New Perspectives on Turkey (2022), 1–28
doi:10.1017/npt.2022.3

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Land occupation as a form of peasant struggle in Turkey, 1965–1980

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Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on rural politics in Turkey by investigating peasants' land occupations between 1965 and 1980. We show that agricultural modernization after 1945 created the structural conditions for land conflicts by enabling the reaching of the frontier of cultivable land and facilitating landlords' displacement of tenants. The 1961 Constitution's promise of land reform and the rise of the center-left and socialist politics helped peasants press for land reform by combining direct action and legalistic discourse. Moreover, the vastness of state-owned land and the incompleteness of cadastral records allowed peasants to challenge landlords' ownership claims. During land occupations, villagers often claimed that contested areas were public property illegally encroached upon by landlords, and that the state was constitutionally obliged to distribute it to peasants. Although successive right-wing governments decreed these actions to be intolerable violations of property rights, their practical approach was more flexible and conciliatory. Although nationwide land reform was never realized, land occupations extracted considerable concessions via the distribution of public land and inexpensive land sold by landlords.

Keywords: Agrarian change; land occupation; land reform; peasantry; Turkey

Introduction

Most studies exploring the persistence of small-scale family farming in Turkey have paid only scant attention to the role of peasant struggles. For instance, Dani Rodrik argues that "mild commercialization, coupled with durable patron-client ties, has resulted in most Turkish villages in peasant support for landed groups at election times" during the 1950s (Rodrik 1982, 438). He notes that "in some of the highly commercialized parts of coastal Turkey (the Çukurova valley for example), political participation by the peasantry takes on a more radical guise than in the rest of the country" (Rodrik 1982, 437). However, he does not offer any explanation for, or local examples of, the content of such radicalism. Neither does he discuss whether rural stability was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of both social movements and left-wing radicalism in Turkey.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2022.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While concurring with Rodrik on the importance of patron-client ties as a stabilizing factor in rural Turkey, Çağlar Keyder pays closer attention to class conflict in the post-World War II era. For Keyder, agrarian modernization did not lead to considerable class conflict in most areas of Turkey because of the historical salience of family farming. However, in Kurdish-majority southeastern Turkey, land conflicts took place in the 1960s and 1970s between landlords who attempted to displace most of their sharecroppers after purchasing tractors and the sharecroppers who resisted displacement. Keyder considers the contested nature of land tenure to be a critical factor behind these conflicts. Given that most land under landlords' control was former state property with incomplete and dubious cadastral records, sharecroppers' resistance was often based on claims that landlords had illegally seized state property and that, for the sake of social justice, the state should back the sharecroppers (Keyder 1983a, 43–49, Keyder 1983b, 142–143). However, this important theme has remained underexplored in Keyder's scholarship.

Although we agree with Rodrik and Keyder on the importance of factors other than peasant struggles, our article extends the research agenda set by Keyder's earlier works by exploring the role of peasants' land struggles during the 1960s and 1970s in the persistence of small-scale family farming in Turkey.[1] We show that big landowners benefited from agrarian modernization more than other classes and expanded their share of cultivated land after 1945. Land conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s resulted from this unequal agrarian structure. During this period, land-poor peasants occupied both uncultivated public land and land under the control of big landowners. During these occupations, peasants claimed that the occupied areas were public property that had been illegally appropriated by big landowners, and they demanded that the state distribute it to those in real need. Although land occupations did not lead to nationwide land reform, they forced the state to distribute more public land to peasants. In many cases, government officials encouraged landlords to sell land to contain peasant struggle. In short, in contrast to existing explanations of the persistence of small peasantry in Turkey based solely on patron-client relations, we argue that peasants often secured protection by extracting material concessions from the government and big landowners.

A few journalistic accounts and memoirs of leftist activists of the 1968 generation discuss the land occupations of the 1960s and 1970s (Babuş 2004; Ciravoğlu 2004; Kürkçü 1989, 2136–2139, 2151–2152; Yavuz 2010, 21–52; Zileli 2002). Sezgin Tüzün's 1970 paper on the Elmalı district of Antalya was the earliest substantial analysis of land occupations (Tüzün 1970). Cevat Geray broached this issue in his 1974 book, in which he states that he found 146 contentious events involving peasants in press reports between 1967 and 1970. He noted that these incidents "generally appeared as land occupations"; interestingly, he does not cite any source or provide information about these figures (Geray 1974, 366). A few recent studies have revisited the subject (Aysu 2014, 629–649; Gürel 2004, 32–43; Gürel 2014, 330–332; Fırat 2017, 79–105; Kurtege-Sefer 2018) but land occupation remains a largely underexplored theme. Our study contributes to bridging this gap in the literature by exploring a wide array of land occupations across Turkey between 1965–1980. This article consists of three

[1] For an insightful critique of the neglect of peasant struggles in the academic literature on modern Turkey, see Metinsoy (2020, 83–84).

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parts. The first part introduces the theoretical and methodological framework of our study. The second part examines the historical context of land occupations. The third part provides our empirical findings and discusses their implications.

Theoretical and methodological framework

A working definition of the peasantry

The concept of "peasantry" has always been fraught with controversies concerning its definition. As Sidney Mintz notes, "debates about who peasants are, or how best to define peasantries [. . .] promise to be unending" (Mintz 1973, 91–92). Henry Landsberger stresses that "concerning the formal definition of the term 'peasant' [. . .] there are considerable differences not only between outstanding authors, but even crucial variations for the same author within relatively short periods of time" (Landsberger 1974, 6). Hence, scholars usually provide a working definition of the term that is temporally and spatially specific. For example, in his classical essay titled "Types of Latin American Peasantry," Eric Wolf stresses that the yardsticks with which he decided to define peasantry "are chosen with a view to Latin American conditions" (Wolf 1955, 453–545). Likewise, below we provide a working definition of the "peasantry" in the context of land occupations in Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s.

Since Wolf's essay defines the term "peasant" very strictly, we clarify our stance in response to Wolf, who defines the peasantry based on the following criteria:

> First, let us deal with the peasant only as an agricultural producer. This means that for the purposes of the present article we shall draw a line between peasants, on the one hand, and fishermen, strip miners, rubber gatherers, and livestock keepers, on the other [. . .] Second, we should—for our present purpose–distinguish between the peasant who retains effective control of land and the tenant whose control of land is subject to an outside authority [. . .] Third, the peasant aims at subsistence, not at reinvestment [. . .] We may thus draw a line between the peasant and another agricultural type whom we call the "farmer." The farmer views agriculture as a business enterprise [. . .] The crops produced are sold not only to provide goods and services for the farm operator but to permit amortization and expansion of his business. The aim of the peasant is subsistence. The aim of the farmer is reinvestment (Wolf 1955, 454–455).

Starting with Wolf's first criterion, we find that most participants in land occupations in Turkey were cultivators. However, many villagers combined cultivation with small-scale animal husbandry and fishing, and defended pasturelands and fisheries against landlord encroachments. Regarding Wolf's second criterion, those who occupied land in Turkey included both landless tenants and small-scale cultivators who had effective control over insufficient amounts of land and chose to occupy additional land to make a better living. Finally, confirming Wolf's emphasis on subsistence as a definitional criterion, peasants who occupied land in Turkey often portrayed themselves as poor people whose immediate subsistence was threatened by landlords and who presented land distribution as a solution to solve their subsistence problem. However, given the

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rapid commercialization of agriculture after 1945, there was no big divide between the subsistence and income-maximization motives of the land-occupying peasants. Many of our interviewees who managed to retain occupied land became small-scale commercial farmers. Hence, rather than sticking to a strict peasant-farmer divide, we locate our study's participants in land occupations in a continuum between pure subsistence and pure profit-seeking behavior.

Land occupation as a form of peasant struggle

The literature on peasant politics has long focused on the rebellions and revolutions in which peasants played major roles. Following the publication of James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* in 1985, scholarship on peasant struggles shifted its emphasis from rebellions and revolutions to the politics of the possible in non-revolutionary times during which agrarian elites and the state are capable of deterring peasants from rioting or revolutionary activity. As Scott shows, when peasants are unable to openly confront the upper classes, they exhibit false compliance while resorting to a diverse repertoire of everyday forms of resistance including sabotage, evasion, petty theft, and gossip (Scott 1985). In one of the (still) rare comparative-historical analyses of land occupation movements, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet points to a third type of "protest politics" that "are less frequent and more visible than everyday resistance but also less tumultuous and more frequent than rebellions, though they may appear as blurred images on the fringes of each" (Kerkvliet 1993, 464–465). Standing "between the subtle everyday variety and explosive, violent revolts" (Kerkvliet 1993, 464), land occupations offer a unique perspective from which to analyze peasant politics.

