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# Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey: From the Denial of Kurds to Peaceful Co-existence?

# 10

Ayşe Betül Çelik

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## Kurdish Chapter Summary

In this chapter the author describes the Kurds as a heterogeneous minority group with shared cultural identity, yet differing religions and languages. This group is estimated to comprise 15–20% of the current population of Turkey. Conflict traces back to the Ottoman Empire, but takes a more ethnic character after the formation of the Turkish state, reaching a peak after 1984. The continuing conflicts, resolution attempts, and suggestions for a peaceful future are outlined.

Significant acts of rebellion over the last hundred years of conflict are delineated along with the underlying causal factors including nationalism, attempts to homogenize, and resettlement activities. The evolution of various legal and illegal groups which helped mobilize the Kurds in the struggle for equality and recognition are discussed. The author recognizes that while some progress was made through these efforts, there were also many negative outcomes such as human rights abuses, banning of Kurdish language in public, and forced migration.

The author notes that significant positive changes began to occur as Turkey prepared to harmonize with the EU. Emphasis is given to a continuing cycle of increased hope for the Kurds through state treaties and initiatives followed by lack of implementation which resulted in a persistent sense of mistrust. Discussion of a current state initiative granting specific rights to Kurds reflects many positive aspects, but the author points out the important issues that are notably absent.

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A.B. Çelik (✉)  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University,  
Orhanli Tuzla, Istanbul, Turkey  
e-mail: bcelik@sabanciuniv.edu

Suggestions which the authors believe will assist in resolving this conflict are offered, including but not limited to the need to recognize and address the social tension between the Turks and Kurds. Studies are cited which reveal the existent misperceptions between these two groups. The authors call for each group to address the other in open dialogue, recognizing the pain, social polarization, and mistrust.

Cheryl Jorgensen



The Kurdish Question is perhaps one of the most important issues with which Turkey has had to deal since the mid-1980s. Even though the roots of this problem can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire, the devastating consequences of the war between the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* – Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and the Turkish security forces that has taken place since 1984 in the southeast of Turkey and the fact that the demands of the ethnic Kurds have still not been effectively addressed by the Turkish state, places this issue at the core of Turkish politics. The war between the PKK and the Turkish army has resulted in

damaged infrastructure, conflicts over land ownership between villagers and village guards,<sup>1</sup> and a legitimacy problem due to improper human rights practices during the *Olağanüstü Hal* regime

<sup>1</sup>Village Guards are locally recruited civilians armed and paid by the state to oppose the PKK. There are around 59,000 village guards on regular salaries, and 23,274 village guards are working on a voluntary basis (*Today’s Zaman*, 2009). The national media have carried various stories in recent years about the criminal activities of village guards, such as the abduction of women, aggravated assault, and the formation of armed gangs (see Kurban, Çelik, & Yüksek, 2006).

(system of emergency rule).<sup>2</sup> It also created mistrust between the local state administrators and the local inhabitants, and produced internally displaced people (IDPs), who are still encountering problems returning to the conflict region. Conflict in the western cities of Turkey, on the other hand, has led to a degree of polarization among different groups and occasional discrimination against Kurds. Besides these bitter consequences, however, the last decade has also witnessed some improvements in the ways in which the governments have handled the conflict. From denial of the problem, they have moved to a position of seeking alternative solutions that can bring long-lasting peace to the country. This chapter will discuss the history of the conflict along various dimensions and analyze the recent peace-building efforts of the actors involved in the process.

## 1 Kurds: Stateless Nation of the Middle East

Many scholars and organizations refer to the Kurds as being one of the largest ethnic groups without a nation-state (Council of Europe, 2006; Izady 1992; MacDonald, 1993; McKeirnan, 1999). They make up an important percentage of the minority population in the countries where they live in the Middle East – namely, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan, and a considerable percentage in some Western countries such as Germany, Holland, and Sweden. There are no official statistics on the percentage

<sup>2</sup>The OHAL regime was imposed in several cities of eastern and southeastern Anatolia in 1987. The governors of the cities under the OHAL regime acquired the right to pass regulations functioning like laws. Among several rights the governors enjoyed one can list the right to expel citizens from the region, restrict ownership and limit rights and liberties, and freedom of the press and of expression. Even though the regime had been lifted in the region by the end of 2002, albeit gradually, not only its legacy and tradition but also the mistrust it created between the locals and the public officers remain to a certain extent there.

of Kurds in Turkey. However, studies estimate that they make up 15–20% of the population of the country (Andrews, 1992; Gunter, 1997; McDowall, 1997).

The Kurds do not constitute a homogenous group; they follow various religions (Sunni, Alevi, and Yezidi) and speak a variety of languages (Zaza,<sup>3</sup> Kırmanji). That is why it is often hard to describe them. Kurds in Turkey can distinguish themselves from other groups by their language and culture. They speak two (Zaza and Kırmanji) of the many dialects of the Kurdish language, which belongs to the northwestern group of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. It is a close relative of Persian, which is in the southwestern group. Differentiating themselves on the basis of language sometimes can be problematic in the case of Kurds who never learned to speak Kurdish, either because their parents were afraid to teach them the language or because they were simply assimilated into Turkish culture. Most Kurds, therefore, define themselves on the basis of their parentage, place of origin, and/or self-identification. Geographically, there is no specific region where the population is exclusively made up of Kurds, although they constitute the majority in most parts of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia (see blue and red areas on Map 1).

Another difficulty in talking about Kurds as a homogeneous group is their spatial diversity and dispersion in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan. Although there is a Kurdish consciousness that binds them together, Kurds in these countries speak different dialects (the northern version, commonly called Kırmanji, is spoken in Turkey, Syria, and the northern part of the Kurdish-speaking areas of Iraq and Iran. The central version, commonly called Sorani, is spoken in western Iran and much of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Southern Kurdish dialects, and Hewrami or Auramani (Gorani) are spoken by few, especially in Iran.

