

DIASPORA POLITICS AND GERMANY'S KURDISH QUESTION

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Introduction¹

The political sway of diaspora groups has increased over the last few decades due to the rise of a new pattern of conflict, the rapid increase of the number of war refugees and the heightened speed of communication and mobility (Demmers 2002: 86). A number of other factors have also played a role, such as the new policies pursued by host countries in terms of integrating immigrants by encouraging multiculturalism rather than through assimilation, or the home states' own interest in creating expatriate communities abroad (Safran 1991, Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). These changes paved the way for the diaspora groups to become one of the most influential non-state actors in the global arena and through their efforts; conflicts in today's world are no longer confined to within the homeland's borders as they diffuse to the diasporic space.

The Kurdish Question is an apt case for the diffusion of a conflict situation outside nation-state's borders, as it is one of the many conflicts in the world which reveals itself in local, regional and transnational contexts. For instance, for a long time, it became the question used to bargain between the European Union and Turkey however it was also a matter for debate in many European Union member states. Among them, Germany might be considered as the country that has been affected the most from the spatial diffusion of Turkey's internal conflicts. Germany has received the highest number of Kurdish and Turkish migrants in Europe and, therefore, their political activism and contentions between them has become highly visible in the German public sphere. It witnessed the rise of Kurdish nationalism in various forms and perceived the evolution of Kurdish mobilisation on its soil as a "*domestic security problem*" as a combination of its general approach to the Kurdish Question as well as due to the confrontational methods utilised by the Kurdish diaspora especially during the 1990s.

¹ This paper was presented at the "Diasporas and Security" workshop at the University of Kent on Dec 6, 2013 and at the "Diasporas and International Relations" workshop at the University of Warwick. The author thanks the participants for their valuable comments. The author also wants to acknowledge the valuable feedback from her colleagues Dr. Vera Eccarius-Kelly and Francis O'Connor.

This paper analyses how the Kurdish diaspora² transnationalised the Kurdish cause in the German context. The idea is to show that there is no abiding Kurdish Question that all of the European countries experience invariably, and instead each host country has its own authentic puzzle that has to do with the conflict in Turkey. The Kurdish conflict did not just randomly “spill over” to Germany, but there is a reason why the Kurdish diaspora has chosen certain strategies from a grand repertoire of actions. It is argued that the tactics of the Kurdish Diaspora, Germany’s relations with Turkey, Germany’s approach to the Kurdish migrants as well as the course of events back in Turkey got Germany tangled in its own Kurdish Question and compelled it to form its own approach to its very own Kurdish Question. In other words, as the Kurdish diaspora directly contested the German state in the 1990s and applied unconventional methods in order to pursue its goals, the Kurdish Question in Germany turned into a domestic security concern from “one of Turkey’s internal problems.” The arguments of this paper are largely based on the interviews that the author conducted with Kurdish diaspora activists in Germany as well as in other European countries between 2008 and 2013.³

Since the 1990s, the Kurdish movement has been criminalised in Germany and its political opportunities were significantly limited. After the capture of Ocalan, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)⁴ and consequently the diaspora went through significant changes in their agenda and opted to challenge the idea that they constitute a security issue for their host states. This new approach of tailoring strategies according to the new dynamics occurred gradually rather than instantly. During this transition period the diaspora followed the pattern of “a dual strategy to remain relevant in the European context” (Eccarius-Kelly 2008) and swapped between conventional and

² As the Kurdish diaspora is heterogeneous and there are many actors and individuals involved in diaspora politics, it is necessary to state that this paper solely focuses on the diaspora activities that were in line with the PKK ideology. The PKK has the largest recruitment rate within the Kurdish diaspora and it is the dominant Kurdish movement which has significant mass support. I refer to the PKK supporting groups when I use the Kurdish Diaspora unless stated otherwise in a different context.

³ The interviews were conducted in Sweden and Germany as part of my PhD research at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, between 2008 and 2012. Other interviews in Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France were conducted during my employment as postdoctoral fellow, and member of the ERC Project “Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty” lead by Dr. Maria Koinova at the University of Warwick between 2012 and 2013.

