkusundan Siirt'te 32 köy terk edilmiş" [32 villages abandoned in Siirt due to fear of bandits], *Cumhuriyet*, March 6, 1967, p. 1; "Şakilerin kaçırıldığı 4 kişi öldürüldü" [Four people kidnapped by bandits killed], *Milliyet*, May 17, 1967, p. 1.

98 "Diyarbakır'da bir petrol arama kampı maskeli soyguncular tarafından basılarak soyuldu" [Petroleum exploration site in Diyarbakır raided and robbed by masked brigands], *Cumhuriyet*, October 29, 1962, p. 1; "Yıllardan beri aranan doğulu şaki Koçero Batman'da öldürüldü" [Wanted for many years, eastern bandit Koçero killed in Batman], *Milliyet*, July 5, 1964, p. 1.

99 Social brokerage is "the linking of two or more currently unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relations with each other and/or with yet another site." McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, eds., *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 142.

100 "Ağa baskısı ve eşkiya korkusu 280 kişiyi köyünden etti" [280 people abandoned their villages due to oppression of aghas and fear of bandits], *Milliyet*, June 13, 1965, p. 1.

for protection.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, as successive governments launched a series of massive military operations against bandit gangs throughout the decade, Kurdish bandits were gradually transformed from “criminal citizens” into “traitors” in state discourse; they were no longer just thieves but rather insurrectionists plotting a Kurdish rebellion.¹⁰²

In the early 1960s, two opposing state discourses competed to reinterpret Kurdish banditry. The economy-oriented discourse construed it as a “problem” deriving from the region’s economic backwardness, which should be “resolved” by economic means. In contrast, the security-oriented discourse posited it as the “threat” of a festering Kurdish rebellion that should be “suppressed” by military means.¹⁰³ During the coalition government of the CHP and the AP, Minister of Internal Affairs Ahmet Topaloğlu, despite admitting an increase in the incidence of extortion in Siirt province, criticized national newspapers for exaggerating the banditry problem, claiming that the state’s military operations in the region were “normal occurrences.”¹⁰⁴ During the succeeding coalition government led by the CHP, Minister of Internal Affairs Kemal Sahir Kurutluoğlu reevaluated it as a consequence of the underdevelopment of the region, while heralding at the same time the constitution of commando units to hunt bandits.¹⁰⁵ Interpreting the rise of criminality in the eastern provinces as a symptom of an emerging separatist movement, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü threatened to reactivate the notorious 1923 Law on the Elimination of Brigandage, declaring that ongoing military operations would soon be so devastating for bandit gangs that everybody would fully understand the state’s “object lesson.”¹⁰⁶ In a Senate meeting in 1962, Senator Buhanettin Uluç expressed his suspicion about the political nature of the crimes of the eastern bandits: “Are these acts really ordinary robbery? Or else, are they politico-ideological movements?”¹⁰⁷ As national newspapers periodically asserted that bandit gangs were sheltered and supported by Barzani’s forces, in 1964, Senator Ekrem Özden proclaimed the existence of an organic linkage between the eastern bandits and Barzani, claiming that bandits were “not only in pursuit of disrupting the public order in the country but also a part of a scheme against our regime.”¹⁰⁸

101 “Şaki Özbay ve çetesi Barzani’nin elinde mahpus” [Bandit Özbay and his gang captive in the hands of Barzani], *Cumhuriyet*, January 23, 1969, p. 1.

102 “728 jandarma eşkiya takip ediyor” [728 gendarmes in pursuit of bandits], *Milliyet*, December 30, 1961, p. 5; “Doğu bölgesinde büyük arama-tarama yapılacak” [Massive searching-scanning in eastern region], *Milliyet*, June 29, 1962, p. 1; “Eşkîyalar dikkat! Komandolar geliyor” [Bandits, watch out! Commandos coming], *Milliyet*, July 22, 1964, p. 1; “Bir komando taburu Doğu’da ‘haydut avı’na başlıyor” [Commando troop launches “bandit hunt” in the East], *Milliyet*, March 10, 1967, p. 3; “Doğu’da 720 komando eşkiya avına çıkıyor” [720 commandos go for bandit hunt in the East], *Milliyet*, April 3, 1967, p. 3.

103 For a similar analysis, see Yeğen, “Kurdish Question,” p. 565.

104 “Bakan ‘Siirt’te gasp suçları arttı” dedi” [Minister says “Crime of extortion increased in Siirt”], *Milliyet*, January 4, 1962, p. 1.