The existing literature shows that agrarian modernization is a root cause of land occupations. When landlords begin using labor-displacing farm machinery or shift to crops that require less labor input, thereby decreasing the number of available farming jobs, peasants respond by occupying parts of the landlords' land to defend their livelihoods. When landlords stop renting out land to their tenants in order to use it for more lucrative (agricultural or non-agricultural) pursuits, peasants challenge them through land occupations. Different from conflicts stemming from the impulse to modernize, some conflicts may be a result of landlords' apathy. For instance, rather than renting out or cultivating land, when landowners leave land "largely idle despite numerous people in the area needing and wanting to farm," peasants occupy and farm the land (Kerkvliet 1993, 465). Kerkvliet cautions against a restrictive reading of the participants and their grievances:

> In Portugal, most occupiers were farm workers. Peasants, typically tenants, were a minority. Participants in Peru reflected the diversity in rural society at the time—peasants who relied nearly entirely on pasturing, villagers who had tiny flocks and had other income sources from agriculture, and families who had still a foothold in the countryside but relied heavily on members working in the mines and urban areas [. . .] In Russia and Indonesia, peasants composed most of the take-over participants, neither country having a large proportion of purely landless agricultural workers (Kerkvliet 1993, 479).

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The legal status of the contested land also shows significant variation. As Eric Hobsbawm notes:

> The land to be occupied may belong to the peasants, but have been alienated, legally or otherwise, in a manner which they do not recognize as valid. Land invasion therefore equals the recuperation of their own land [. . .] Second, the land occupied may belong to nobody, or in legal terms to the government as public land. In this case the process of peasant colonization or squatting turns into an "invasion" only when there is some dispute about legal title. The most usual case is one in which such land is simultaneously claimed by peasants and landlords, neither of whom may [. . .] have a valid property right under official law (Hobsbawm 1974, 120–121).

Such legal ambiguity enables peasants to present landlords as lawbreakers encroaching upon public land. Since leaving farmland empty is undesirable in both economic development and public welfare terms, peasants call on the states to distribute land with questionable legal status to those who need it most. Hence, peasants often combine legalistic and moral economic claims:

> When trying to avoid being perceived as acting illegally, they underline how and why their acts are within the law, even enforcing the law. To landlords they might emphasise that they want to become tenants, not claim the owners' land titles. As constraints are relieved, threat of repression recedes, [. . .] or for other reasons villagers may speak more freely, those justifications underscored for politicians, police, and landowners, though still present, become less pronounced. The emphasis shifts from legal to moral arguments (Kerkvliet 1993, 478–479).

What matters most to peasants is the ability to defend their livelihoods, so when legal claims and mechanisms do not work, they may resort to other discourses and methods. As Hobsbawm aptly notes, "not being either western liberals or student insurrectionaries, the peasants quite failed to make a choice in principle between peaceful and violent, legal and non-legal methods, 'physical' and 'moral' force, using either or both as occasion appeared to demand" (Hobsbawm 1974, 145–146).

The existing literature also stresses the significance of the political context in land occupations. Outside forces usually play a minimal role in the early phases of land occupations, but their influence often grows in subsequent phases (Kerkvliet 1993, 481). During land occupations, the role of left-populist and Marxist movements "is plainly important, both as mobilizers of local cadres, as catalysts of peasant activity and perhaps above all as forces turning separate local agitations into a wider movement" (Hobsbawm 1974, 145–146). Finally, land occupation movements that are not violently suppressed often alter the political landscape. Land reform and other socioeconomic demands of the poor peasantry become popular political and intellectual debates (Kerkvliet 1993, 485). The inability of the ruling elites to satisfy peasants' demand for land was a critical factor behind twentieth-century peasant-based revolutions such as the Cuban, Chinese, and Vietnamese revolutions. In other cases (such as Peru in the 1960s, Portugal in the 1970s, and the Philippines in the 1980s), waves of

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land occupation forced governments to implement large-scale land reforms (Kerkvliet 1993, 459, 483–484).

The case of Turkey shares many of the characteristics of land occupations in other countries. In line with Hobsbawm's and Kerkvliet's observations, we show that many land occupations in Turkey were a response to landlords' move to use labor-displacing farm machinery. Some occupations were a response to landowners' decision to use land for purposes that threatened the livelihoods of their sharecroppers or tenants. Confirming Kerkvliet's emphasis on the diversity of participants, we demonstrate that villagers occupying land in Turkey were not limited to sharecroppers and tenants. In some cases, landlords claimed ownership of areas that were previously farmed by small-scale independent peasants, resulting in peasant occupation of the land. Like Hobsbawm's Peruvian case, many land occupations in Turkey were rooted in the competition over state-owned land between large landowners and land-poor villagers. Echoing the findings of Hobsbawm and Kerkvliet, our study also shows that Turkish and Kurdish villagers joined forces to legitimize their actions based on problems of subsistence, demanding land distribution as a solution. Villagers occupying land used a heavy dose of legalistic discourse in almost all occupations. Peasants also collaborated with outside forces such as center-left and socialist organizations that supported their actions. Land occupations also shaped political debates and established land reform as an important political agenda in the 1960s and 1970s.

Despite these broad similarities, however, the intensity of land occupations in Turkey was much lower than in the abovementioned cases. Moreover, despite the engagement between peasants and outside political forces, no national-level land occupation organization (like the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil and numerous others across the Global South) emerged in Turkey. Finally, as shown below, land occupations resulted in considerable land distribution in Turkey. However, the scale of land reform in Turkey was much smaller when compared to Hobsbawm's and Kerkvliet's cases. An analysis of these significant differences is beyond the scope of this article, but we hope to turn to these subjects in future studies.

Methodology

Our study is based on a combination of archival research and fieldwork. We collected reports and commentaries on the land question and land occupations from the archives of national newspapers, local newspapers, and leftist periodicals listed in the References section. Given that only a fraction of contentious socio-political events is covered by the press (especially before the age of the internet), we believe that the actual number of land occupations between 1965 and 1980 was higher than we found. Further archival research may uncover many other land occupations both before and during the period under consideration, which would allow for a more thorough historical analysis. We supplemented our archival work with the minutes of the Turkish parliament and the publications that broached the land question and land occupations.

Moreover, between February and June of 2017, we conducted fieldwork in the following villages: Sarıbahçe (Adana), Bayralar, Karamık (Antalya), Değirmenköy (İstanbul), Atalan, Göllüce (İzmir), Dedeyazı, and Ören (Malatya). We also interviewed

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a former resident of Turanlar Village (Aydın) in August 2021. We chose our fieldwork sites based on our initial archival research. Our entry into the field began in İstanbul's Silivri district. Our first interviewee was the headman of Değirmenköy at the time of the land occupation, who shared with us his first-hand experience. By using the snowball technique, we then extended the number of participants in neighboring villages. We interviewed three people in Silivri, all in their sixties, two of whom had experienced the occupation as participants, and one who had memories of the events through family narratives. For our fieldwork in İzmir, we first interviewed a Farmers' Union (*Çiftçi-Sen*) representative who helped us to gather insight about the occupations in the region. Through this channel, we gained access to the villages where occupations unfolded. In İzmir, we visited Atalan and Göllüce villages in the Torbalı district. Unlike our fieldwork in İstanbul and İzmir, we did not have any initial contact that facilitated our research in Adana, Antalya, and Malatya, but luckily, villagers welcomed us and accepted our requests for interviews.

We conducted focus group interviews in village coffeehouses. Coffeehouses are one of the rare spaces where male socialization occurs in villages, and it was the most convenient space for us to recruit interviewees, who felt comfortable speaking with us there. All participants were male, and almost all were above the age of sixty and had either participated in the land occupations or had childhood memories of the events. Our inability to recruit female interviewees is the main shortcoming of our fieldwork and was partly due to our short stay in those villages and partly to traditional patriarchal norms in rural areas that restrict women from direct contact with outsiders and easily accessible public spaces like coffeehouses. Overall, our fieldwork helped us to collect invaluable material on the context, process, and consequences of land occupations.

The political economy of land conflicts in Turkey

The land question in Turkey

Between 1923 and 1944, the Republic of Turkey distributed approximately 11 million *dönüms*[2] of farmland (including croplands, gardens, and vineyards) on which to settle Muslim-Turkish migrants and refugees from Greece, the Balkans, and the Caucasus (Korkut 1984, 46). This comprised unoccupied land and land farmed by Armenians until 1915 and by Greeks until 1923. Apart from this settlement-driven land distribution, the new regime did not carry out land reform because Republican elites had organic ties with big landowners (Karaömerlioğlu 2000, 116). Muslim-Turkish elites seized the land of non-Muslims across the country in the 1920s. Moreover, like the Ottoman state, the Republican regime relied on landlords to govern eastern Turkey, especially in the Kurdish-majority southeast. Many landowners were CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, Republican People's Party) deputies during the one-party period (1923–1946) (Gürel 2014, 318–319).