⁴ The PKK was founded in 1978 by a number of Kurdish activists in Turkey. It started an armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984 with the aim of forming a separate Kurdish state. The organisation had modified its agenda over the years and currently opts for regional autonomy.

unconventional methods. Currently, the diaspora is leaning more and more towards less confrontational methods and this time they are choosing repertoires that contest the criminalisation of the movement within Germany. There is also a significant discursive change that demonstrates that the Kurds now perceive themselves as citizens or residents of Germany, and are thus a part of German society and challenging the policy makers in terms of equal citizenship and opportunity frameworks.

Diffusion of Homeland Conflicts to the Diasporic Space

Diasporas carry their cause to the political scenes of the host countries, which is termed by some scholars as *diffusion of domestic politics* (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006), *conflict import* (Feron 2012, Pirkkalainen & Abdile 2009, and Baser 2012), *transfer of clandestine political resistance networks* (Eccarius-Kelly 2002) or *transnationalisation of homeland conflicts* (Van Bruinessen 2000). The diffusion of conflicts by migration flows is not a new phenomenon, however scholars agree that it has become much more visible, durable and frequent during the last couple of decades. Migrants, refugees and exiles searched for justice or some kind of closure outside the borders of their homeland before the social scientists decided to recirculate the concept of diaspora back to the literature. What makes the issue different today is perhaps the post 9-11 discourse which tended to analyse the activities of diaspora groups from a securitisation angle (Faist 2005) and to investigate their constructive and destructive contributions and what motivates them to choose one of these ends (Brinkerhoff 2008: 68). Many scholars, policy makers as well as the media have approached the activism of diaspora groups and their non-transparent relations with their homelands as a potential security threat for the country of residence. The common perception in the West was that “diasporas are dangerous insofar as they bring with them the homeland conflict and thereby threaten the social cohesion of those countries where they eventually settle” (Pirkkalainen & Abdile 2009: 22). In particular, diasporas which are coming from conflict zones and mobilised for homeland politics came under the surveillance of the host states.

What the policy makers and the media failed to identify with this new phenomenon was that the homeland conflicts inherently spill over to the transnational space, however they are not an exact reflection of the conflict that one can observe in their home country. As Soysal (1994: 84) highlights, “migrants arrive to the hostland with an organisational repertoire of their own, however their practices acquire new forms and characteristics

through interaction with host polity institutions.” Tensions between rival groups may also be reproduced in different forms in the host country and conflict dynamics take on a different shape according to the new environment, which Feron (2012: 71) calls the “autonomization” of diasporic behaviour. The autonomization process creates different transnationalization patterns in each host country and “transnational processes are bounded by nation states” (Nell 2008: 17). Furthermore, the root causes of what created the homeland conflicts do not disappear into thin air when migrants cross national borders. Hierarchies, inequalities and imbalanced power relations are recreated in different shapes and forms in the host country by a combination of factors.

Diasporas operate in a host country that might work both as a constraint or facilitator to their activities (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006). It is thus essential to talk about the hostland, its migrant incorporation policies, and the political opportunity structures (POS) that it grants to the diaspora member, all of which affect the ability of diasporas to function as interest groups and to target policy change (Esman 1986: 338). How does the openness or closure of structures affect the claims-making of transnational groups? First, the openness of the POS in a host country may enable the transnational migrant communities to form diasporic organisations easily. Since mobilisation is a key factor for such organisations, the openness of the system may facilitate the recruitment of members by making it possible to use the political arenas to draw attention to the diaspora’s cause from both the members of the same ethnic/religious/cultural group as well as the policy makers in the host country. They may easily distribute flyers, organise seminars, deliver speeches, hold protests, or use diaspora associations for propaganda. On the other hand, if the system is closed in terms of political opportunity structures, it might not facilitate the organisational procedure of diaspora formation but it could offer more incentives to members of immigrant communities to get together and mobilise if they were suppressed in the host country (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003, Smith 2007, Baser & Swain 2008). However, political opportunity structures in the host countries, despite helping us a great deal with understanding the host country context, cannot solely explain the diversity of diaspora mobilisation in different contexts and they are not the only factor that determines the repertoires of actions that a diaspora group opts to operationalise. The foreign policy priorities of the host country, as well as its relations with the homeland, can cause a significant level of diversity and play an important role when it comes to creating manoeuvre spaces for the diaspora mobilisation (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006).

Diasporas are rational actors and they perform cost-benefit calculations while determining their agenda and strategies that will help them to pursue their goals (Esman 1986). They prioritise certain issues over others, while considering the circumstances in the host country as well as those in the home country. Their actions can also *limit or enhance* the political opportunities that they are given in a specific host country. They are non-state actors that are trying to open up a field for themselves between different actors that consist of nation states and international organisations. Diaspora elites may choose different patterns of actions at different times in different settings.