<sup>3</sup>There are debates among scholars that Zaza is not a Kurdish dialect and that the Zazas are a different ethnic group. However, this debate is not supported by many research studies; therefore, most scholars still consider Zazas as part of Kurdish culture.

These are further divided into sub-dialects). Moreover, there are also differences in lifestyles among these groups because of being assimilated into or having lived together with different national groups in these countries.

Kurds have never existed as an independent political community,<sup>4</sup> and thus, have been under different rulers throughout their history, including the Sassanian Empire, the Safavid Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Turkish Republic, among others. In the early sixteenth century, Kurdish tribes fell under Ottoman rule as a result of the Safavid–Ottoman struggle (van Bruinessen, 1992; Entessar, 1992; McDowall, 1997). With respect to its relations with its subjects, the Ottoman Empire was different from nation-states: subjects were not classified according to their ethnic identities/origins but rather to their religions (Muslim vs. non-Muslim). Accordingly, Kurds, who had lived in the Ottoman domains since the sixteenth century, were recognized as part of the Muslim community, along with Arabs, Turks, Albanians, etc. The hostility between the religious and ethnic communities was aggravated in the late nineteenth century<sup>5</sup>; consequently, the roots of the “Kurdish question” should be contextualized within the transition from a multi-ethnic

Empire to a nationalistic Turkish Republic in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The first international recognition of the Kurds came with the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, which led to the partition of Ottoman lands by the Allied Powers after the First World War. The Treaty of Sevres recognized Kurds as an ethnically distinct people and a plan was drafted that included autonomy for Kurdish-populated areas. The treaty provided an independent, but non-unified, Kurdistan. However, the basic documents and international treaties (such as the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923), which shaped the legal foundations of the new Turkish state after the War of Independence, left no room for the official recognition of Kurds and other Muslim groups as distinct peoples. The Treaty of Lausanne recognized only non-Muslim groups (Greeks, Armenians, and Jews) as minorities. Even though it replaced the Sevres Treaty and formed a unified Turkey, the fears that the Allied Powers would divide the country continued and is still one of the major barriers for the resolution of the conflict. What is commonly known as *Sevres Paranoia*, fears that there are external powers who are trying to challenge the territorial integrity of the Turkish state and implement the provisions of the Sevres Treaty by establishing local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas, still affects many Turkish citizens and policy-makers’ perceptions on any ground-breaking policy on the issue.

<sup>4</sup>The only exception is the short-lived Mahabad Republic in today’s Iran in December 1945. The Republic ceased to exist when the Soviet forces and support, which helped the foundation of the Republic, were withdrawn in December 1946.

<sup>5</sup>Although Kurds lived under Ottoman rule without much challenge to its existence, there are several historical events that signify the emergence of Kurdish nationalist sentiments and of challenges to the Ottoman rule in the nineteenth century. The first significant sign of independence vis-à-vis Ottoman rule came from Bedr Khan, who established his authority over all Kurdish tribes, and refused to send tribal contingents when these were requisitioned in the Ottoman–Russian war of 1828–1829. The second Kurdish insurgency towards the Ottoman rule was a rebellion led by Şeyh Ubeydullah of Nehri, who sought to establish an independent state with the help of the British in 1880. Lastly, the Hamidiye Cavalries created by Abdulhamid II in 1891 strengthened the formation of Kurdish community as a distinct unit, by giving considerable power to Kurdish Hamidiye commanders, which posed a potential threat to the state (van Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 1997; Olson, 1989).

## 2 Kurds in the Early Years of the Republic

During the first years of the Republic, there were several Kurdish uprisings. Of the 18 rebellions that broke out between 1924 and 1938, 17 were in Eastern Anatolia and 16 involved Kurds (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997). Three of these deserve mention because the narratives of these rebellions have been passed from generation to generation through oral accounts, which were separate from, and opposed to, Turkish national identity, and were pivotal in constructing a separate Kurdish identity (Neyzi, 1999).

The first important Kurdish rebellion was led by Sheikh Said in 1925. This was the earliest large-scale Kurdish rebellion in the Republic. Although it was largely led by religious *şeyhs* (sheiks),<sup>6</sup> the Kurdish organization Azadi (Freedom),<sup>7</sup> which had the aim of establishing an independent Kurdistan (van Bruinessen, 1992), was instrumental in the unfolding of the rebellion. What is significant about the rebellion is that it “was a turning point in the history of the Kurds in that nationalism was the prime factor in its organization and development” (Olson, 1989, p. 154). Olson argues that although the rebellion was significant because of the nationalist elements it carried, it proved the weaknesses of the Kurdish mobilization. First of all, it lacked tribal connection with urban dwellers. Secondly, the rebellion failed because of existing tribal rivalries and Sunni–Alevi<sup>8</sup> differences

<sup>6</sup>According to Turkish official history, the Şeyh Said rebellion had a religious character, mainly because of the symbols used in the rebellion. It is argued that it was against the secular nature of the new republic, and the rebellion erupted because Atatürk, the president of the new republic, had abolished the Caliphate on March 3, 1924. There is still no agreement among the scholars working on Kurdish history whether the rebellion was a nationalist rebellion in essence. Van Bruinessen (1992) argues that prohibition of the use of Kurdish language in public places (*populism*), the exile of Kurdish landlords (*aghass*) and the expropriation of their land by the state (*abolition of feudalism*), and abolition of the Caliphate gave rise to grievances among Kurds, leading to the rebellion. Thus, the rebellion carries both national and religious elements. On the other hand, some argue that Kurdish intellectuals and military officers were at the heart of this movement, making it a nationalist rebellion. And, “the fact that the rebellion had a religious character was the result of Azadi’s assessment of the strategy and tactics necessary for carrying out a successful revolution” (Olson, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>Azadi was a Kurdish nationalist party founded by Kurdish nationalists and officers from the Ottoman army in May 1923. Azadi was largely supported by Zaza-speaking tribes. It opposed the new government’s policies of secularization (abolishment of the Caliphate) and the introduction of a modern education system based on Turkish (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Alevism is a sect in Islam. There are significant differences in the beliefs and worshipping practiced by Sunnis and Alevs in Turkey, which has created a long-lasting animosity between the two. It is estimated that around 70% of the Kurds in Turkey are Sunni, and the remaining 30% consists of Alevs and Yezidis (Andrews, 1992).