Successive wars and resulting depopulation resulted in relatively low population pressure on farmland. Only one-sixth of potentially cultivable land was under cultivation by the 1920s (Korkut 1984, 45). An official survey carried out before the

[2] One *dönüm* is a land measurement unit equal to 1,000 square meters. *Dönüm* and *decare* are often used interchangeably.

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Table 1. Land distribution in Turkey according to the agricultural censuses of 1963, 1970, and 1980

	1963		1970		1980	
Farm size (*dönüm*)	Households (%)	Land (%)	Households (%)	Land (%)	Households (%)	Land (%)
1–20	40.9	7	44.4	8	25.9	3.7
20–50	27.8	17.3	28.2	18.7	33.3	16.2
50–100	18.1	23.9	15.7	22	21.8	21.2
100–200	9.4	23.7	7.7	21.5	12.3	24.6
200–500	3.2	17	3.1	17.9	5.6	25.1
Over 500	0.6	11.1	0.9	11.9	0.8	8.9
Number of households	3,100,850		3,039,289		3,141,169	
Total cultivated area (ha)	16,734,335		14,765,131		20,335,363	

Source: Korkut (1984, 41).

legislation of the 1945 Land Reform Law found that 418 households owned more than 5,000 *dönüms* of land; in contrast, about one million households (38.1 percent of all farm households) lacked sufficient land. Almost five percent (4.89 percent to be exact) of all farm households were entirely landless, and 33.21 percent were land-poor (Köylü 1947, cited in Tekeli 2019, 23). As World War II ended and the transition to the multi-party regime appeared on the horizon, the CHP government tried to gain popularity among the peasantry by reintroducing the land reform agenda. The Law Reform Law (*Çiftçiyi Topraklandırma Kanunu*) was legislated on June 11, 1945. Based on this law, the Turkish state distributed about 22 million *dönüms* to 446,000 households (comprising about 10 percent of the total farming population) between 1947 and 1970 (Korkut 1984, 52). Due to the combination of landlord pressure and availability of a large reserve of public land, what was distributed comprised almost entirely public properties. Less than 1 percent of the total distributed area was taken from private individuals (Korkut 1984, 52).

Moreover, the rapidly increasing use of farm machinery, partly financed by the USA's Marshall Plan assistance after 1947, helped to bring previously idle land under cultivation (Keyder and Pamuk 1984–1985, 54; Yalman 1971, 188–189). The total area under cultivation increased from 145 million *dönüms* in 1950 to 230 million *dönüms* in 1962 (Karapınar 2005, 167). Despite the significant expansion of cultivated area and land distributions, the size of the land-poor population remained significant. As Table 1 shows, in the 1960s about 40 percent of all farm households were cultivating no more than 20 *dönüms*, while about 10 percent of rural households controlled nearly half of all cultivated land. In short, despite the persistence of small-scale farming in large parts of the country, Turkey had a land question.

The socio-economic processes explained above significantly shaped land-related conflicts. Rapid agricultural modernization occurring from the late 1940s onwards enabled farmers to bring idle land under cultivation, leading to the closing of the land frontier by the early 1960s. Hence, initiatives to increase production scale was bound to create land conflicts. Farm mechanization also made the displacement of tenants a

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Table 2. Land conflicts in Turkey based on a survey of 3,015 rural households conducted in 1952

Region	The number of households involved in land conflicts as % of the total number of village households	Parties that households contested against (%)				
		Relatives and kinfolk	Another villager	Village headman (*muhtar*)	Residents of the neighboring village	Government
Central Anatolia	23	10	28	21	25	16
Mediterranean	15	19	40	2	17	22
Aegean	8	13	39	18	28	2
Marmara	10	9	49	11	24	7
Southeast	26	10	28	1	38	23
Black Sea	4	0	57	14	14	15
Average	14	13	35	11	28	13

Source: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi (1954, 137).[3]

possible option for landlords, especially in the southeast (Yalman 1971, 188–189). Finally, only one-third of Turkey's farmland had proper cadastral registration by the late 1960s (Özkök 1971, 23).[4] The incompleteness of cadastral records opened up a wide space for contesting ownership claims. According to a survey of 448 villages from 73 districts across Turkey in 1952, land conflicts rose after farm mechanization in 44 percent of villages. The survey also showed that 14 percent of all rural households involved in land conflicts had a diverse array of disputants, including relatives, other villagers, residents of neighboring villages, village heads (*muhtar*), and the government (see Table 2). Although the survey did not allow for class analysis, it clearly shows that access to land had become a contentious issue and that land conflicts were common long before the rise of land struggles in the late 1960s.

The political context of land occupations

Although land occupations by peasants occurred in Turkey during several periods, like the labor movement, the heyday of land occupations was in the 1960s and 1970s. The political atmosphere in the aftermath of the military coup on May 27, 1960 undoubtedly favored peasant mobilization. While the 1961 Constitution included anti-democratic clauses, it also eased restrictions on the formation of labor unions and democratic mass organizations and granted autonomy to universities. Furthermore, two articles were of particular relevance for the peasantry. Article No. 37 explicitly promised land reform:

[3] The percentage of land conflicts with government institutions in Central Anatolia is printed in the source as 6 percent. This must be a typo because the total does not add up to 100 percent. The correct figure should be 16 percent.

[4] Cadastral records in Turkey were only nearly completed in the post-1990 period (Türem 2017, 21).

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> The State shall adopt the measures needed to achieve the efficient utilization of land and to provide land for those farmers who either have no land, or own insufficient land. For this purpose, the law may define the size of tracts of land according to different agricultural regions and types of soil. The State shall assist farmers in the acquisition of agricultural implements (The Constitution of Republic of Turkey [1961] 1963, 476).

Like the Land Reform Law of 1945, Article No. 38 of the 1961 Constitution stated that land distribution was within the scope of "public interest" that entitled the government to confiscate private landholdings:

> The State and other corporate bodies, where public interest deems it necessary, are authorized, subject to the principles and procedures as set forth in the pertinent law, to expropriate the whole or part of any immovable property under private ownership, or to impose an administrative servitude thereon provided that the true equivalent value is immediately paid in cash. The form of payment of the true equivalent values of land expropriated for the purpose of enabling farmers to own land, for nationalization of forests, for afforestation, and for accomplishing the establishment of settlement projects, shall be provided by law (The Constitution of Republic of Turkey [1961] 1963, 476).

Peasants frequently referred to the above two articles to legitimize land occupations.[5] An interesting example of growing peasant assertiveness took place during the visit of Cemal Gürsel, head of the National Unity Council [*Milli Birlik Komitesi*, MBK] in 1960–1961 and the president of Turkey between 1961 and 1966, to Adana in November 1962. During the visit, a peasant interrupted Gürsel's speech and said: "My Pasha, this country will be fixed if you get rid of those people robbing the public treasury. There are people in this country who cultivate thousands of *dönüms* of land without holding any land title." Gürsel immediately gave an order to complete cadastral surveys in Adana to identify the landowners who were cultivating public land illegally and distributed that land to landless peasants (*Cumhuriyet* 15 November 1962). Moreover, on February 15, 1965, two days after the resignation of the CHP government, which promised to enact land reform, over 4,000 peasants attended the "March to Support Land Reform" organized by the Land Reform Association (*Toprak Reformu Derneği*) in the Ceyhan district of Adana (*Milliyet* 16 February 1965; *Cumhuriyet* 16 February 1965). In short, land reform was not merely a top-down project of the May 27 junta nor just the desire of the CHP and socialists but had a considerable bottom-up dimension during the 1960s.

The rise of the socialist left should also be taken into consideration for proper political contextualization. The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed the climax of the socialist left in modern Turkish history. The foundation of the Workers' Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP) in 1961 and its entry to the parliament with

[5] One of the student activists of the time recalls that during a visit to a village in Adana in 1969, when the students read aloud Article No. 37 from the Constitution booklet, peasants were surprised and excited (Cinemre 2020, 51).