Germany's Kurdish Question

The Kurdish diaspora in Germany is not a homogenous entity. It comprises labour migrants, students, asylum-seekers, refugees, exiled intellectuals and their families. Kurdish migration to Germany started with the bilateral labour migration agreements between Turkey and Germany at the beginning of the 1960s, but the profile of the migrants changed significantly during the mid-1970s and especially at the end of the 1980s with the arrival of asylum seekers who were leaving Turkey due to political chaos and the coup in 1980.⁵ The establishment of ethnic organisations naturally followed the waves of Kurdish migration and gained a political touch with the escalation of the conflict in Turkey. Before the mid-1980s, there were Kurdish diaspora organisations in Europe that contributed to the Kurdish movement in various ways, such as KOMKAR (The Association for Kurdish Workers for Kurdistan); however these could not be described as mass movements. During the 1990s the PKK became the most dominant Kurdish movement in Europe and the activities of pro-PKK Kurdish organisations in Europe surpassed those of earlier groups.

The PKK recognised the importance of the Kurdish diaspora and sent members to Germany to recruit supporters for their cause (van Bruinessen 1999). The labour migrants became politically active and were mobilised, in part, as a result of the political

⁵ Whilst no recent or reliable census of the Kurdish population in Europe has been conducted, the most widely accepted estimates are that there are more than one million Kurds dispersed throughout Western Europe, of which approximately 1 million live in Germany.

opportunities, which fostered a process of self-discovery in political terms (Leggewie 1996: 79, Van Bruinessen 2000). Considering the non-existent freedom of speech in Turkey right after the coup in 1980, Germany has offered great opportunities for the Kurds to express their claims, mobilise other Kurds who lacked a politicised form of awareness about their identity, and to organise certain party lines which were banned in Turkey. There was no torture and no arrest, or prosecution for openly stating their identity. However, there were other problems, which the Kurdish diaspora members gradually became aware of: Germany was not Turkey but their actions were still constrained, this time by the laws and state structures of another nation-state. “Germany was only partially open to immigrant constituents - predominantly to those who have German citizenship” (Eccarius-Kelly 2008) and the German system was significantly closed to the political claims of the migrants who were not even perceived as permanent residents in Germany. In the beginning, the German authorities perceived the Kurds as a sub-group of Turkish immigrants and initially paid little attention to their cause. At that time German politicians were hesitant to describe Germany as an immigration country and there was no incentive to invest in an integration policy, which would be tailored according to the needs and diversity of immigrants. Because the Kurds arrived in Germany as ‘Turkish citizens’, they were treated as such by the German authorities. Thus, in addition to struggling to overcome discrimination and xenophobia in Europe, they had to fight for ethno-cultural recognition as ‘Kurds’. Due to strict citizenship policies in Germany, the lack of accession or partnership to the German society, the lack of official recognition of their identity as a separate ethnic identity from Turks, Persians or Arabs, closed lobby channels to influence policy change in Germany placed them under different power relations and hierarchies in a different society: this time new policies were needed that considered their status as migrants or asylum seekers as well as new strategies to moderate between German-Turkish relations.

The 1990s symbolise the years when the armed clashes between the PKK and the Turkish army reached their peak in Turkey. Between 1984 and 1999, an unknown number of victims were killed (or disappeared) by “mystery” killings that have been attributed to the Turkish police, intelligence, gendarmerie and village guards. All in all, the clashes between the Turkish Army and the PKK caused more than 50,000 deaths (accompanied by disappearances). There were also thousands of internally displaced people as a result

of the deportations of the Kurdish population from their villages.⁶ These systematic deportations are of utmost importance to understand the migration flows to Europe. The PKK established its hegemony over the Kurdish movement both at home and abroad and turned itself into a mass movement.