among the Kurds (Olson, 1989). The rebellion followed systematic deportations and martial law in the East. It also led to the establishment of the Restoration of Order Law in 1926, which created Independence Tribunals to arrest the leaders of all opposing forces. The law was in effect for 2 years, and the two Independence Tribunals, one established in the east and one in Ankara, were successful in stifling all reaction and rebellion, and restoring “social harmony” (McDowall, 1997, p. 195). With the *Law on the Transfer of Certain People from the Eastern Regions to the Western Provinces* (Law No. 1907), which was passed by parliament on June 10, 1927, many Kurds were transferred to western provinces without an indication of where they were to be sent, and their land and other real estate were taken over by the treasury (Tekeli, 1994). The law was passed after the Ankara government realized that Kurdish recalcitrance had continued despite the suppression of the Sheikh Said Rebellion. The number of people transferred is unknown, but some argue that it was no fewer than 200,000 (Clerk as cited in McDowall, 1997).

From 1925 to 1927, Kurdish mobilization was largely suppressed. The second important Kurdish rebellion of the Turkish Republic came as an insurrection led by a former Ottoman army officer, İhsan Nuri Pasha in the area of Ağrı (Ararat) in 1930. Frustrated by the Turkish state’s homogenization project, whose foundation was based on the belief that all citizens are Turkish, combined with the government’s emergency powers to administer the area, some Kurdish nationalist elites formed the Khoybun (Independence) group in 1927. The operational leader of the Bayt al Shabab mutiny, İhsan Nuri, assembled a small group of men trained in modern weapons, and moved his men to the Ararat region, where there were local tribes already in revolt. This time some Alevi tribes in Turkey and Kurdish tribes in Iran also joined the revolt. However, the Turkish army’s superior weaponry, communications and logistics, and the lack of coordinated mobilization of Kurdish tribes led to the Turkish state’s success in suppressing the rebellion (McDowall, 1997).

The last important Kurdish rebellion dates back to the late 1930s. There were two important factors that laid the ground for the rebellion. The first came on June 21, 1934, when the Turkish parliament passed the Law on Resettlement (Law No. 2510), which regulated the settlement of immigrants and resettlement within the country. The law divided Turkey into three zones in accordance to adherence to “Turkishness”: (1) localities where the population possessed non-Turkish elements and a concentration of population having Turkish culture was desired (as a result, immigrants from the former Ottoman provinces who had Turkish origins were settled in these localities); (2) regions reserved for people who were expected to assimilate into Turkish culture; and (3) regions to be totally evacuated (the inhabitants of these regions were to be settled in the first two zones) (McDowall, 1997; Tekeli, 1994). The law also aimed to break down the structure of potentially powerful tribes, and abrogated tribal property rights. Tekeli reports that 25,831 people from 5,074 households were transferred from 15 cities in the eastern and southeastern Anatolia to western Anatolia. However, many households which were transferred to other provinces in the 1930s returned to their homes in the 1940s when the obligation of the transferred people to stay where they were settled was lifted, as Turkey moved to a multi-party regime in 1947 (Tekeli, 1994).

The other factor which prepared the ground for the Dersim rebellion was the passing in December 1935 of a law by parliament that placed Dersim (renamed Tunceli after the rebellion) under military rule. In fact, Dersim was commonly known as the main problem area. The law also enabled the government to detain and deport the “potential threats” of the “notoriously defiant region.” The inhabitants of Dersim resisted the imposition of direct government control, which initiated the Dersim rebellion led by Şeyh Seyyid Rıza in 1936. At the end of 1938, the rebellion was bloodily suppressed by the government. Seyyid Rıza was hanged and thousands were executed. Again the rebellion preceded deportations and population control. And the inhabitants and deported families of Tunceli had

to wait for 1946 to be able to be free from the emergency powers and to return their homes.

### 3 Kurds in the Transition to the Multiparty Era

The suppression of the Dersim rebellion was so powerful that it left a bitter memory among the Kurds so great that it pushed back any possible Kurdish mobilization until the 1950s, when the single-party era came to an end. The strict state control following the rebellion in the Kurdish-populated regions made it almost impossible for the Kurds to mobilize against the Turkish state. From the late 1930s to the late 1950s, there was no significant Kurdish opposition to the Turkish regime.

It is the political environment of the 1960s which provided fertile ground for political mobilization. The immediate cause was the 1961 Constitution, considered to be the constitution providing the most explicit protection of freedom of association (Bianchi, 1984). The rights granted by the Constitution promoted the foundation of trade unions and student organizations, which would play an important role in the Turkish politics of the 1970s. However, it should be kept in mind that although the 1961 Constitution encouraged some freedoms in terms of organization and mobilization of the Kurds, and the publication of the first Kurdish journals at the beginning of the 1960s, the government imposed strict measures to control the Kurdish-populated regions. By Law No.1587, the National Unity Committee, which for a while took over the administration after the 1960 *coup d'état*, started to replace Kurdish place names with Turkish ones, claiming that names which hurt public opinion are not suitable for national culture, moral values, traditions, and customs (McDowall, 1997). Thus, the 1960s both created some liberties and led to greater restrictions on Kurdish rights.