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15 deputies in 1965 was a milestone. TİP effectively brought workers' and peasants' rights and demands to the political agenda. Beginning in 1968 the rise of student activism on university campuses further radicalized the political atmosphere. The Federation of the Revolutionary Youth of Turkey (*Türkiye Devrimci Gençlik Federasyonu*, Dev-Genç) was founded in 1969. In the early 1970s, both TİP and Dev-Genç were split into numerous socialist organizations. The socialist movement was deeply involved in the land occupations of peasants during this period. These developments pushed the CHP toward a center-left orientation. The change of party leadership from İsmet İnönü to Bülent Ecevit in 1972 was a milestone in this regard. As the land question became part of national politics, between 1960 and 1971 successive governments prepared ten different land reform draft laws. None of these drafts was legislated by the Turkish parliament (Korkut 1984, 53–56). Still, growing public concern and peasant demand for land reform created panic among landlords throughout the 1960s (Yalman 1971, 210). In short, land occupations were not born in a vacuum but were rather part of the growing combativeness of the lower classes across Turkey between 1960–1980.

The processes and consequences of land occupations

Table 3 encapsulates the findings of our archival and field research, and provides a list of 56 land occupations that occurred between 1965 and 1980. The individual land occupation cases that involved more than one village include Ören-Dedeyazı (Malatya), Bayralar-Karamık (Antalya), Değirmenköy-Çanta-Çavuşlu (İstanbul), Ayrancılar-Hortuna-Kuşçuburun-Pancar (İzmir), and Geyiksuyu/Deşt (which involved about fifteen villages). In those cases, the residents of neighboring villages jointly occupied land. Table 3 provides only the first year of major land occupations. For instance, in Bayralı and Karamık villages of Antalya, small-scale land conflicts began in 1954, but the main land occupation event that attracted nationwide public attention occurred in 1967. Another issue worth stressing is that land occupation was only one form of land-related peasant activism of the time. Some of the mass demonstrations and armed insurgencies of the era were related to landlord–peasant conflicts. Table 3 excludes these incidents because they were not exactly land occupations.

Table 3 also provides information about the size of the contested area, indicating the seriousness of the conflict. It also includes data on outside political support, informing our analysis of the politics of land occupations in Turkey. The table also includes information about the consequences of land occupations. Because Turkish newspapers often fail to follow up on previously covered events, we found only scant information about such consequences in news archives, and filled this critical gap through fieldwork.

Table 3 also reveals the temporal and spatial clustering of land occupations. While 49 began between 1965–1971, only seven took place between 1972–1980. Hence, land occupation was at its peak before the military coup on March 12, 1971. There is only one reported land occupation from the Black Sea region. Although further research may uncover more cases, such additional information would probably not change the general picture of the Black Sea region. Mass demonstrations by tea, hazelnut, and tobacco growers demanding greater state protection occurred in the Black Sea region throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The absence of land occupation in the repertoire of

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Table 3. Land occupations in Turkey (1965–1980)

East and southeast	Name of village & province	Size of contested land (in *dönüm*)	Organizational support	Consequence
1969	Rihayat (Urfa)	N/A	N/A	Suppression
Late 1960s	Reşit (Diyarbakır)	10,000	N/A	Concession
1969	Dedeyazı & Ören (Malatya)	2,000	Socialists	Concession
1969	Karadibek (Gaziantep)	3,000	N/A	N/A
1970	Osmanoğulları (Gaziantep)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Kuzuyatağı (Gaziantep)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Nohutalan (Gaziantep)	450	Socialists	N/A
1970	Alahan (Gaziantep)	800	N/A	N/A
1970	Araplar (Adıyaman)	200	N/A	Suppression
1970	Teşt (Urfa)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	İkiztepe (Mardin)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Dağdeviren/Kulu (Van)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1974	İkizkuyu (Gaziantep)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1978	Bereketli (Malatya)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1979	Around 15–20 villages near Geyiksuyu/Deşt (Tunceli)	N/A	Socialists	Concession (for a brief period)
Central Anatolia				
1965	Kaya (Sivas)	N/A	N/A	Suppression
1967	Karahamzalı (Ankara)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1968	Sekili (Yozgat)	20,000	N/A	Concession
1968	Kâzım Karabekir (Konya)[6]	53,000	Socialists	N/A
1970	Nallıdere (Ankara)	N/A	Socialists	Concession
1970	Olukpınar (Konya)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1975	Beylikköprü (Ankara)	18,000	N/A	Concession
Mediterranean region				
1965	Haruniye Township	2,000	N/A	N/A
1967	Karamık & Bayralar (Antalya)	9,000	CHP & socialists	Concession
1969	Çolaklı (Antalya)	350	Socialists	N/A
1969	Varışlı (Hatay)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Irmakbaşı Kilise (Adana)	313	Socialists	Suppression

(*Continued*)

[6] Karaman was separated from Konya and became a province in 1989. Kâzım Karabekir village is in the Karaman province.

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Table 3. (*Continued*)

East and southeast	Name of village & province	Size of contested land (in *dönüm*)	Organizational support	Consequence
1970	Küçükkaldırım (Adana)	30,000	Socialists	N/A
1970	Akdam (Adana)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Aslanbey (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Dedeler (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Köskenli (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Maksutuşağı (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Pilo (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Zeyneppınar (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Emiroğlu (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1971	Pınarbaşı (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1974	Hacıbebek (Maraş)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1975	Sarıbahçe (Adana)	4,000	CHP & socialists	Concession
1975	Yalanboz (Hatay)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
Aegean region				
1967	Bafa Lake (Aydın)	N/A	Socialists	Concession
1969	Atalan (İzmir)	12,000	CHP & socialists	Concession
1969	Göllüce (İzmir)	N/A	CHP & socialists	Concession
1969	Ayrancılar-Hortuna-Kuşçuburun-Pancar (İzmir)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Yenioba (İzmir)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Kızılcahavlu (İzmir)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Akçakonak (Aydın)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	Çayyüzü (Aydın)	7,000–8,000	Socialists	N/A
1971	Turanlar (Aydın)	17,500	Socialists	Suppression
1971	Hisarlık (Tire)	525	Socialists	N/A
Marmara region				
1969	Değirmenköy-Çanta-Çavuşlu (İstanbul)	7000	CHP & socialists	Concession
1969	Akyayla (Balıkesir)	N/A	Socialists	N/A
1970	Kayabaşı (İstanbul)	N/A	N/A	Concession
1970	Kaşıkçı (Tekirdağ)	N/A	N/A	Concession
1970	İsmailli (Tekirdağ)	3180	Socialists	N/A

(*Continued*)

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Table 3. (*Continued*)

East and southeast	Name of village & province	Size of contested land (in *dönüm*)	Organizational support	Consequence
Black Sea region				
1969	Uzunburun (Tokat)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Interviews and written sources listed in the References section.

rural protest was due to the region's agrarian structure. The hilly terrain and high population prevented the formation of large farms and significant land-based class polarization in the region. While violent inter-household disputes over farm borders was a common phenomenon, land conflicts pitting a large group of land-poor peasants against a few landowners was almost entirely absent.

Table 3 also reveals a considerable degree of outside support for peasant land occupations by socialist organizations and the center-left CHP. The table also shows that 14 out of 56 land occupations resulted in concessions to peasants. Since the consequences of land occupations were rarely reported, the real number of occupations that resulted in concessions to peasants could be higher. We detail the different forms of concessions below. Overall, land occupations were at least partly successful and led to land distribution to land-poor peasants.

Varieties of land occupation

We detected three main varieties of land occupations in Turkey. These varieties include those that were: (1) driven by labor-displacing farm mechanization, (2) organized to protect village commons, and (3) designed to target public land outside of landlord control.

Land occupations driven by labor-displacing farm mechanization

After the 1950s, landlords with access to farm machinery (thanks to low-interest agricultural credits) tended to evict many of their tenants whom they no longer needed. Tenants responded to this by publicly questioning the legal basis of landlord control over land. Calling upon the state to end the situation and implement land reform, they often claimed that much of the contested land was public property which the landlords had seized illegally. Contesting claims over land resulted in many legal battles, protests, occupations, and armed conflicts (Yalman 1971, 198–199). The fiercest landlord–peasant conflicts driven by mechanization took place especially in the southeast, where semi-feudal relations of production were historically prevalent. Surveys conducted by the Ministry of Village Affairs in 1964–1968 found that the ratio of landless households was 53.7 percent in Urfa, 46.8 percent in Diyarbakır, and 40.8 percent in Mardin (Korkut 1984, 32). Land occupations began earlier in some localities. For instance, in 1955, peasants and landlords contested over 150,000 *dönüm*s of farmland in the Viranşehir district of Urfa (Gümüşbaş 2001, 92). These struggles reached a climax in the mid-1960s. Landlords in Viranşehir were able to cultivate only with the help of armed guards (Yalman 1971, 180–181). In 1969,

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peasants occupied land in the Rihayat Village of Urfa's Harran district, justifying it as a defensive act against the landlord, who had attempted to evict them from the land they had long been cultivating (Babuş 2004, 159). On May 18, 1969, the gendarmerie beat the peasants—who shouted slogans such as "We will die but not give our land to anyone!"—and handed the contested land over to the landlord (*Cumhuriyet* 19 May 1969).