Despite the fact that there were a few politicians from the leftist circles which showed interest in the Kurdish issue, Germany often opted for a cautious approach towards the migrants from Turkey and their political activism. The German population also did not welcome the homeland-oriented political activities of its migrant communities. Even in 1982, the issue of *Ausländerextremismus (Foreigners Extremism)* was discussed in the Bundestag with regards to the danger of these organisations posing a threat to German domestic security (Chapin 1996). In a survey conducted in 1985, when violent events were relatively rare compared to the 1990s, many Germans declared that they were disturbed by the immigrant groups' activities related to homeland-politics and they were concerned by the Turkish-Kurdish contentions (ibid). Even before Kurdish political activism reached their peak, German police arrested many Kurdish activists that sympathised with the PKK in 1988. Their trials lasted until 1994 and they were called "Dusseldorf Trials." For many Kurds, this was "the first sign that Germany would ally with Turkey on this matter and they had to struggle with both states on German soil."⁷

In the beginning of the 1990s, PKK activities became much more visible in Germany due to clashes between the Grey Wolves (Turkish fascist groups) and the PKK supporters, and among different fragments of the Kurdish nationalist groups in the diaspora, which were impossible for German authorities to ignore (Leggewie 1996: 79, Mushaben 2008: 154). There were also fights among rival Kurdish groups in Germany, gradually establishing the basis for German authorities to perceive the PKK as a criminal organisation. According to Ucarer and Lyon, the hostility that caused trouble for German administrators was also related to the rivalry between the PKK and KOMKAR, which claimed the lives of some Kurdish activists and left others injured in Germany and elsewhere (Ucarer & Lyon 2001: 937). As a result of rising violent events, the German authorities began to consider outlawing the PKK. They frequently

⁶ See for example related report of the Human Rights Watch, 1993.
<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/TURKEY933.PDF>

⁷ Interview with a Kurdish journalist who worked for Kurdish TV channel MED-TV and that is now residing in Berlin, May 2013.

expressed their determination to prevent the spill over of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict to Germany by any means (Leggewie 1996: 79).

In 1992 the PKK declared Germany to be its “*second enemy*” after Turkey, due to its relations and military cooperation with the Turkish state. The targeting of German tourists in Turkey, as well as damaging Turkish and German property finally paved the way for the *official* criminalisation of the organisation (Ögelman et al. 2002: 150). As a result of these threats and the occupation of the Turkish Consulate in Munich⁸, Germany prohibited the PKK and banned its activities in November 1993.⁹ However, this ban only caused further frustration and anger towards the German state. Rather than stopping the protests and the hostility associated with them, the ban was followed by additional protests and escalating Kurdish activism in Germany (Ucarer & Lyon 2001: 935).

The Kurdish activists who were interviewed for this research agree that the 1990s in particular were highly crucial for the Kurdish diaspora. That was the time when the Kurds were forcefully deported from their villages in south-eastern Turkey due to accusations of helping the PKK fighters. There were extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances. Many highlighted the tactics that were used by the Kurdish diaspora and they said they were very much dependent on the developments mentioned above. According to the president of a Kurdish organisation, which is close to the PKK line in Berlin, the diaspora aimed at two important goals at that time: *visibility and media attention* which would bring recognition of their ethnic identity and awareness about their situation back home. Drawing from the testimonies of other interviewees, it can be said that the Kurdish activists and the organisations, which were in line with the PKK’s ideology, had three main strategies during that time. Initially they opted to outbid their rivals during the 1990s. They gave first priority initially to establish hegemony, make the PKK accepted and legitimised and lastly to heighten the Turkish-Kurdish divide in order

⁸ Kurdish activists invaded the Turkish Consulate in Munich and took hostages on 25 June 1993.

⁹ In January 1998, the German authorities announced that the PKK was no longer listed as a terrorist organisation but that it is instead a criminal organisation due to its involvement with drug trafficking, murder, money laundering, etc. However, the PKK was put on the terrorism list once again following the decision of the EU in 2002. For more information see: United States Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1997 - Germany*, 1 April 1998, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/46810713c.html>.

to increase ethnic awareness among the Kurds who initially did not show interest in the Kurdish cause. Secondly, they were very much aware of the German-Turkish trade agreements, especially with regards to military equipment. Both of these countries were NATO members and had a very similar approach to international security matters. Therefore, the diaspora elite knew that they would have to contest both states in order to open up a sphere of influence for themselves. Thirdly, the diaspora elite opted for more confrontational matters despite the criminalisation of the movement, since at that time they wanted international as well as local attention for the Kurdish issue in general, which had more priority on their agenda.