Within this rather “democratic” environment, Kurds initiated legal mobilization in both associations and political parties. The establishment of the *Türkiye İşçi Partisi* (the Workers’ Party of

Turkey – hereafter the WPT) in 1961 is a milestone in the legal Kurdish mobilization. The party gained support from the middle-class “progressives” in Istanbul, and overwhelmingly from Kurds and Alevis in the countryside (Samim, 1987). Even though the party was a pro-Soviet socialist party aiming to “transform the Turkish society through the creation of a mass workers’ party” (Samim, 1987, p. 155), it also supported organizational activity in the late 1960s.

The perspective of the WPT in the western cities of Turkey such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir was mainly based on class struggle against capitalist exploitation. On the other hand, in the cities of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia, the WPT argued that in order to liberate people, the institutions of *şeyhlik*,<sup>9</sup> *ağalık*,<sup>10</sup> and feudalism should be abolished, land reform introduced, and human rights respected. These two different perspectives stemmed from institutional and structural differences between the east and the west of the country. However, the argument was about structurally changing the society by replacing the “exploitative” institutions. In this sense, party politicians did not pronounce “Kurdishness” as an ethnic right until the mid-1960s.

It was only in 1965 that the WPT’s chairman, Mehmet Ali Aybar, “shifted his emphasis from

‘class interest’ to ‘human freedom’ in an attempt to broaden its appeal—especially to Kurds and Alevis” (Samim, 1987, p. 158). In 1966, at its Second Congress, the party experienced a break between those who supported the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and the Socialist Revolution. In its monthly publication *Aydınlık*, the NDR, led by Mihri Belli, published an article in November 1968, entitled “The National Reality,” where it talked about the “Kurdish question” (*Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi – STMA*, 1988). Whereas the WPT continued its program along the lines of the Socialist Revolution, which argued that the revolution should take place under the leadership of the workers, the NDR criticized the party for being “pacifist and parliamentarist,” and argued that a new struggle should take place. However, neither the NDR movement nor the WPT were able to get Kurdish youth, who realized the “Turkish” left organizations did not respond to their needs, to follow them. These young people later founded the first legal Kurdish organization of the Turkish Republic: *Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları* (Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Hearths, hereafter the ERCH).

What is significant about the WPT in terms of Kurdish mobilization is that it was the first legal political party recognizing the existence of Kurds in Turkey. In its fourth Grand Assembly, on October 29, 1970, the WPT announced that

There is a Kurdish people in the East of Turkey... The fascist authorities representing the ruling classes have subjected the Kurdish people to a policy of assimilation and intimidation, which has often become bloody repression (Chailand, 1993, p. 87; STMA, 1988, p. 2132).

One should note that although the party openly suggested an ethnic problem in Turkey, this analysis “was heavily laden with class and leftist terminology” (Barkey & Fuller, 1998, p. 15). The party argued that the most fundamental reason for the underdevelopment of the region and the suppression of the Kurds was the “economic and social policies of the dominant classes who were very much aware that the region was inhabited by Kurds” (Chailand, 1993, p. 87). Thus, the leftists of the era related the Kurdish question to the “colonization” of the region by the Turkish-dominant classes.

<sup>9</sup>*Şeyhlik* is a religious institution, and *şeyh* (sheikh) is a religious title given to the head of the Naksbandi order in Islam. Among the Kurds, *şeyh* was a very influential religious figure (Olson, 1989, p. 3). Although one can come across with influential Kurdish *şeyhs* who could “infuse religious phraseology full of millenarian and messianic symbols into ... nationalist objectives” such as in the case of the uprising led by *Şeyh Ubaydullah of Nehri* who sought to establish an independent state with the help of the British in 1880 (van Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 1997; Olson, 1989), in the 1970s many Kurds argued that the existence of *şeyhs*, who mostly used their ties with the state to strengthen their own power, prevented the rise of Kurdish nationalism.

<sup>10</sup>*Ağalık* is an institution similar to landlordship. *Agas* (Aghas), in Kurdish-populated regions, were the leaders of Kurdish tribes, and they had a great amount of social, economic, and political power over the tribe members. In most cases *ağas* used their clientelistic ties with the state to exert their power over the population, which overshadowed the growth of Kurdish consciousness for decades. Also, the conflict between the tribal groupings led by *ağas* formed shifting patterns of alliance, preventing the rise of a united Kurdish mobilization (Barkey & Fuller, 1998).

According to the perspective presented by most of the members of the WPT, the “Eastern problem,” as they put it, stemmed from the combined effects of colonization of the Eastern Anatolia, and its relative deprivation based on ethnic differences. Along with this argument came the belief that when the capitalist and imperialist forces are overthrown, Kurds will also be liberated. This ideology gained support, particularly among the Kurdish youth and intellectuals of the early 1960s.

The most significant event of the 1960s in terms of Kurdish consciousness is the *Doğu Mitingleri* (The Eastern Meetings). From August 1967 to August 1969, 12 meetings were held in several Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian cities, and in Ankara (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları: Dava Dosyası 1*, 1975). Although the meetings of the WPT in western cities of Turkey were rather unpopular, the Eastern Meetings gathered thousands of people. These meetings focused mostly on economic and social problems with an emphasis on the institutions of *ağalık* and *şeyhlik* (as sources of inequality) in the society, inequality between the regions, unequal income distribution and poverty. Although the meetings were largely organized by the WPT, the supporters of another pro-Kurdish party also joined and gave their support: the *Kurdistan Demokratik Partisi* (Democratic Party of Kurdistan – hereafter the DKP). This political organization, led by Sait Elçi, was an illegal party that had connections with the Iraqi Democratic Party of Kurdistan, led by Molla Mustafa Barzani. It was mostly supported by rich Kurdish peasants. Although the party provided support to the meetings, it could not mobilize many Kurds.