Fierce land battles also took place in Diyarbakır. Through a series of land occupations in the late 1960s, peasants of the Reşit Village in the Bismil district of Diyarbakır seized 10,000 *dönüms* of land previously controlled by the Çetin family which claimed to own three villages, including Reşit. Reşit villagers declared that the contested area was public land illegally occupied by the Çetins and that the government should give it to the landless peasants who had been cultivating it. They successfully warded off the landlords in the following years. In two interviews published in 1971 and 1973, members of the Çetin family complained about the peasants' land occupation and their use of legal action and political campaigning (*Milliyet* 1 July 1971; *Milliyet* 5 March 1973). The Çetins attempted to reclaim the land in April of 1974, leading to a clash that resulted in several gendarmerie soldiers being injured and the arrest of 24 peasants (*Milliyet* 20 April 1974). Like the situation in Urfa, Diyarbakır landlords were only able to farm under the protection of armed guards. While resident landlords had some success, absentee landlords failed to defeat the peasants (Yalman 1971, 204).

Çukurova, a fertile and well-irrigated alluvial plain located in the northeastern part of the Mediterranean region, was another area that witnessed fierce conflicts following mechanization-driven displacement. Large-scale capitalist agriculture had been developing in the region since the mid-nineteenth century. Muslim elites seized Armenian-owned properties there after 1915 (Toksöz 2010, 198–201). Large-scale investment in green revolution technologies after 1950 further strengthened large-scale farming in Çukurova. An official survey in the 1960s of 156,000 farming households in Adana, Mersin, and Hatay found that 2,800 households owned half of the surveyed area (1,852 *dönüms* per household), while 153,200 families owned the other half (34 *dönüms* per household) (Korkut 1984, 33). One of the longest and fiercest land conflicts of the region took place in the Sarıbahçe Village of the Ceyhan district. The local landlord, Hacı Andırın, claimed to legally own about 4,000 *dönüms*, but about 100 landless households asserted that it was public land illegally occupied. The contest between the two sides climaxed in 1975. Villagers first requested that local cadastral officials make an on-the-spot investigation, but that request was not met on time. Frustrated by the delayed investigation, villagers occupied 250 *dönüms* of Andırın's land in December 1975. From the onset, villagers used legalistic discourse, claiming that it was the landlord who was breaking the law by illegally seizing public land. They called on government officials to lease them the contested land, stressing that they needed it for subsistence (*Milliyet* 19 December 1975). According to the recollections of the village head at the time, villagers collectively cultivated the occupied area:

> If we had distributed the land, it might have broken up into tiny pieces. That is why we decided to cultivate it collectively. Thus, we did so for a couple of years during the occupation. The money we earned from this land was spent on common costs of the village. We were on guard at night to protect the land (Interview in Sarıbahçe Village).

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After the first occupation, the contested land changed hands several times through conflicts between the occupying villagers and Andırın's armed guards. The gendarmerie also intervened to evict them. Local officials pressured the village head to convince the villagers to stop the occupation, but the villagers did not give up (Interviews in Sarıbahçe Village). Reflecting the radical atmosphere of the 1970s, villagers cooperated with several left-wing groups who came to support them. One of these socialist cadres recalls the use of guns and Molotov cocktails during skirmishes (Ciravoğlu 2004). Moreover, soon after the arrest of ten villagers following a fight that broke out during a court hearing about the dispute, villagers reached out to CHP leader Ecevit, who was visiting Ceyhan for a meeting. In his speech, Ecevit demanded the immediate release of all arrested villagers (Interviews in Sarıbahçe village).

Following the decision of the Administrative Board of Adana City in his favor in March of 1976, the land was returned to Andırın, under the escort of 300 gendarmerie soldiers who arrested nine peasant protestors (*Milliyet* 14 March 1976). Local courts and the State Council (*Danıştay*) made similar decisions in the following months. However, villagers continued fighting:

> During the process of our occupation, the gendarmerie was coming. One day, we saw them lined up like a hedge around the land to protect it from us. We broke through them. They were also coming to rip out our wheat, as we were cultivating it again at night. As Andırın Ağa was sowing wheat and sesame, we were ripping them out. The court decided to evict us from the land. The incidents turned into a gang war. The whole village, young and old alike, were backing us (Interview in Sarıbahçe Village).

The villagers' struggle continued for a couple of years. Unable to protect the land despite the court orders in his support, the landlord decided to sell it. As the headman recalls, "Andırın Ağa became unable to use this land. He got tired of our struggle and sold it. Some of us also bought some land cheaply" (Interview in Sarıbahçe Village).

Another interesting case from the Mediterranean region is the land occupation in Antalya's Elmalı district. In Elmalı, peasants from Bayralar and Karamık villages fought the Subaşı family over a large area around the Avlan Lake. İbrahim Subaşı served as the Democrat Party deputy from Antalya for two consecutive terms in the 1950s. The roots of the Elmalı conflict can be traced back to 1937–1938, when the Subaşı family registered the entire lake as their private property. The cadastral registry commission accepted the request, although one commission member objected. The Subaşı family purchased their first tractor in the 1930s, making them one of only a handful of tractor owners in Turkey at the time. The number of tractors they owned rose to six in 1954 and 20 in 1968. By the 1960s, the total size of legally registered/titled land in Bayralar and Karamık was 38,500 *dönüms*. Although Subaşı family members comprised only 0.4 percent of the population of these villages, they owned 73.5 percent of all the registered land. Despite this stark inequality, the region's landlord–peasant conflict was primarily over unregistered areas. The ratio of unregistered land to total cultivable area was 55.4 percent, and the Subaşıs retained *de facto* control over this expansive area (Tüzün 1970, 270–274).

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From 1954 onwards, peasants challenged Subaşıs' control and cultivated those unregistered lands. A series of lawsuits ended in favor of the Subaşıs. Peasants' appeal to local authorities to carry out a detailed cadastral survey and land titling in 1964 was rejected. A cadastral survey was finally carried out in 1967 but the announcement of its results was delayed (Tüzün 1970, 270–274). The increasing tension resulted in an open land occupation in August of 1967, which continued for more than a year, during which villagers refused to leave despite the pressure from the gendarmerie (Yavuz 1968, 21–52). As one of our interviewees recalls, peasants "were cultivating the land at night during the occupation. The landlord could only plow the land under the protection of the gendarmerie" (Interview in Karamık Village). The Elmalı incident was the first point of direct contact between the peasants and leftist university students. Hundreds of students, mostly from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, flooded the region and participated in fights, with many being arrested. The visit of the CHP Vice Chairman Bülent Ecevit on September 18, 1967 was also a turning point. His slogan was: "Land to the tiller, water to the user" (*Cumhuriyet* 19 September 1967). Four days after the visit, CHP leader İnönü sent a telegraph to the Minister of Interior Affairs calling for an end to state violence against Elmalı villagers (*Cumhuriyet* 23 September 1967).

Peasants' continuous struggle and the growing public support for their cause forced local officials to complete the cadastral survey in 1971 (Tüzün 2001). The conflict continued in the courts in the following years. In 1979, the court decided to designate the contested area public property (Yavuz 1968, 29). Each household received a few *dönüms* of land (Interviews in Bayralar and Karamık villages). The final decision, made in 1982, gave 94 percent of the unregistered area to the state (Tüzün 2001), helping the peasants to retain the land that they received because of the land occupation (Interviews in Bayralar and Karamık villages).

Land occupations protecting village commons

Land occupations of the era were not restricted to farmland. As landlords gained the capacity to farm large areas thanks to access to farm machinery after the 1950s, they increasingly encroached upon village commons such as pastureland. As shown below, some landlords also curtailed villagers' fishing rights. Many land occupations of the 1960s and 1970s aimed to end such encroachments.

One of the most publicized landlord-peasant conflicts between 1965–1980 occurred around the Bafa Lake in the Söke district of Aydın. A few landowners banned villagers from fishing in the lake in the 1960s by claiming that it was adjacent to their farmlands and therefore should be considered their private property. As villagers defied the ban, landowners set up a sealed fishery and placed armed guards around the lake to prevent villagers from fishing; these guards shot and wounded several villagers. In 1967, villagers, supported by a variety of socialist groups, occupied the lake area and fought against the armed guards and local gendarmerie forces (Çelenk 2013, 439). Although the gendarmerie suppressed the occupation, the event attracted nationwide public support. On April 19, 1967, TİP deputy Cemal Hakkı Selek questioned Prime Minister Demirel about the legal basis of the landlords' ownership claims over the lake. Demirel claimed that there was nothing illegal about the current situation (*TBMM Tutanak Dergisi* 26 January 1968). However, backed by strong public support,

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the villagers continued to challenge the fishing ban and waged a successful legal and political battle in the following years. A decade later, in June 1978, the CHP government nationalized the sealed fishery on Bafa Lake, blocked compensation to private individuals, and gave villagers the right to fish (*Milliyet* 18 June 1978; *Cumhuriyet* 30 July 1978).