105 “Kurutluoğlu ‘Ne eşkiya ne de Jandarmadan korkmalı’ dedi” [Kurutluoğlu say “Not to be afraid from bandit or gendarmerie”], *Milliyet*, August 7, 1962, p. 1; “Doğu kalkınması birinci plana alındı” [Giving priority to eastern development], *Milliyet*, September 12, 1962, p. 1.

106 “Ordu maceralara karşı” [Army is against adventures], *Milliyet*, July 16, 1962, p. 1; “Eşkîyalara karşı harekete geçildi” [Mobilization against bandits], *Milliyet*, July 17, 1962, p. 1.

107 *Republican Senate Records*, 1st Term, 79th Session (September 4, 1962), p. 487.

108 “Koçero, Barzani’ye iltihak etti” [Koçero joined Barzani], *Hürriyet*, November 7, 1962, p. 1; “Doğu’daki 400 eşkiya Barzani’ye iltica etti” [400 bandits in the east seek refuge with Barzani], *Cumhuriyet*,

In 1966, Senator Suphi Batur accused Barzani of being the “supplier of arms” for bandit gangs and described eastern banditry as the “secret design of external powers over the eastern people.”¹⁰⁹

During the political rule of the AP in the second half of the 1960s, Bülent Ecevit, leader of the opposition CHP, together with Tarık Ziya Ekinci, MP from the leftist Workers’ Party of Turkey, attributed banditry to the feudal order in the eastern provinces, which they declared should immediately be abrogated via a comprehensive land reform policy that would redistribute land to impoverished peasants.¹¹⁰ However, this economy-oriented discourse became marginalized in the second half of the 1960s when the security-oriented discourse gained favour among the state elite, for whom the ongoing reign of bandits in the mountains and their raids on highways and villages exposed the state’s military weakness in the eastern regions. Despite the relentless efforts of the state elite to capture Koçero, the infamous bandit enjoyed a relatively long criminal career, the very fact of which mocked the state’s image as an indomitable force.

Throughout the 1960s, photos of captured bandits—or dead, as in the case of Koçero—were published in the national printed press to reinforce the idea of the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. In this respect, the war between the Hamido and Özbay gangs exposed not only the state’s incapacity to guarantee the security of the native population but also its disrepute in the region, viewed as impotent and alien. While the AP government secretly negotiated with Hamido for his surrender, the bandit chief presented himself in national newspapers as the “guardian of the people,” protecting them from the raids of the Özbay gang. In letters published in *Milliyet*, Hamido described himself as the “state’s gendarmerie” locked in against the Özbays, whom he decried as the “soldiers of Barzani.”¹¹¹ In 1967, when the Özbay gang kidnapped and murdered four peasants from Hamido’s village, CHP members of the Senate blamed the AP government for damaging the state’s prestige by having failed to protect the peasants in Hamido’s absence, as negotiated in his terms of surrender.¹¹²

In 1970, the military operations of the state culminated in commando raids on eastern villages. These continued for six months, forcing the bandits to abandon their territories and cross the border to northern Iraq and Syria.¹¹³ Though their stated

February 7, 1967, p. 1; *Republican Senate Records*, 4th Term, 9th Session (November 24, 1964), p. 213.

109 *Republican Senate Records*, 4th Term, 11th Session (December 6, 1966), p. 340. In the second half of the 1960s, national newspapers occasionally claimed that Barzani secretly supported the eastern bandits. “Doğu’daki 400 eşkiya Barzani’ye iltica etti” [400 bandits in the east seek refuge with Barzani], *Cumhuriyet*, February 7, 1968, p. 1.

110 *National Assembly Records*, 2nd Term, 1st Legislative Year, 43rd Session (February 9, 1966), p. 692; “Bülent Ecevit” [Bülent Ecevit], *Milliyet*, December 11, 1966, p. 1.

111 “Hamido: Ben şaki Özbay’ı takip ediyorum” [Hamido: I am chasing the bandit Özbay], *Milliyet*, September 16, 1968, p. 1; “Hamido bir çeteyi Suriye’ye kaçırttı” [Hamido drives away a gang to Syria], *Milliyet*, September 30, 1968, p. 1.

112 *Republican Senate Records*, 7th Term, 13th Session (December 19, 1967), pp. 446–448.

