This study is an attempt to shed light on the complex nature of civil war. It joins the debate on the need to shift the focus from macro-level analyses to the micro-level in examining the complex nature of violent conflict. Drawing on the PKK insurgency in Turkey, I aimed to dissect the multifaceted phenomenon of war by demonstrating that conflict can pave the way for positive sociopolitical changes.

Evidence from the Kurdish conflict both vindicates and challenges current findings outlined in the growing literature on the war-change spectrum. While the results presented in this book confirm previous studies that have drawn attention to armed conflict’s potential to engender greater political activism, they have also highlighted the key role ideology plays in providing gains in women’s rights and secularization.

As discussed in chapter 4, armed conflict helps articulate social, economic, and political grievances in a society and paves the way for the rise of an activist identity. These results resonate well with previous findings by scholars who have argued for the positive outcomes of conflict (Wood 2003; Bellows and Miguel 2009; Blattman 2009).

The argument and results presented also speak to the literature on civil war and democratization. While most existing studies rely on war characteristics, such as outcome, type, deadliness, and duration, to model post-civil-war democratization (Wantchekon 2004; Gurses and Mason 2008; Joshi 2010; Nilsson 2012), this study demonstrates that wartime experiences also help engender a democratic political culture at the individual level. War dynamics not only facilitate the rise of an activist identity char-
acterized by a willingness to participate but also help build a capacity for empathy. Additionally, it highlights the war–nation-building connection and its effects on creating a sense of belonging, a common consciousness that makes up an important part of political culture. Similar to what Tilly (1975, 1990) argued with regard to how war made states in Europe, civil war dynamics facilitate the rise of an ethnonational identity, or a “national unity” as “the sole background condition” of building and sustaining democracy (Rustow 1970, 350).

Nonetheless, as discussed at length in chapter 2, insurgent groups’ ideology is of significant importance in explaining changes in gender relations and religious decline. While ideology is often neglected in civil war studies, it can serve as a blueprint that guides and regulates insurgent groups’ behavior (Gutierrez-Sanin and Wood 2014). Ideology helps participants to make sense of their pain and suffering and provide a proper language with which individuals can express their anger, frustration, and desires.

Results presented in chapters 3 and 5 confirm the key role ideology plays in bringing about social change. The hypothesized effects of wartime experiences producing gender-equal attitudes and leading to noticeable secularization are largely conditioned by the insurgent group’s ideology. Thus, in line with some recent scholarly works that have highlighted the effects of leftist ideology on encouraging women’s participation in armed conflict (Huang 2016; Wood and Thomas 2017), the PKK’s ideology has had a noticeable impact on producing an environment conducive to more gender equal relations and resulting in an observable secularization among the Kurds.

Drawing on the estimated proportion of an insurgent group’s combat force made up of women, Wood and Thomas (2017) categorize all insurgent groups that were active between 1979 and 2009. Their measure of “female combatant prevalence” ranges from “0” (none/no evidence) to “1” (low, <5 percent), to “2” (moderate, 5 percent–20 percent) and to “3” (high, >20 percent) prevalence. Of the sixteen groups that received a “high” score, an outcome the authors ascribe to a leftist ideology, the PKK is the only major insurgent group from a majority Muslim society.

The emphasis on gender equality often sets insurrections espousing leftist views apart from other groups, Islamists in particular. An Islamist worldview often strives to preserve non-equalitarian gender views that turn “reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) ‘reality’” (Freire 2000, 37). The issue of women, as Talhami (1996, 123) examines at length using the case of Egypt (a country home to the Muslim Brotherhood, arguably
the largest and most influential Islamist movement in the world), is the Achilles’ heel of Islamism. This issue, Talhami writes, has become “the most objectionable feature of the Islamist blueprint for social change,” despite attempts by various Islamists to refute the charge of women’s unequal treatment in Islam.

Evidence from post-1979 Iran confirms the significance of ideology in facilitating or obstructing gains in women’s rights. The Iranian case resembles the aforementioned cases of Uganda and Rwanda, two cases that experienced significant gains in women’s rights, in that the Khomeini-led opposition won a decisive military victory against the shah’s regime. In contrast to Uganda and Rwanda, postrevolutionary Iran “encouraged motherhood and domesticity” as women’s important duties. The emphasis on Islamic law placed women “in an unequal position with regard to polygyny, divorce, and child custody” (Ramazani 1993, 411).

It was the death of Khomeini and the rise of a reformist government to power in the 1990s that created “a climate more receptive to reform on issues affecting women” (Ramazani 1993, 409). Harsh and extremist measures on women introduced by the revolutionary regime were progressively modified due partly to the “ politicization of women during the revolution and the resultant sense of empowerment” (Kazemi 2000, 465). This partial progress, made after the end of the Khomeini era characterized by strict enforcement of veiling and gender segregation, came under severe pressure with the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. With the ascendency of Ahmadinejad to power, conservative Islamic ideas toward women reappeared in the public discourse as the government “tried to discourage women’s public presence by getting them back to their natural role as mothers and nurturers” (Rezai-Rashti 2015, 479).