Duran Kalkan, who is one of the leading members of the PKK cadre and who was arrested and tried at Dusseldorf Trials, explains the strategies of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany at that time as the following: “effective, active and radical” however “very well organized and controlled.” According to him, the actions of the diaspora were radical because the PKK at that time had started “a total war” and “a counter-movement” to the states which collaborate with Turkey in terms of oppression of the Kurdish people. He states that the Kurdish people were “angry” with Germany because they see the Dusseldorf Trials, the lack of rights and recognition as well as arbitrary arrests and criminalisation as part of an “international conspiracy” against the Kurds and Germany was considered as the center of this. Kalkan also adds that the German authorities witnessed that the Kurdish movement was becoming stronger and stronger and they wanted to stultify this “before it is too late.”¹⁰ The president of the Ahmet Kaya Cultural Center in Paris (a Kurdish diaspora organisation), during our interview, compared the situation in France and Germany and added that the German system was closed to lobby activities and for the Kurds it was more important to stop the arms trade between the two countries rather than creating a positive image for the Kurds. When asked if there are any regrets among the elite circles of the Kurdish diaspora about these strategies, he said such tactics were inevitable.

Among the interviewees, there were some diaspora members who supported the PKK but still found these violent tactics to be improper. For the other Kurdish diaspora groups, which were not in line with the PKK, the ban still caused dismay and

¹⁰ “Kalkan: Almanya’daki PKK Yasagi Derin Turk-Alman Iliskilerine Dayaniyor”, <http://www.yeniulkehaber.com/Detay.aspx?gn=2336>

frustration. Interviewees from these organisations, such as KOMKAR, argue that the PKK and the diaspora members who supported their actions brought the criminalisation of the movement but it not only badly affected the PKK but also other Kurdish organisations which were outbid by the PKK.¹¹ According to them, their lobby channels were also closed with the 1993 decision of the German court and the PKK was also to blame for this result. The PKK's activities in Germany, as well as inter-ethnic encounters with Turkish nationalists, also played a part in the rise of xenophobia against "foreigners". Right-wing politicians in particular used these events as an excuse to accuse immigrants of destabilising Germany and threatening the security of the German people. The Kurdish question is thus lumped in with "immigration debates" and has damaged opportunity structures for both Turkish and Kurdish migrants in Germany in general.

The German police had actively hunted the PKK cadre and extradited PKK militants to Turkey – despite being caught on German territory. The government's frequent declarations about possible deportations and arrests had an impact on Kurdish activists and, as Leggewie pointed out, the Kurdish population in Germany felt victimised by German domestic and foreign policy. Diaspora members decided to protest the 1993 ban on the PKK in Germany in several cities during the 1994 Newroz festivities; however they were banned in Germany due to the expectation that there would be clashes with the police. Kurds protested these interdictions and occupied highways in several places in Germany. There were clashes with the police that ended up around 1,000 diaspora members being arrested after the protests. After that event, this issue was addressed in Bundestag by the then Foreign Minister Kinkel when he said: "To all the Kurds living in Germany: Do not bring your conflicts to Germany, and do not think that violence is the way to realise legitimate political aims" (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 74). This kind of rhetoric was used many times by several politicians from various political parties to address the Kurds regarding their "inappropriate behaviour" in Germany. The PKK contested the German state, which was deemed unacceptable in the hostland's political and social framework and by doing that it also limited its own discursive opportunities in Germany.

¹¹ Interview with KOMKAR Representative in Berlin, May 2013.

German–Turkish trade relations, especially in terms of military equipment, raised serious debates in German politics and caused strong reactions among the Kurdish community in Germany. After various Kurdish protests Germany eventually ceased to sell military equipment to Turkey, after pressure from the Green Party. This clearly showed what diaspora politics and activities are capable of accomplishing (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 43–44). Considering the fact that “diasporas seldom make a government adopt a policy unless that policy is also in the interest of the country” (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006: 10), this can be considered as a great achievement. Unsurprisingly, the Turkish state saw this as German interference in internal affairs and accused the country of caving in under the PKK’s threats. While Kurdish activists protested against Germany, Turkey criticised Germany for turning a blind eye to the PKK’s clandestine activities, even after the ban, and for not being serious enough about the PKK’s transnational mobilisation. It is argued that German authorities calculated every possibility and wanted to act for German interests, while at the same time retaining good relations with Turkey. Despite efforts to juggle the expectations of both the PKK followers and the Turkish state, in the end Germany could not please both sides.