The discourse at the meetings combined the socialist rhetoric of relative deprivation with the demands for identity recognition. They emphasized the relative deprivation of “the East,” and raised the issue that Easterners should get as great a share in national capital and resources as “Westerners.” Some of the banners at the meetings emphasized this inequality between the regions: “If the West is the homeland, what is the East?” “The fate of the East is famine, unemployment, and degradation,” “Where is democracy?” “We want protection of life,” “Oil was our blood, you took that, too,” “Inn

for us, villas for them,” “The Easterner has awakened. Now, he will look after his rights,” “Rights are not given, but taken,” and so on. What was important about the Eastern Meetings is that for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, a legal party was able to mobilize so many Kurds and ask for egalitarian income distribution between the regions. Although the word “Kurd” was not mentioned at the meetings, the problems of Easterners’ were emphasized.

The formation of the Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Hearths in May 1969 stands as the first important legal step of the Kurdish mobilization in the history of Turkish Republic. However, note that even the title of the organization indicates that it brings together the people of the “East,” and does not necessarily refer to the Kurds. “The founding objectives of the ERCHs were: (a) to encourage Kurdish university students to engage in cultural activities, and generate material solidarity among them, (b) to destroy all the racist-chauvinist ideologies of Turkey, and mobilize Kurds within the democratic and revolutionary institutions that struggle for the brotherhood and equality of nations” (STMA, 1988, p. 2119).

What is important to note about the ERCH is that it mobilized a significant number of Kurds, especially the youth. Barkey and Fuller (1998) argue that this young generation replaced the old one, “whose traditional ties limited its rebellious temptations,” with “one raised with all the symbols of nation and state” (p. 15). The perspectives of the ERCH were reflected in the WPT so successfully that it led to the resolution regarding the existence of the Kurds in the eastern part of the country in the party’s Fourth Grand Assembly in 1970. However, this resolution also paved the way for the banning of both the WPT and the ERCHs by the military memorandum of March 12, 1971.

The memorandum brought very strict restrictions on Kurdish rights. The court decision concerning the ban of the ERCHs argued that they were closed down because of high treason. The attorneys also claimed that

Kurdish, rather than being a language, is a bunch of words (...) The Kurdish language does not actually belong to an existing or historical entity because it has been proven that Kurds come from Turkish descent (STMA, 1988, p. 2304).



With the establishment of the ERCHs, the Kurds learned to engage in political issues and to voice their demands through legal channels. However, because of the short-lived history of the ERCHs, and the banning of most of the leftist political parties and institutions in 1971, Kurdish mobilization found different paths in many illegal leftist organizations during the 1970s.

With the 1971 memorandum, most political parties as well as syndicates, associations, and trade unions were banned from the political scene and their leaders were put in prison. The members of the ERCHs were charged with training “militants who believed in Kurdistan, to spread the argument that there is an independent Kurdish race, and to help establish an independent Kurdistan” (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları: Dava Dosyası 1*, 1975, p. 25). The memorandum also restricted the rights of many associations granted by the 1961 Constitution. From 1971 to 1974 Kurdish mobilization was once again silenced. Many leaders were captured, and the state controlled a large segment of political life. The 1974 general amnesty granted by the coalition government formed after the transition period following the 1971 memorandum brought these leaders back into the political arena; however, this time, they mostly became part of illegal political groups.

During the mid-1970s, a highly politicized political system developed between extreme right and left groups. Within this environment, different illegal Kurdish groups emerged; while all were in the leftist camp, they had different political perspectives. McDowall (1997) argues that Kurdish nationalism was revived by “economic deprivation, social injustice and physical displacement as well as ideas of ethnic identity, all of which combined in the 1970s to create the conditions for revolt” (p. 402).

The 1970s are important for Kurdish mobilization since those years include the emergence of illegal Kurdish organizations, which are separate from similarly banned Turkish leftist groups, and more importantly, the emergence of the PKK as a political entity. Even though the discourse of these organizations was highly revolutionary, for the first time in Turkish Republican history, Kurdish nationalist demands

were explicated, and Kurdish appeared in the names of these groups (e.g., *Yekitiya Proleterya Kurdistan – Kawa* (Kurdistan Proletarian Union), *Rızgari* (Kurdistan Independence Movement), etc.), after it was first used by an illegal political party *Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi – TKDP* (Kurdistan Democrat Party of Turkey) in 1965.

*Devrimci Demokratik Kültür Dernekleri* (Revolutionary Democratic Cultural Associations – hereafter the RDCAs), which were founded in 1974 in Ankara and Istanbul, are worth mentioning in this regard. The RDCAs, in their monthly magazines, argued that they were following the paths of the ERCHs, which were banned by the “anti-democratic regime of the March 12th [1971],” and emerged when “there was a reawakening among the students after the relaxation of the regime’s strict measures” (*Devrimci Demokrat Gençlik-DDG*, 1978, p. 8). These associations have largely been dominated by students, who were devoted to the defeat of “imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism and racism” (DDG, 1978, p. 9). They were successful in leading a great number of Kurds into the streets, and getting them involved in political life, through either conventional or unconventional participation. This resulted in the most successful Kurdish illegal mobilization ever: the PKK. Because of their active role in Kurdish mobilization, the functions of the RDCAs were under strict state control in the late-1970s, and they were eventually closed down by the 1980 military coup d’état. The September 12, 1980 coup d’état was a result of extreme ideological polarization of the society, coupled with the election laws, which prevented any single party from attaining a majority in the parliament, resulting in the inability of rapidly changing governments to respond to the increasing violence. It led to the arrest of hundreds of thousands and five hundred people receiving the death penalty. The military junta also imposed martial law and stripped many people of their political rights. Even though it returned the government to civilian hands within two years, the 1982 Constitution it prepared is still in effect and remains one of the important political barriers for the recognition of Kurds as a culturally distinct group.