Some land occupations in the Aegean region combined struggles over farmland and defense of village commons. The Atalan and Göllüce occupations were the most publicized of this type. On January 27, 1969, about 500 peasants of the Atalan Village in İzmir's Torbalı district occupied land that they claimed that landowners were illegally using when it should have been for the use of poor peasants for farming and animal husbandry. The village headman proposed that although landowners held title deeds for 1,500 *dönüms*, they were controlling an additional 12,000 *dönüms* illegally. After cadastral officials investigating their case supported the landowners, peasants began to occupy the contested land. A local newspaper reported that one landowner and several cadastral officials escaped the village after the occupation. Peasants organized a demonstration and shouted slogans such as "The land of this homeland cannot be given to anyone!" and "We will cultivate this land because this land belongs to the state!" The gendarmerie forcibly evicted the peasants and began a legal investigation of about 42 villagers (*Demokrat İzmir* 29 January 1969). Peasants carried on their struggle, with the support of leftist students (*Demokrat İzmir* 30 January and 1 February 1969). On February 1, 1969, the governor of İzmir, Namık Kemal Şentürk, gave a press conference on the events. In "carrot and stick" fashion, he stated that the government was working to solve the problem, but he also warned peasants to ignore "provocateurs," adding that the state would prevent anyone from violating property rights. On the same day, the headmen of Atalan, Subaşı, Göllüce, and Naime villages issued the following statement: "We, the peasants of Atalan Village and surrounding villages, declare to the public that we have begun a struggle for the constitution and for land against the landlords and their allies who have expropriated our lands by using illegal methods" (*Demokrat İzmir* 2 February 1969).

Soon after, another land occupation began in Göllüce, a neighboring village (Fırat 2017; Fırat 2021). The primary target of the occupation was Mesude Evliyazade, the aunt of former Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who was overthrown in the 1960 coup and executed in 1961. Peasants claimed that Evliyazade had obtained invalid property documents in the 1950s. The village head stressed that villagers were not trying to encroach upon genuinely privately owned land: "As understood by the cadastral survey conducted last June, the lands in the hands of the landlords belong to the state treasury, and the landlords hold no title deed. Our demand is to give the public lands to us" (*Demokrat İzmir* 3 September 1969). In the village square, Göllüce villagers hung a large poster on which Article 38 of the constitution was written (*Milliyet* 4 February 1969). On March 17, violent clashes between 200 women and the gendarmerie took place (*Demokrat İzmir* 18 March 1969). On March 31, 1969, with the cooperation of the National Student Federation of Turkey (*Türkiye Milli Talebe Federasyonu*) and the Aegean University Social Democracy Association (*Ege Üniversitesi Sosyal Demokrasi Derneği*), Atalan and Göllüce peasants organized the "Demonstration for the Constitution" (*Demokrat İzmir* 1 April 1969).

Although the first reaction of the ruling AP government led by Süleyman Demirel was to order security forces to suppress the occupation, the government eventually

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began to open the doors to bargaining after realizing that the villagers would not back down. On April 2, after meeting with a local landowner, İzmir governor Şentürk told the press that he had "communicated the peasants' demand to the landowners. The peasants, too, want to end the tension and have access to the land by paying rent. If this proposal is accepted, then we can give necessary credits to the peasants for renting the lands" (*Demokrat İzmir* 3 April 1969). On April 8, Şentürk announced that peasants and landowners were on the way to reaching an agreement (*Demokrat İzmir* 9 April 1969). One of our interviewees from Atalan stated: "Villagers were not given title deeds but were given use rights of the land" (Interview in Atalan Village). Another interviewee from Göllüce explained: "The state sold a total of 160 *dönüms* divided in parcels of 5, with a payment term of twenty years. They convinced Barber Ali [a wealthy man] to give loans to villagers to enable them to buy land" (Interview in Göllüce Village). In addition, residents of both villages retained some common grazing areas.

Land occupations to protect village commons also occurred in other regions. A notable case occurred at the Resneli Farm in İstanbul's Bakırköy district. The family, descendants of Resneli Niyazi, one of the leaders of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, and the villagers, who had come from Salonica to settle in the region in the 1920s, had a long-standing conflict over the distribution of the pastureland dating back to the late 1920s (*Cumhuriyet* 21 May, 12 June, and 7 July 1934). With the rise of the land occupation movement, this conflict reached a new high. Peasants occupied the Resneli Farm in October of 1970, arguing that the Resnelis legally owned only 433 *dönüms* of a total of 10,025 *dönüms* of the concerned farm (*Cumhuriyet* 16 September 1972). In 1971–1972, villagers resisted the eviction decision of local courts by fighting the gendarmerie that attempted to implement these decisions (*Cumhuriyet* 17 September 1972). Following the land reform works that began after the 1971 coup, the Resneli family began to sell the contested land to the villagers (*Cumhuriyet* 16 September 1972). Similarly, in 1970 in the Nallıdere Village of the Nallıhan district of Ankara, villagers supported by leftist youth seized control of a hilly pasture area. A few landowners had previously controlled the area, renting land to villagers who used it for animal husbandry. Landowners' appeals to local authorities to evict the peasants were rejected (*Aydınlık Sosyalist Dergi* 1970, 474–476).

Land occupations targeting public land outside landlord control

Although the great majority of land occupations pitted peasants and landlords against each other, we found two notable exceptions where land occupations solely targeted state-owned land. Both cases occurred in Alevi villages in Malatya and Dersim/Tunceli. As in other parts of Turkey, the socialist left was able to organize more easily among the Alevis than among the Sunni majority during the period under discussion. In both cases, socialist organizers led villagers to occupy state land and experiment with collective farming.

No significant land inequality occurred in the Dedeyazı and Ören villages of Malatya's Doğanşehir district, where a land occupation movement began in 1969 and victoriously ended in 1973. In these two villages, the land question resulted from inter-village conflict. Residents from the two villages had long been fighting over disputed areas—mostly public land. Socialist organizations had contacts in these

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villages and convinced villagers to stop fighting and instead equally distribute the contested area and other public land nearby among the people of both villages. Villagers occupied approximately 2,000 *dönüms* of land. Inspired by collective farming experiences in socialist regimes, socialists proposed that the recently occupied areas be collectively cultivated. They framed their proposal with reference to the *imece* (cooperation) tradition of rural Turkey, thereby convincing the villagers. Between 1969 and 1973, peasants collectively farmed the contested area and shared the proceeds in an egalitarian manner. Government authorities attempted to suppress this collective farming experience, and peasants and the gendarmerie clashed several times. In 1973, government officials gave up and distributed a large portion of the occupied land to the villagers, after which the conditions of the peasantry improved. However, with the contest over, family farming soon prevailed over collective farming. As one of our interviewees said, "After the occupations, the state distributed public lands in the 1970s and balanced land ownership among villagers. Nobody owned 300 decares of land. This decreased tensions and made reconciliation easy. Even though some villagers had radical political tendencies, individual property ideals prevailed" (Interview in Ören Village).

The land occupation in the Geyiksuyu/Deşt region of Dersim was much larger in scope. In 1979, a group of socialist militants discovered a large, fertile, and uncultivated state-owned area and decided to enact political agitation in nearby villages to occupy and collectively farm this area. One of the socialist cadres explained their motivation as follows:

> Landlordism did not exist; so, what could we do? We were unable to organize land occupations. Then we said let's occupy the lands owned by the state and make them people's collective property. Then we started to visit villages. We told the people: "The state seized the land that belonged to you and [is] now leaving it empty and idle. Can we collectively cultivate this area if we support you?" (Aktağ 2019, 50–51).

Following this agitation, over 400 people from 15 villages occupied the Geyiksuyu/Deşt area in the spring of 1979. People brought tractors to the area and began collective farming, with about 15 of them armed to protect the area. Initially, security forces did not intervene, but after villagers planted crops and were returning to their villages, they arrested 120 people. Twenty of the arrested were jailed, after which mass protests were organized in the Tunceli city center and the Hozat district. Although mobilization behind the occupation continued until the military coup the following year, the occupation eventually faded away. Local socialists believe that villagers failed to retain the land because the occupation was a product of socialists' intervention rather than being based on a burning demand for land (Aktağ 2019, 51–52).