The most well-known intense events organised by PKK activists happened right after the capture of Öcalan in 1999. Kurdish protesters organised an invasion of the Israeli embassy¹² in Berlin, which was resisted by the Israeli security guards. In the end, three Kurdish protestors were killed and others were injured. After the events, the German authorities made declarations stating that if PKK sympathisers continued to act violently, they would be deported.¹³ The German Interior Minister of that time, Otto Schily warned that the government would take harsh measures if they do not follow the rules of law in Germany and added that the Kurdish conflict does not belong to Germany (quoted in Eccarius-Kelly 2002: 93). This was a sign that the Kurds who sympathized with the PKK in the diaspora were perceived as “terrorists or criminals” (ibid.). There were violent mass demonstrations throughout Germany, as well as

¹² As the Washington Post reported: “Kurdish protesters invaded the Israeli Embassy on February 1999, right after the capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. The confrontation occurred as PKK supporters focused their wrath on Israel following unconfirmed news reports that Israeli intelligence officials helped Turkey track down and capture him”, *Washington Post*, 18 February 1999. Last access 12 June 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/feb99/kurds18.htm>

¹³ “Germany Warns Öcalan Supporters”, *BBC News*, 18 February 1999. Last access 8 June 2012. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/281670.stm>

incidents of hunger striking and self-immolation that concerned the German authorities. According to an interviewee who participated in this protest and lost a friend to the shootings of the Israeli security guards, what happened was a “desperate act” and it shows the psychological state of mind of the Kurds at that time. He says that there was a feeling of “helplessness” and “uncertainty about the future” and the frustration revealed itself in different forms. He states:

“How else can you explain burning yourself to death when you are just 15 years old? [...] Nobody tells you ‘go and attack here or there’ but everything happened spontaneously. [...] you go and protest but no one can predict what will happen there. If you feel whacked, you can do anything. [...] The message was ‘don’t ignore us.’”

Pressured by the Turkish state and its own security concerns, Germany banned ROJ TV in 2008, a Kurdish TV channel that airs clips from the guerrilla war in the mountains. As a result of these events, the Kurdish leaders of United Communities of Kurdistan issued an open threat against Germany, an ultimatum to the Merkel government, demanding that it puts an end to its “hostile policies against the Kurdish people and their liberation movement”.¹⁴ In 2008, in reaction to German measures, PKK militants seized three German climbers from their camp on Mount Ararat’s eastern Agri province in Turkey. They made the following statement: “The German tourists will not be released unless the German state announces that it has given up its hostile policies against the Kurdish people and the PKK”, which was published by the PKK’s own media agencies. The statement continued: “Their kidnap was a reaction to what Germany is doing. We urge the German government to undertake a new policy towards the Kurds”.¹⁵ According to Eccarius-Kelly (2008), this was an attempt to demonstrate the relevancy and strength of the PKK leadership towards Germany’s policies on the PKK. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble stated that Germany would not give in to blackmail. Chancellor

¹⁴ “Germany becomes a target of the Kurdish PKK”, *Der Spiegel*, 15 July 2008. Last access 21 May 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,566033,00.html>

¹⁵ “PKK Sets German Hostage Demands”, *BBC News*, 10 July 2008. Last access 30 May 2012. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7500282.stm>, “PKK: German hostages to be freed if Turkey ends operations”, 14 July 2008. Last access 10 June 2012. <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3484125,00.html>

Angela Merkel made a call to the kidnappers to release the hostages.¹⁶ After being kept hostage for one week, the climbers were released. Although this event had nothing to do with the Kurdish diaspora per se, it still contributed to the negative public opinion towards the Kurdish migrants and their activism in Germany. It also showed very clearly that the Kurdish Question was also Germany's Question and that the political developments in Turkey and Europe were intertwined.

During the last decade, Kurdish organisations affiliated to the PKK in Germany have been declaring their intention to establish advocacy groups and for civil society organisations to put forth their demands. However, the German authorities still perceive Kurdish activism to be a potential threat to public welfare. The last three Annual Reports on the Protection of the Constitution by the Federal Ministry of Interior argue that the PKK continues to advocate the collection of a "revolutionary tax" as well as recruiting second-generation members and organising violent attacks against Turkish targets in Germany. The interviewees from various Kurdish diaspora organisations stated that they do not find the above-mentioned reports reliable and they argue that there is no evidence to back up the claims.