#### 4 **Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) and the “Kurdish Question”**

Among all the Kurdish illegal organizations, perhaps the most important was the PKK, which was founded by Abdullah Öcalan and his friends in Ankara, during his university years at *Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Fakültesi* (the Faculty of Political Science at Ankara University). Before the organization came into being in 1977, this group had prepared a document entitled “The Path of Kurdish Revolution,” which argued that the Kurdish-populated regions of Turkey were colonies. They also argued that the colonization was enforced by Kurdish feudalists and bourgeoisie, who chose to collaborate with the Turkish ruling classes. According to Öcalan and his friends, this was why Kurds should lead a Marxist-Leninist revolution to create an independent Kurdistan. The document later became the program of the PKK (Kirişçi, 1998).

The emergence of the PKK as an armed force occurred in a period just after the military coup of September 12, 1980, which had silenced Kurdish mobilization, along with all sorts of non-Kurdish political mobilization. The 1980 coup d'état preceded a martial law regime and strict restrictions on the right to form associations. Within this environment, the regime paradoxically paved the way for the PKK's greater mobilization in the following years (Kutschera, 1994). The PKK launched its first open attack on the Turkish authorities with an armed assault on gendarme garrisons in 1984. Since then the conflict has taken many lives. There are no exact statistics on the number of casualties that the conflict has caused. However, most scholars and journalists estimate the number to be around 30,000–40,000.

From 1984 to the early 1990s, Turkey's “Kurdish question” started to attract increasing attention from both Turkish and international media and political circles. Yet, it is in the early 1990s that the issue acquired high priority as a consequence of escalating PKK attacks, on the one hand, and harsher state responses, on the other. When the conflict re-emerged with the PKK's separatist goals

in the 1980s, it was perceived by many state officials as “terrorism,” first, and an “underdevelopment,” problem later on. It was common practice to refer to the Kurds as “Mountain Turks” in the 1980s. It took almost two decades for state officials to come to terms with the fact that Kurds do exist and this problem is also one that demands recognition of Kurds as a distinct group in Turkey.

The armed conflict peaked in the mid-1990s, when human rights abuses, torture, and disappearances were reported by NGOs in the region and state offices,<sup>11</sup> and the public use of Kurdish language was banned. Furthermore, around a million Kurds were forced to migrate (HÜNEE, 2006) to other cities either as a result of the evacuation of villages by the military, allowed by the 1987 emergency rule; or because of the PKK's pressure on villagers who did not support the PKK to abandon their villages; or due to the insecurity resulting from being caught between the PKK and Turkish security forces (Kirişçi, 1998).

The armed conflict started to de-escalate when the PKK leader Öcalan was captured by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 1999. That year was also significant because of EU's acceptance of Turkey as a candidate to the Union. The negative peace that came with Öcalan's imprisonment and the PKK's decision of “inaction,” which lasted until mid-2004, laid the fertile foundation for democratic reforms.

#### 5 **Post-1999: A New Era?**

Between 1999 and 2004, the PKK declared a one-sided ceasefire, which it broke on June 1, 2004. However, this negative peace period was

<sup>11</sup> According to a report prepared by the Ministry of Justice on July 29, 2003, for example, the number of people taken into custody by the Diyarbakir State Security Courts and State Attorney in Diyarbakir, the biggest Kurdish city, during the OHAL regime was 48,697. According to the President of the Diyarbakir Bar Association, around 800 state officers have been expelled from the region and none of them have been able to file complaints against the state on the issue (interview, Diyarbakir, February 11th 2004). OHAL has also restricted many public activities. According to Tanrikulu and Yavuz (2005), many art activities such as festivals, concerts, and public screening of movies have been restricted.

the signal that a new era was opening in Turkey's Kurdish Question. As part of harmonizing its laws with European norms in the process of adopting European Union (EU) Common Law, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey has accepted broadcasting in other mother tongues besides Turkish and has eased restrictions on languages other than Turkish, has abolished the death penalty, and has signed international treaties protecting the economic, social, cultural, and political rights of its citizens (see Çelik, 2005 for a detailed analysis of legal changes). Even though such changes were not made to deal with the issues underlying the Kurdish Question, they indirectly affected it. Such constitutional guarantees were provided reluctantly and slowly; yet they were crucial for leaving behind a period that had to a certain extent neglected the problems of the Kurds. Interviews conducted by the author with Kurds and Kurdish NGOs revealed that these steps were perceived by many Kurds as insincere attempts by the Turkish state that did not address the demands of Kurdish citizens. They were seen instead as an effort to prove to the EU that Turkey could democratize (Çelik & Rumelili, 2006).

In a speech delivered in Diyarbakır, the most important city for Kurds in Southeast Anatolia, on August 12, 2005, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that "the Kurdish Question is everyone's problem, especially mine. Disregarding the mistakes made in the past is not an attribute of big states. The solution lies in providing more democracy, citizen rights and welfare" (*Radikal* 12/08/2005). Erdoğan's speech, which stressed the existence of the Kurdish question and offered citizenship rather than "Turkish identity" as a supra-identity for both the Kurds and Turks, raised the hopes of Kurds for the democratic resolution of the issue for a short while. However, his emphases on the security of the state in his later speeches and the resort to military means since 2007 have diminished this hope. Such dissatisfaction and loss of hope on the side of the Kurds led to an escalation of violence. From mid-2004 to mid-2009, sporadic hostilities in the conflict-affected areas, as well as the spread of violence to the cities of western Turkey, hampered any attempt at bringing about peace. The conflict

also became internationalized again<sup>12</sup> in late 2007 with the Turkish army's bombings of PKK camps within the territory of Northern Iraq. With the intensification of violence in the post-2004 period, the State's emphasis has been on the security and the territorial integrity of the country, whereas the main dissatisfaction of the different Kurdish groups has been with what can be summarized as the slow unwilling moves of the State in the EU integration process to grant more rights to the Kurds as a group.