The consequences of land occupations

Land occupations significantly affected the political landscape. As land reform became a popular issue, the Turkish political establishment could not ignore it entirely. As a result, land occupations brought certain material gains to peasants. In addition,

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the stance toward the land question and methods of struggle shaped the trajectory of the Turkish and Kurdish socialist movements in the 1970s. We now turn to these consequences.

Land occupations significantly influenced the CHP's shift to the center-left. Bülent Ecevit, Vice-Chair of the CHP until 1972 and Party Chair until 1980, vehemently supported land occupations in Atalan, Göllüce, and Bayralar-Karamık. The CHP Congress in July 1970 was a milestone in this regard. In his speech, Ecevit argued that "land occupation is a revolutionary action" that the party should support. Kemal Satır criticized Ecevit by saying: "Mr. Ecevit says that our peasants are winning rights not given to them by the constitution and the government. Land reform should be done by law. The constitution prohibits our peasants' encroachments upon the lands of others." İnönü tried to find a middle ground between these two viewpoints (*Cumhuriyet* 6 July 1970). Following Ecevit's victory over İnönü in the Party Congress in 1972, CHP's discourse became explicitly pro-land reform. Rahşan Ecevit, Bülent Ecevit's wife and political collaborator, played an important role in this process. She founded and chaired the Peasant Association (*Köylü Derneği*) until the 1980 coup. In a speech given at the opening ceremony of the Association's branch in İzmir's Turgutlu district, Rahşan Ecevit protested against the government's deployment of the gendarmerie, which also consisted of sons of poor families, to suppress poor peasants' land struggles (*Cumhuriyet* 20 March 1976). However, this stance had its limitations. For instance, Bülent Ecevit opposed the CHP Youth Branch's initiative for a "Congress of the Landless People" in Adana in 1971 (Kaya 2010, 229). Moreover, as we will see below, the CHP continued to work with landlords in places like Urfa in the 1970s.

The center-right AP led by Süleyman Demirel exhibited a certain degree of flexibility and pragmatism on the land question. During an election meeting in Konya on October 7, 1965, Demirel expressed an uncompromising stance: "The last frontier of cultivable land has been reached in Turkey [...]. Industrialization is the only way to solve Turkey's land shortage [...]. It is impossible to distribute land to all landless people in Turkey in these circumstances" (*Cumhuriyet* 14 September 1967). In contrast, in a press conference on September 13, 1967, Demirel promised to distribute public land to maintain socio-political stability:

> Giving state-owned land to Turkish citizens and turning them from leaseholders of the state to tax-paying citizens is very beneficial for our social structure [...]. The available land in different regions of our country will be distributed to those who are in need [...]. This is an issue that should be handled very carefully and painstakingly [...] Land conflicts consist of half of all court cases today. We do not want to do anything that may pit our citizens against each other and turn our country from a land of people living in peace to a people living in conflict (*Cumhuriyet* 14 September 1967).

Like other establishment politicians, Demirel's discourse of protecting stability primarily referred to containing the rise of the socialist movement. Hence, local officials working under successive Demirel governments adopted a similarly flexible approach toward land distribution. A case study from Central Anatolia during the reign of the first Demirel government vividly illustrates how this flexible approach worked:

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> In the 1965 elections, most of the landless villagers voted for the Marxist Turkish Labor Party (TIP) as the party which promised land reform. The voting results frightened not only the ağas but also many State officials who regarded TIP as a communist organization. To reduce TIP's appeal, the State authorities in 1967 turned over a portion of a drained swamp to the landless villagers, distributing small parcels to each family. In addition, the ağas used their connections with town merchants and the ruling families of neighbouring villages to pressurize villagers and townsmen in the area to shun peasants from Village 'B' who had supported TIP. These tactics succeeded and by the time of the 1969 elections, few villagers would admit to having previously voted for TIP (Leder 1979, 93).

Many of the state-mediated landlord-peasant negotiations following land occupations that eventually ended with land distribution to peasants, such as those in Atalan and Göllüce, also occurred during the Demirel years. The case of Değirmenköy Village in İstanbul's Silivri district illustrates this point vividly. On November 11, 1969, Değirmenköy villagers occupied approximately 7,000 *dönüms* of the Esece/Araplı Farm of Ziya Bey. Supported by socialist groups, the occupation began with a small group of peasants and quickly escalated to neighboring villages such as Çanta and Çavuşlu. The Değirmenköy incidents were debated in the Turkish parliament, and CHP Deputy Yılmaz Alpaslan proposed that the government act as mediator to convince the landowner to sell the land to villagers (*TBMM Tutanak Dergisi* 21 November 1969, 213–214). In response, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Haldun Menteşe, stated:

> Conflicts between the people of Değirmenköy Village and the owners of the Araplı Farm occurred and ended up in court and administrative authorities. But [. . .] our villager citizens were found to not have the right [of ownership]; indeed, it was found that the farm owners hold the land title [. . .] and that the land is their property [. . .] We have been and will be against a natural right such as "Land to its cultivators, water to its users, house to its inhabitants." Why? Because this is unlawfulness (*TBMM Tutanak Dergisi* 21 November 1969, 213–214).

Nevertheless, the AP government eventually followed the course proposed by the CHP. As one of our interviewees recalls:

> The representatives of the Justice Party government came and offered us credits from state banks to purchase these lands. While some villagers acted impulsively and immediately rejected this offer, claiming that they inherited these lands from their grandfathers, others accepted the offer and received credits. This resulted in a cleavage among villagers (Interview in Değirmenköy Village).[7]

[7] The Değirmenköy occupation resumed after the transition to civilian rule in 1973. Socialist law students in İstanbul continuously defended peasants in court cases, and villagers managed to claim a substantial part of the Esece/Araplı farm between 1977 and 1979.

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Ironically, the AP even attacked the CHP's inconsistencies regarding land reform. For example, a 1979 AP election pamphlet stated:

> The CHP, which provoked the peasants with its slogan "Land to those who cultivate it, water to those who use it," encouraged them to unlawfulness by speaking about the "Law of the Nature," and cheered land occupations in Elmalı, Göllüce, and Atalan, stopped talking about "Land Reform" that it continuously talked about during its years of opposition. These fake reformers did not distribute any land to peasants. [The] Justice Party government nationalized 2 million and 917 *dönüms* of land in [the] Urfa Land Reform region and distributed 178 thousand and 81 *dönüms* to 1187 farm households (Adalet Partisi 1979).

Besides Demirel's AP, even the military-backed governments founded after the coup on March 12, 1971 were unable to avoid the land reform issue. Interestingly, the military memorandum promised to implement the reforms within the framework of the 1961 constitution to restore socio-economic stability (*Cumhuriyet* 13 March 1971; Subaşı 2019, 29). The program of Prime Minister Nihat Erim's technocratic government, formed two weeks after the coup, declared land reform to be an immediate task. A draft law prepared by the government aimed to invalidate all "fraudulent land sales" made since July 1961. It also outlawed the sale of land over 100 *dönüms* in irrigated areas and 500 *dönüms* in unirrigated areas. Before sending the draft to the parliamentary commission, the cabinet increased these limits to 150 and 600 *dönüms*, respectively.

By signaling that the military-backed government would confiscate large landholdings, the draft law created panic among big landowners. The head of Adana Stock Exchange, Selahattin Canka, claimed that recent discourses around land reform implied enmity against private property and that even non-landholding industrialists were feeling uneasy. During discussions in the parliamentary commission, AP representatives labelled it a communist initiative (Korkut 1984, 57; Subaşı 2019, 36). The draft law finally omitted size limits for land sales and extended the date for the invalidation of fraudulent land sales from July 1961 to August 1971. In protest at Prime Minister Erim's passive attitude during this period, eleven pro-reform ministers resigned on December 3, 1971 (Korkut 1984, 57).

In the end, the Turkish parliament legislated the Land and Agricultural Reform Law (No. 1757) on July 19, 1973, though it did not establish a clear roadmap for land reform (Korkut 1984, 57). Urfa was designated as the pilot region for reform; however, except for several local cases, landlords waged a successful resistance that included dividing landholdings among family members, using violence against land-claiming peasants, and lobbying all establishment parties. Even the pro-land reform CHP could not bypass the landlords of the region. As one Urfa peasant told a journalist in 1975, "Ecevit talks about reform, but he chooses landlords" as deputy candidates in general elections (Bilgen 2007, 82). An impasse was reached around the issue of land reform in Urfa during the Nationalist Front government between 1975–1977. In 1975, the pro-landlord Democratic Party appealed to the Constitutional Court to rescind Law No. 1757, which had been enacted on October 19, 1976. The law was finally abrogated on May 10, 1978. Overall, although the reform program aimed to distribute 2,552,173

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dönüms to 18,776 households, only 230,897 *dönüms* were distributed to 1,218 households in Urfa (Bilgen 2007, 82).