Kurdish Diaspora's New Outlook in Germany

According to Eccarius-Kelly (2002), "with the arrest of Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) leader Ocalan in February 1999, Kurdish activists in exile modified their structural, organizational, and strategic operations to adjust to a new political reality. Abandoning the original goal of an independent Kurdistan, activists instead pursued national minority rights in Turkey." This tactical change undoubtedly reflected itself in the diaspora's behaviour as the diaspora elite started to work on "finding common ground with host-country policy makers" (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006: 8). This structural transformation was certainly reflected in the Kurdish diaspora which sympathised with the organisation's ideology and agenda. The transition was not easy. There has been the swapping of different methods, confrontational and non-confrontational strategies and sometimes the use of a dual agenda which uses these methods interchangeably to reach certain aims. The Kurdish diaspora became active in local, national and supranational

¹⁶ "Germany becomes a target of the Kurdish PKK", *Der Spiegel*, 15 July 2008. Last access 30 May 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,566033,00.html>

levels by forming various associations that deal with the issues of women, youth and children as well as associations which work as advocacy networks. The mobilisation process became less militant and more civil society natured which used official channels to influence policy makers. Especially after the early 2000s, it is possible to see such a trend where the agenda of the Kurdish diaspora put homeland and hostland politics in an alloy. This change in strategy demonstrates that diaspora politics are circumstantial and they are not static throughout the diverse conflict cycles.

Currently, the Kurdish Question in Turkey is not resolved. There is a so-called “peace process” that is initiated by the official negotiations between the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Ocalan and the Turkish Intelligence Service officials. The PKK has declared a cease-fire and there are expectations for substantial reforms which could be sustained by constitutional change. The Kurdish activists and politicians have more opportunity for their claims-making in Turkey compared to the situation in the 1990s, however there is still no resolution and the Kurds and their rights are still being oppressed in Turkey. Turkey is playing big in the Middle East in order to rise as a role model for other countries and uses its soft-power to gain a leadership role in the region. Current developments in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria have also been pushing Turkey to resolve its Kurdish Question as soon as possible. In light of these developments, the necessity to adapt to changing dynamics in the region also pushes the diaspora for a policy change.

In the 1990s the aim of the Kurdish diaspora was to sustain visibility and media attention towards the Kurdish situation in Turkey. As Kendal Nezan, the head of the Kurdish Institute in Paris mentioned¹⁷, the diaspora acted as “a loudspeaker” for the Kurds in Turkey to make their voice heard in Europe and elsewhere. It can be said that currently, the centre of gravity of Kurdish politics has returned to the core, namely Turkish Kurdistan, again and the diaspora has changed its priorities accordingly. When one looks at the protest events and activities of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany today, it can be said that two main agendas come to the fore: *removing the PKK from the terrorism list and demanding equal citizenship rights in Germany as citizens/residents of Germany.*

¹⁷ Interview with Kendal Nezan, Paris Kurdish Institute, November 2013.

Firstly, it can be said that the diaspora elites realized that stateless diasporas linked to legitimized leaders and organizations are more likely to influence policy change than diasporas which are de-legitimized or outlawed in the international arena (Smith 2007: 12). The criminalisation of the Kurdish movement in Germany had serious consequences for the members of the Kurdish diaspora. There had been cases where Kurdish activists who joined protest events in support of the PKK were denied German citizenship once they applied on the grounds that they support a terrorist organization.¹⁸ Moreover, some of the interviewees also mentioned that their actions are monitored by the German intelligence, their phone calls and properties are bugged and they are constantly under surveillance which makes them feel frustrated as they feel like they are treated as potential criminals. According to the leader of one of the largest Kurdish organisations in Berlin, criminalisation of the movement prevents many Kurds from joining the organisations as they believe that they will be labelled as “supporters of terrorism.” For the Kurdish diaspora elite in Germany, contesting the dominant German discourse about the PKK - which is highly influenced by the Turkish discourse - is at the top of their agenda. The aim is to show that the Kurdish movement is not a security threat to Germany and it should be treated as an interlocutor while Germany as well as the EU engages in the resolution of the Kurdish Question in the Middle East.