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## 6 Towards Resolving the Conflict?

Year 2009 marks another important turning point in the state's position towards the conflict. TRT-6, a TV channel owned by the Turkish state initiated broadcasting in Kurdish on January 1, 2009. While this was not the first case of Kurdish broadcasting, it was more significant than the earlier attempt in 2004. Following the signing of the National Program for the Adoption of the EU Common Law on March 8, 2001, the government initiated several reform packages. One of government's reform packages in 2004 included allowing the teaching of Kurdish (and other mother tongues and accents) in private courses and broadcasting in Kurdish; however, the state still retained the right to exercise strict control in such areas. For example, Kurdish TV programs could only be broadcasted on state television and were limited in content. The first private Kurdish courses opened their doors to students in April 2004 in the two Kurdish-populated cities in the regions affected by the conflict. In June 2004, the first Kurdish broadcast appeared on Turkish state

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<sup>12</sup>The mass influx of Iraqi Kurds into Turkey in the early 1990s can be considered the initial internationalization of the Kurdish Question. World attention focused on the Kurds at the end of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and continued throughout the 1990s as there were increasing levels of forced migration from the Kurdish-populated regions of eastern and southeastern Anatolia. Although this event was a spillover effect of what has happened in Iraq, the "Kurds" as a group subsequently became recognized in the international arena.

television. Even though this first attempt was seen as insincere and inadequate by many Kurds, it was the first step in overcoming the problems in making Kurdish language more public. Yet, it is the changes in 2009 that made the Kurdish broadcasting a reality in Turkey.

The positive developments continued throughout 2009, and for the first time in the history of the Republic, a government claimed to be initiating an extensive peace process to address the conflict. However, even though the project was commenced as the “Kurdish Initiative,” meaning designed to address solely the Kurdish Question, it came to be referred to as the “Democratic Initiative,” and, lastly, the “National Union and Brotherhood Project.” These changes in names signify the government’s confusion, and some desperation, in dealing with a complex and deep-rooted problem. Announced as the Kurdish Initiative by the Ministry of Interior in July 29, 2009, these attempts to resolve the conflict aimed at addressing several core problems. The proposal was believed to include greater cultural rights for Kurds (excluding teaching in Kurdish), some form of local autonomy, and incentives to demobilize and reintegrate the PKK fighters into the society. Such changes require first and foremost the changing of the 1982 Constitution, a byproduct of the 1980 coup d’état. Since it is regarded as undemocratic and opposed by many civil society groups and there is a need to comply with the EU’s Copenhagen Standards,<sup>13</sup> several modifications have been made to it since 2001. The initiative of the ruling party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, hereafter the AKP), aimed at “ending terrorism,” and “advancing democracy”; however, while it has the will to address the conflict, it is still unclear as to what steps need to be taken. However, after mid-2010, with the increasing violence from both sides, even this will is being questioned by many Kurds.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Copenhagen Criteria, all EU candidate states must meet several standards and criteria. Among them were political criteria indirectly affecting the issues related to the Kurdish Question. Of the political standards, respect for the principle of the rule of law and for minority rights serves as a crucial part of the basis of compliance.

After discussing the “initiative” in the National Assembly on November 13, 2009, the AKP published a report on what this new policy means. In its publication about the National Unity and Brotherhood Project (AKP, 2010) and in the prime minister’s public speeches, the government claimed to address the following issues:

- Allowing the use of Kurdish in prisons. This was legalized by the government in the first week of November 2009.
- Reintegrating PKK members. The government aims to reintegrate PKK members who have not participated in any armed confrontation with the Turkish military. However, this objective does not have any concrete plan, and was not pronounced by the government in clear terms.
- Reintegrating the people in the Makhmour Refugee Camp, in cooperation with the Kurdish autonomous region administration in Northern Iraq: During the armed conflict in the 1990s, approximately 12,000 Kurds crossed the Turkish border into Iraq. Approximately 9,000 of these settled in the Makhmour Refugee Camp; 2,600 of them returned to Turkey in the following years (UNHCR, 2004). The return of the rest of the refugees was discussed extensively at the beginning of the initiative, but it was not mentioned in the AKP’s 2010 publication. It might be due to the fact that people in the Makhmour Camp stated that they will not return to Turkey unless they believe that Turkey has fully been democratized and a general amnesty is granted to members of the PKK.
- Bringing prisons up to EU standards and closing the Diyarbakır Prison.<sup>14</sup>
- Rehabilitating minors involved in “terrorist acts.” Especially following the violent uprisings in the funerals of several PKK members in Diyarbakır (April 2006) and increased clashes between the PKK and the Turkish army (since summer 2006), several minors in the big cities of the southeast Anatolia participated in

<sup>14</sup> Diyarbakır is the most populous Kurdish city. Diyarbakır prison became a symbol of anti-1980 coup d’état because of human rights abuses that took place during the coup d’état and the military rule following it.

throwing stones at the Turkish security forces. These minors were sent to adult prisons after receiving long sentences in anti-terrorist courts. A bill on these minors passed by parliament on July 21, 2010. According to the new law, minors will no longer be tried at high criminal courts; those charged with violating the Law on Meeting and Demonstrations will not face prison terms if they do not use a weapon, a knife, or explosives against the security forces, and they will serve their sentence at institutes of education or doing community service.

