In the late 1990s, Kurdish towns witnessed the emergence of a radical youth movement. This movement redefined the space of politics as well as the meaning of the political not only in Kurdistan, but the country more broadly. Kurdish youth took to the streets, clashed with the police on a daily basis, and consequently turned the streets into political spaces. Using Molotov cocktails, stones and fireworks, they rendered their neighborhoods and even entire towns temporarily inaccessible to the Turkish state. The formation of Revolutionary Patriotic Youth Movement (YDG-H) in 2013 marked the formal recognition of the role of the youth in the Kurdish movement as self-defense units. It also marked the expansion and transformation of the novel set of political tactics youth began experimenting with since the late 1990s. One year later, the youth in Cizre dug deep trenches along the entrances to their neighborhoods and stood guard with weapons to prevent the police from entering and arresting them. These trenches suddenly became a symbol of freedom for Kurds as well as an immense challenge to the state’s authority over space. Their methods quickly spread to countless other Kurdish towns in which youth politics have become literally and figuratively entrenched. The state used the trenches as a pretext to launch massive military operations, surrounding towns with tanks, bombing neighborhoods for months.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Cizre, I first analyze what politics does in youth’s lives. What does actually happen at the moment of demonstrations? What do the youth experience during the demonstrations? How does this experience transform the ways in which they act, see, understand and situate themselves in relation to each other and the Kurdish community? Then, I examine the transformation of the Kurdish youth movement over time, namely their transition from “stone-throwing children” to the self-defense units in Cizre and elsewhere. I look at the processes leading to the debut of YDG-H and the trenches and explore how they transformed youth’s spatial politics as well as their relation to the Kurdish community and movement at large.