Thus, while wartime experiences seem to robustly predict greater support for political activism, as demonstrated in chapter 4, changes in attitudes toward women and the rise of a secular political culture appear to be primarily shaped by wartime experiences interacting with insurgent ideology. These findings point to the need to account for the contextual nature of the war-change relationship. They also call for greater scrutiny in analyzing the effects of exposure to violence during civil war on the “remarkable and miraculous” (Guo 2016) sociopolitical changes it produces.

Chapter 6 shifted gear toward the difficult question of peace after ethnic civil wars. It raised questions about the narrow definition of peace used in the extant literature, and it underlined the multifaceted nature of peace building, particularly after ethnic civil wars. Demonstrating the uneven
relation between the Kurds and the Turkish state, this chapter casts light on the political, economic, and social obstacles to building a sustainable and dignified peace.

Just as ethnic exclusion is “inimical to democratic principles” (Horowitz 1993, 25), the incorporation of the Kurds into the polity can greatly contribute to deepening and strengthening existing democratic institutions in Turkey. Kurdish inclusion through devolution of power can not only “help avert separatism” (Horowitz 1993, 36), but also build a pluralist democracy that can usher in changes for other smaller, “forgotten” ethnoreligious minorities throughout the region. In a country that once viewed non-Muslim religious minorities as an obstacle to its national unity and security, the Kurdish HDP nominated members of Aramaic-speaking Syriac (Assyrian) Christians and Yezidis, whose ancient religion draws heavily on Zoroastrianism and has become nearly extinct after centuries of oppression. The HDP’s Garo Paylan became one of the first Armenians to enter the Turkish parliament (Yackley 2015).

While the Kurdish PYD of Syria has embarked on establishing its own “relatively peaceful and democratic administration” with an emphasis on liberating Kurdish and non-Kurdish women (McKernan 2017), several Kurdish-run municipalities in Turkey introduced measures aimed at reconnecting with the region’s multireligious and multiethnic past. In an effort to resuscitate the nearly extinct Armenian and Assyrian cultures in cities where these two Christian communities once held sizeable populations, the Sur municipality of Diyarbakir (a bastion of Kurdish nationalism) helped reconstruct the Surp Giragos Church in 2011. Furthermore, it erected the Monument of Common Conscience in 2013 to raise awareness about the atrocities committed against these communities in the past and to incentivize a democratic coexistence commensurate with Mesopotamia’s diverse and rich history. It also began an initiative to offer services in four languages: Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian.

The Kurdish movement can also strengthen democratic institutions and culture in Turkey through its push for a gender-equal society. The real divide between Western and majority-Muslim countries lies in Western ideological support for equal rights and opportunities for women (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Fish (2002) ascribes the democratic deficit in Muslim societies to the “subordination of women.” Moghadam (2004, 3), highlighting the key role the empowerment of women plays in the quality of democracy, concludes that “women may need democracy in order to flourish, but the converse is also true: democracy needs women if it is to
be an inclusive, representative, and enduring system of government.” The Kurdish HDP has been described as “prowomen” and is credited for reaching out to a variety of minority groups excluded by other parties (Robins-Early 2015).

By the same token, the crackdown on the Kurdish movement carries the risk of undoing the progress made toward gender equality and “threatens a haven of gender equality built by Kurds . . . in a region where patriarchy is generally the rule” (Nordland 2016). Moreover, it is likely to result in reversing the sociopolitical environment that allowed for having a meaningful debate on how to reconcile the region’s bloody past. In the aftermath of removing dozens of elected Kurdish mayors, the state-appointed trustee replaced the sign on the Sur municipal building (in the above-mentioned district of Diyarbakir that was written in four languages and emphasized the multireligious and multiethnic past of the city) with a Turkish flag.3

The denial of the Kurdish reality or the Turkish state’s insistence on the use of military force to deal with Kurdish opposition in Turkey and beyond carries serious risks for further bloodshed and chaos. As Wadie Jwaideh (2006, xvii) prophetically put it in the late 1950s, “the Kurds have come to play an increasingly significant role in Middle Eastern affairs. Their behavior is one of the most important factors in the future stability and security not only of the Kurdish-inhabited countries, but of the entire Middle East.” He concludes that “no major country interested in the Middle East can afford to ignore the Kurdish problem or to avoid the formulation of a Kurdish policy as part of its overall Middle Eastern policy” (295).

The sheer size of the Kurds and the lands they inhabit; the division of them between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria; the collapse of state authorities in Syria and Iraq, which has empowered the Kurdish groups in these countries; and the emergence of Kurds in the Middle East as an effective on-the-ground partner in the fight against Islamic radicalism complicate the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and call for a comprehensive solution to the Kurdish question. As Barkey and Fuller (1997) observe, since the Turkish state has almost always had the initiative, much of the onus of bringing about a sustainable peace is on the Turkish state. In the absence of a real democratic compromise, the situation will most likely result in a weakened state followed by a fractured society and country.