There have been petitions, sit-ins and mass protests to realise this aim. For instance, recently on 16 November 2013 (20th anniversary of the PKK ban), there has been a mass protest which also included representatives of Kurdish Diasporas from France and the Netherlands with the aim of protesting the ban on the PKK. Many NGOs, German politicians and other activists joined the protest in support of the Kurdish diaspora.¹⁹ The dominant discourse during the protests was not about the situation in Turkey but about the lack of democracy on how Germany approaches its Kurdish citizens and residents. The claims were framed within the framework of democratic rights and equal citizenship within Germany’s borders.

Secondly, the Kurdish migrants in Germany constitute the largest Kurdish diaspora in Europe and many of them do not plan to return to Turkey at this point. There are young generations who are born in Germany and the diaspora is multi-layered in many ways.

¹⁸ Interview with Metin Incesu at the Kurdische Zentrum NAVEND, Bonn, August 2011.

¹⁹ “Berlin’de PKK Yasagi Kalksin Gosterisi”, 15 November 2013. Last access 20 March 2014, <http://www.avrupa-postasi.com/almanya/berlinde-pkk-yasagi-kalksin-gosterisi-h91523.html>

Fifty years since the first migration flows started, the Kurds started to perceive themselves as shareholders in German society. They increasingly started to question their equal citizenship rights. During the interviews, young Kurds were no longer comparing their situation to Turkey but instead compared themselves with other ethnic minorities in Germany and asked, “Why am I, as a Germany-born Kurd, not equal to a Turk who is born here as well? Why is my identity not being recognised?” Germany’s strict citizenship policies, hardships such as the language test and long bureaucratic procedures and Germany’s lukewarm approach to multiculturalism are all questioned in the new Kurdish diaspora discourse more than ever.

Kurdish organisations which are not in the line of the PKK have already campaigned about recognition of the Kurdish identity as a separate ethnic identity in Germany starting from the 1980s.²⁰ Recently, one can see that the PKK sympathising organisations have also been taking the lead in this regard. YEKKOM organised a wide-ranging petition campaign and collected more than 70,000 signatures (supported by more than 200 Kurdish organisations) for the official recognition of Kurdish identity by Bundestag. They see this attempt to be important as it will give them some fundamental cultural rights in Germany, will enable them to separate their cultural spheres from Turkish, Arabic and Persian influence and de-criminalise their ethnic identity. The petition was supported by many NGOs and other ethno-national diaspora groups. Kurds are now questioning their own status in Germany and contesting the German perspective of them as a security threat. They try to communicate that there was a reason the diaspora and the PKK acted in a certain way and now they give a clear signal that they want to be a legitimate non-state actor in the international arena as well as a legitimate actor in the resolution process in the Middle East.

Concluding Remarks

The Kurdish Question is not just Turkey’s problem. It went beyond Turkish borders long ago: now it is a concern for Europe and for each European country that has Turkish and Kurdish migrants. This does not by any means suggest that the migrants are responsible for the reproduction of the conflict; on the contrary, it is the opportunities and the constraints in the home and host states that enable or prevent the reproduction of the

²⁰ Interview with KOMKAR Representative, Berlin, December 2010.

dynamics that cause tension between ethnic groups, as well as between ethnic groups and the states that try to contest their sovereignty. In Germany, the capacity of Kurdish organisations or individual activists to act is very much limited by German policy, which calculates its moves towards its own interests and its relations with Turkey. This is a further reason why the Kurds, until very recently, opted for confrontational participation which ultimately limited their diaspora spaces even more.

The Kurdish diaspora perceives Germany as an ally of Turkey and in this regard another state that is hostile towards the Kurds. German authorities and politicians in return perceive the existence of prolific Kurdish activism on their soil as a threat to the security and welfare of the German society. Germany, throughout the last few decades, has realised that it needs to form its own Kurdish policy as its soil is home to nearly one million Kurds today. It has to sustain a balance between its diplomatic relations with Turkey and its relations with its own citizens/residents within its borders. Even this realisation shows that the Kurdish diaspora managed to push a host country to revise its priorities and to link its foreign and domestic policies together.

Since the capture of Ocalan, the Kurdish diaspora has consistently underlined the fact that they are in favour of dialogue and negotiation. How the Kurdish Question in Germany will evolve depends on various factors such as the current peace process in Turkey and Germany's potential to shift its approach towards a more inclusive one. In the meantime, the Kurdish diaspora will tailor an updated agenda according to the ever-changing dynamics and as it learnt to juggle between the two states and in the international arena, it will ascend as an ever-rising non-state actor in the political arena.

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