On the other hand, many land occupations ended in at least partial success. Sekili (Yozgat) and Beylikköprü (Ankara) villages where land occupations occurred were also designated as pilot land reform regions between 1973–1978. The CHP government's decision to nationalize Bafa Lake in 1978 was also a consequence of the land occupation of 1967 that attracted nationwide support. Furthermore, in several cases, landowners and peasants struck deals, which led to sales and rental arrangements with at least partly favorable terms for the peasants. Villagers forced landlords to sell all village land in some villages of Diyarbakır (Yalman 1971, 204–205). The cases of Atalan, Göllüce, Dedeyazı, Ören, Resneli, and Sarıbahçe also fit into this category.[8] Moreover, courts and local government branches decided in peasants' favor in Nallıdere, Değirmenköy, Bayralar, and Karamık cases. Peasants gained *de facto* victories in some regions such as the Pazarcık district of Maraş.[9] However, unlike the 1961 Constitution that defined land reform as a social right, the 1982 Constitution that followed the military coup on September 12, 1980 did not give room to the legitimization of land reform as a constitutional right.

Land conflicts also profoundly affected alignments in the Turkish and Kurdish left. Concerning the former, although the fractures within the TİP are due to multiple reasons that cannot be reduced to student radicalization, disagreement regarding methods of engagement with land occupations appears to be a factor shaping the initial factional rifts within the TİP. We should recall that radical student youth remained within TİP until 1967. Radical students protested the TİP leadership's call to leave Elmalı and return to campuses to avoid violent provocations of state and right-wing groups (Yavuz 1968, 36).

Although the socialist movement in Turkey paid significant attention to issues like land inequality and land reform, the wave-like surge of land occupations led to a more intense engagement with these issues. Prominent socialists whose names appeared in press reports on land occupations (including Hikmet Kıvılcımlı, Sinan Cemgil, Mahir Çayan, İbrahim Kaypakkaya, and Harun Karadeniz) took different positions in those debates. However, land occupations certainly contributed to the creation of an atmosphere which made a peasant-oriented revolutionary strategy overwhelmingly popular among socialists. By the time of the military coup on March 12, 1971, most of Turkey's radical students were supporters of the "national democratic revolution" (*Milli Demokratik Devrim*, MDD) thesis, which claimed that Turkey was a semi-feudal country because most of the population was still living in villages where agrarian class relations were based predominantly on landlord-peasant antagonism rather than a capitalist-proletarian divide.

As elsewhere, Maoism emerged as the most peasant-oriented section of Turkey's socialist left in the 1970s. With the start of the publication of the *Proleter Devrimci Aydınlık* journal (Proletarian Revolutionary Shining, known as "PDA") in

[8] According to an article on the Aegean region published in a socialist periodical *Proleter Devrimci Aydınlık*, peasants told the socialist youth who supported them during the land occupation that: "We are doing ok. We made an agreement with the ağa. He is going to sell some of his land to us" (*Proleter Devrimci Aydınlık* 9–23 (September 1970), 391). The piece does not give the name of that village.

[9] On the situation in Pazarcık during the late 1970s, see Zileli (2002, 210).

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1970 (after the split of *Aydınlık Sosyalist Dergi*, Shining Socialist Journal), Maoism became a separate ideological line in Turkey. The PDA group also took over the publication of *İşçi-Köylü* (Worker-Peasant). The PDA soon split between a radical wing led by İbrahim Kaypakkaya (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi-Marksist-Leninist, TKP-ML*, Communist Party of Turkey, Marxist-Leninist) and a more pragmatic wing led by Doğu Perinçek (known as the "Aydınlık Movement") in 1971–1972.[10] Several other Maoist groups were formed in the following years. Moreover, with the end of fraternal relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the Labor Party of Albania in the mid-1970s, several pro-Albanian groups emerged. One of these groups, the *Halkın Kurtuluşu* (People's Liberation), with a periodical of the same name, became one of the largest socialist organizations in Turkey in the late 1970s.

As Table 3 shows, the land occupation movement lost its wave-like character after the 1971 coup and, unlike in the movements of workers and students, never regained a similar momentum throughout the remainder of the 1970s. In the second half of the 1970s, the epicenter of land struggles shifted from the countryside to the cities. Shantytown dwellers often clashed with the police who were attempting to evict them. Socialist organizations were actively organizing in shantytowns and had leadership roles in urban land conflicts.[11] In the few hot spots of rural land occupations in the second half of the 1970s, Maoist and pro-Albanian groups were often on the frontlines. The Aydınlık Movement actively participated in the land occupation in Sarıbahçe Village of Adana, as well as in various land struggles in Maraş (Ciravoğlu 2004; Gürel 2004). Halkın Kurtuluşu was influential in rural land conflicts in Malatya and Maraş (Gürel 2004, 32–43). The Geyiksuyu/Deşt land occupation in Dersim was organized by radical Maoists rooted in the TKP/ML and similar groups (Ünal 2020, 354). Interestingly, although the Revolutionary Path (*Devrimci Yol*), one of the largest socialist groups in Turkey in the late 1970s, was quite active in the farmers' protests on the eastern Black Sea shore, it did not play any significant role in land occupations.

Interventions in land conflicts facilitated the rise of the Kurdish movement in the second half of the 1970s. As previously noted, rural land conflicts never regained their wave-like momentum after the 1971 coup. The notable exception to this general trend was the southeast. As demonstrated above, big landowners failed to reclaim their occupied land in certain southeastern areas, even after the 1971 coup. Rural land struggles soared again in the late 1970s, but they often occurred either as mass demonstrations or as armed conflicts led by Kurdish socialist organizations beginning to organize independently from the Turkish left. Some of the largest demonstrations arranged by these organizations were against landlords. For instance, thousands of people attended demonstrations organized by the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Association (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Derneği*, DDKD) against landlords in Bismil and Siverek in 1978 (Ercan 2010, 157–172). More importantly, many armed clashes took place between the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) and landlord families in Siverek, Batman, and Hilvan between 1979–1980 (Tezcür 2014, 256; Ercan 2010, 195–198).

[10] On the PDA's activities in Söke villages, see Uyanık (2003).

[11] For a detailed analysis of popular struggles over urban space and socialists' involvement in them, see Aslan (2004).

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Conclusion

Our investigation of the land occupations of peasants between 1965–1980 through village fieldwork and archival research yields five main conclusions. First, by helping to reach the land frontier and making the displacement of tenants possible, agricultural modernization created the structural conditions for land conflicts. Second, the 1961 Constitution's promise of land reform and the rise of the center-left and socialist movements created favorable conditions for the land-poor peasantry's push for land reform through land occupations. Third, the blurriness of the distinction between public and private property over land—the result of incomplete cadastral records—allowed peasants to effectively challenge landlords on legal grounds. Fourth, although the AP-led right-wing governments labelled land occupations illegal, their practical approach was often flexible and conciliatory. Finally, although land occupations did not lead to nationwide land reform, they nevertheless extracted considerable concessions from the state and landowners via the distribution of public land and affordable land sales by landlords.

As we noted before, the scholarship on social movements in Turkey has neglected the peasant movements. Likewise, the literature on Turkish agriculture has not seriously considered the role of peasant struggles in the persistence of small-scale family farming. By showing that there was considerable peasant mobilization for defending and advancing their land rights, which brought tangible gains during the 1960s and 1970s, our study contributes to the literature on agrarian change and social movements in Turkey. Moreover, although the post-1980 era is beyond our present study's scope, our findings also point to a continuing land struggle tradition that can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. During our interviews in Dedeyazı Village of Malatya and Atalan and Göllüce villages of İzmir, villagers told us that in recent years they have successfully defended their common pasturelands against the encroachments of companies through collective action. They also drew parallels between these recent struggles with the land occupations in their villages half a century back.[12] Hence, the land struggles of the past have contemporary relevance in some rural regions of Turkey, a theme that should be explored through further research.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank the three reviewers for *NPT* for their helpful critiques and suggestions. We also thank Yaprak Aydın, Gizem Kaftan, Hüseyin Deniz Sert, and Canan Uçar for their assistance at different stages of this research.

Conflicts of interest. None.

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[12] Fırat (2017; 2021) also emphasizes this historical legacy in her works on the Göllüce Village.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2022.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Gürel, Burak, Küçük, Bermal, and Taş, Sercan (2022). Land occupation as a form of peasant struggle in Turkey, 1965–1980. *New Perspectives on Turkey* 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2022.3

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