113 When Mehmet Ali Özbay was killed in an ambush by the gendarmerie in 1969, a triumphant Hamido returned to his village. “Şaki Özbay’ı jandarma öldürdü” [Gendarmerie killed bandit Özbay], *Milliyet*, June 22, 1969, p. 3. He would make the headlines of national newspapers for the last time in 1984 when he aided state forces in their hunt for PKK militants. “Eski şakinin yardımı” [Former bandit’s assistance], *Milliyet*, September 2, 1984, p. 1. After taking shelter in İstanbul, Hekimo was arrested by the secret police,

objectives were the capture of bandits and seizure of firearms and contraband, the commando operations directly targeted rural communities, systematically torturing peasants while insulting them with epithets such as the “Kurds of Barzani.”¹¹⁴ To explain the rationale behind the commando operations, it is crucial to decipher these constant references to Barzani in state discourse. As Iraqi Kurds waged a sporadic war of independence against the Baghdad government between 1961 and 1975, the Turkish state elite worried about its potential spillover into Turkey’s Kurdish population.¹¹⁵ As the Kurdish political movement gained momentum in the second half of the 1960s through the influential “Eastern Meetings” in 1967 and hunger protests in 1969, a feeling of insecurity intensified among the state elite.¹¹⁶ While the war between the Iraqi Kurds and the Baghdad government was internationalized by the involvement of the United States, the Soviet Union, Iran, and Israel in the early 1970s, Turkey remained “watchfully” passive internationally while taking action domestically.¹¹⁷ The commando operations coincided with a break in the Barzani-Baghdad duel due to an autonomy agreement between the warring parties on March 11, 1970, which increased the Iraqi Kurds’ prospects for the foundation of an autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq.¹¹⁸ Therefore, when the “hazardous” developments in Iraq were combined with an emerging national consciousness among urbanized Kurdish youth, the “banditry epidemic” became the logical pretense for the state’s preemptive strike against the perceived threat of Kurdish separatism. Terrorizing Kurdish peasants via a systematic humiliation of their ethnopolitical identity, the commando operations would be followed by the “Eastern Trials” of 1971, putting a stranglehold on the nascent Kurdish nationalist movement.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

In her analysis of banditry in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century, Karen Barkey has demonstrated that the threat bandits and other centrifugal forces posed to the empire was neutralized through the subtle and cunning policies of Ottoman bureaucrats, who transformed them into mechanisms of state centralization through

who were particularly interested in his relationship with Barzani. He would be released in the general amnesty of 1974. Celaleddin Çetin, “Hekimo Efsanesi” [Legend of Hekimo], *Milliyet*, May 1, 1996, p. 5.

114 İsmail Cem, “Acılı Doğu” [Sorrowful east], *Milliyet*, June 12–18, 1970, p. 7; Kırkcı et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, pp. 495–496; Minister of Internal Affairs Haldun Menteşoğlu of the AP government announced that 3,607 fugitives were captured in the eastern provinces during the commando operations, which, he claimed, were conducted in accordance with the rule of law. *National Assembly Records*, 3rd Term, 1st Legislative Year, 74th Session (July 27, 1970), pp. 662–684.

115 Sever, “Kurdish Politics in Iraq and Turkey in the Early 1970s,” pp. 263–264.

116 Kırkcı et al., eds., *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, pp. 2126–2129.

117 Even though the Soviets played a critical role in the short-lived Kurdish Republic in Mahabad in 1949 and the leadership of the KDP, including Barzani, took refuge and received training in the Soviet Union until 1958, the Soviets began to support the Baghdad government after the Soviet-Iraqi treaty in 1972. Along with Iran and Israel, the US began supporting the Iraqi Kurds, even though they had previously been wary of supporting them due to its spillover effects on the Kurds in its allies Iran and Turkey. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 327–335; Sever, “Kurdish Politics in Iraq and Turkey in the Early 1970s,” pp. 263–267.

118 For Turkey’s restrained reaction to this agreement and its handling of this complex problem, see Sever, “Turkey and the 1970 Kurdish Autonomy Deal in Iraq,” pp. 870–886.

119 Beşikçi, *Devletlerarası Sömürge Kürdistan*, pp. 75–77.

policies ranging from confrontation to negotiation and bargaining, including the redistribution of various official ranks.¹²⁰ Barkey's analysis was a critique not only of Hobsbawm's theory of social banditry but also of Turkish Marxist writers who interpreted banditry as a form of rebellion standing in for any substantial peasant riots in Ottoman history.¹²¹ Barkey identified Yaşar Kemal and Kemal Tahir as prominent examples of these Marxist writers (thus misinterpreting Tahir's rejection of Kemal's romanticization of banditry), but her criticism also applies to the writings of Marxist theorist Hikmet Kıvılcımlı. Describing banditry as "a kind of anarchism of the peasantry" in the 1930s, Kıvılcımlı reevaluated banditry in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire as a *sui generis* form of peasant rebellion in his 1974 *Tarih Tezi* (Thesis of history).¹²² Similarly, in 1969, İsmail Beşikçi described Kurdish banditry as being "compatible with the model of social banditry."¹²³

In contrast to the romantic conceptualization of banditry in the writings of Kıvılcımlı, Beşikçi, and Kemal, this study demonstrates that the last iteration of Kurdish banditry between 1950 and 1970 was not a primitive form of peasant rebellion but rather a form of socio-political activity resulting from the destabilization of traditional Kurdish society. The socio-economic and juridico-political transformation of the region concluded with the Turkish state elite's criminalization of the Kurdish peasants, who became "social rebels" due to their unruly nomadism, illegal sources of income, and moral codes of honour killing and blood feuding. In this context, bandits operated as social brokers and local power holders in the politico-moral economy of the region but they also held a political value in the battle between the state elite and Kurdish communities. The state elite reframed the "banditry epidemic," turning it from an impediment to state centralization into a pretense for a series of massive military operations to disarm and suppress the Kurdish population.

Regarding studies of banditry focused on the relationship between banditry and state-building, this study, instead of finding substantial conflict or cooperation between bandits and bureaucrats, claims that the reconstitution of the last of the Kurdish bandits as a "national problem" in state discourse was an integral part of the Turkish nation-state building process.¹²⁴ The state's "war on banditry" enabled the penetration of the state apparatus into the Kurdish regions and assisted the state elite's efforts to permanently settle nomadic communities. For the state elite, the conflict provided invaluable opportunities to reproduce the idea of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. For the Kurdish communities, the myth of "outlaw heroes" represented their longing to rebel against the state. Koçero's story demonstrates how the state's struggle against one bandit was used by both the state elite and Kurdish communities to serve their own ends. National newspapers celebrated the death of this "enemy of the state"; the Kurdish people, for their part, mourned their hero.

¹²⁰ Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats*, pp. 21–22; Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, p. 92.

¹²¹ Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats*, p. 180.

¹²² Kıvılcımlı, *Yol*, p. 289; Hikmet Kıvılcımlı, *Osmanlı Tarihinin Maddesi* [The Article of the Ottoman History] (İstanbul: Yordam Yayınları, 2020), p. 810–823.

¹²³ Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni*, pp. 26, 100–101.

¹²⁴ Brown, "Brigands and State Building," p. 260; Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 185.

The state elite strove to eliminate the bandit gangs, a crucial precondition for consolidating public order in a region where they feared the eruption of a Kurdish rebellion. Due to the political developments in northern Iraq in favour of an autonomous Kurdish government and the emergence of Kurdish political movements in the region, bandits were recast in state discourse; no longer were they “criminal citizens” but instead “traitors.” This recasting sanctioned state security policies that targeted local communities. Beginning with the commando operations, which aimed to terrorize Kurdish peasants via the systematic humiliation of their ethnopolitical identity, state coercion shifted its focus from the banned bodies of bandits to the legal bodies of peasants. Although these operations resulted in the majority of bandit gangs fleeing to northern Iraq and Syria and a decrease in banditry incidents during the period of martial law following the military coup of March 12, 1971, tensions between the state and the Kurdish people were simmering. State oppression was met with strong urban resistance, and the enmity resulting from the cruelty of the commando units and the Kurdish people’s resentment of escalating state oppression intensified to such an extent in the early 1970s that in response to clashes between groups of supporters of rival teams after a football match in Siirt in 1970, commandos opened fire on the fans, killing two and grievously injuring 50 others. Demonstrators poured into the streets in response to this incident, causing the governor of Siirt to declare a curfew, while Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel dismissed the event as an “ordinary hooliganism incident.”¹²⁵ However, these “ordinary” incidents would soon prove that the time was ripe for persistent political conflict in the region. In this sense, the period between 1950 and 1970 was crucial in laying the foundations of a new phase in the long-lasting struggle between the state and Turkey’s Kurdish population. Prime Minister Turgut Özal would infamously label the PKK “a bunch of bandits” in 1986, cementing the militants’ connection in state discourse to the last of the Kurdish bandits, the rulers of outlaw lands.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ “Siirt’te maçtan sonra çıkan olaylarda iki kişi öldü” [Two people died in events that erupted after a match in Siirt], *Milliyet*, May 4, 1970, p. 1.

¹²⁶ “150–200 eşkıya öldürüldü” [150–200 bandits killed], *Milliyet*, August 20, 1986, p. 13.