- Allowing other channels besides the state-owned TRT to have continuous Kurdish broadcasting.
- Empowering the local administrations (decentralization). Such proposals have been discussed in public since the time of the eighth President Turgut Özal. However, up to now, there has been no concrete plan for carrying this out in a country with an historically strong unitary character. Moreover, the government has not pronounced plans for decentralization plans even though in June 2010, 99 pro-Kurdish *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi* (Peace and Democracy Party, hereafter the BDP)<sup>15</sup> mayors in the southeast Anatolia declared that they would work toward establishing some sort of autonomy in their regions.

<sup>15</sup> Another important issue concerning Kurdish political representation is the formation of Kurdish political parties. According to the Articles 12 and 83 of the Law on Political Parties, put in effect in 2005, forming a political party based on ethnic, racial, and religious lines is unconstitutional (TBMM, 2005). Based on these articles, several pro-Kurdish political parties were banned. The BDP is the sixth party whose political ideology can be considered as pro-Kurdish. The first pro-Kurdish party, HEP (Halkın Emek Partisi-People's Labor Party), was founded in June 1990 by the Kurdish MPs who were expelled from the Social Democratic Party (SHP) after their participation in an International Conference held on the Kurdish Question in Paris. After HEP's closure by the Constitutional Court, the three consecutive pro-Kurdish parties, namely DEP (Demokrasi Partisi-Democracy Party), ÖZDEP (Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi-Freedom and Democracy Party), and DEHAP (Demokratik Halk Partisi- Democratic Society Party) shared the same fate. After the inception of the Kurdish initiative the DTP was closed down by the Constitutional Court and its members, except for its two leaders, formed the new party, the BDP, at the end of 2009.

- Strengthening the right of freedom of expression. This mostly aims at removing Article 216 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which penalizes those “instigating a group of people having different social class, race, religion, sect or region to hatred or hostility against another group of people in a way that is dangerous for public security.”
- Allowing the teaching of Kurdish language as an elective course in schools and teaching different languages and dialects in private institutions.
- Allowing the formation of Kurdish institutes and/or Kurdish Literature departments in universities.
- Allowing the use of the Kurdish language during election campaigns, which requires changing the election law. Another factor limiting representation of the Kurds in the Turkish National Assembly is the requirement that a political party receive 10% of the national vote to be eligible to enter parliament. Even though pro-Kurdish parties can obtain up to 65% of the local votes in the small cities of eastern Anatolia, they are not represented in parliament because they cannot reach this national bar. The government initiative does not address this problem, however.
- Easing the strict road and plateau controls in eastern and southeastern Anatolia to make life easier for the inhabitants. Put in effect, this can also increase the return of the Kurdish IDPs.
- Forming “Fight Against Discrimination Commissions,” which would inspect the public and private sectors for possible discrimination cases. There will also be an independent civic Human Rights Commission to control human rights abuses throughout the country, including but not limited to human rights abuses of the village guards and security forces in the southeast.
- Renaming the places of former “locally-named” places. These include not only the villages that formerly had Kurdish names, but also those with other languages, such as Armenian, Arabic, and Circassian all around Turkey. According to a recent study (*Mynet*, 2009), the names of around 28,000 places have been changed since 1940 (*Hurriyet* November 13–14, 2009; AKP, 2010).

As seen by these issues and argued by Kemal Kirişçi (2008), it is easier to discuss the state's "redlines," reflecting its understanding of what not to include in this initiative: "transformation from a unitary state to a federal one," "territorial autonomy," or acceptance of Kurdish as an official language (p. 7). In its publication on the initiative, the government also claimed that amnesty for Öcalan or his re-trial is out of question (AKP, 2010).

The government's will to address the issues around the conflict was welcomed by the pro-Kurdish party of that time, the *Demokratik Toplum Partisi* (Democratic Society Party, hereafter the DTP) and the PKK even before the specific issues of the initiative were known. To show that they also support peace initiatives, the PKK sent to Turkey a "Peace Group" composed of some PKK members who had not joined in any armed confrontation with the Turkish army and some refugees from the Makhmour Camp in Northern Iraq. Even though this was an attempt on the part of the radical Kurds to "welcome peace," enthusiastic celebrations on the border between Iraq and Turkey by Kurds and the release of these returnees, despite Article 220 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which would have otherwise penalized them, elicited harsh reactions by the non-Kurds in the Turkish society. Since this welcoming by the state officers led to severe opposition to the AKP government, state officials later brought up cases against the members of the Peace Group, which resulted in the return of 20 out of 34 PKK members to Northern Iraq in July 2010. For many, this was a sign that the new positive era in Kurdish Question has ended once again.

Even though most Kurdish politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary Kurds appear to have been supporting these possible reforms, the PKK and some Kurdish members of parliament, in fact, had a different understanding of how peace should be achieved. According to an interview with higher-ranking PKK officers, they wanted the government to take Öcalan as the "addressee" of this negotiation process and Kurdish to be an official language along with Turkish (Çongar, 2008). After the contours of the initiative started to be discussed by the Turkish public, the PKK

also released its requests. The "Peace Group," after its arrival in Turkey, made the letters from the PKK available to the journalists. These requests were: disclosing Öcalan's road map<sup>16</sup> to the people and along with possible negotiators, halting military operations, allowing freedom of the Kurdish language, developing democratic social organizations and political representation associated with Kurdish identity, abolishing the village guards system and bringing an end to the Turkish military's "special operations" in the region, and preparing a new democratic constitution. They requested that these be contingent upon a real democratization of Turkey and the Kurdish people's free will. They should be reached by dialogue and discussion and allowing Kurds to lead a free and equal life within the society on the basis of their Kurdish identity – under constitutional guarantees, as a part of the democratic nation of Turkey (*Radikal* 10/20/2009).

However, some of these demands (e.g., taking Öcalan as the addressee) can possibly lead to conflict escalation. Recent polls show that the "Kurdish initiative," even when it was not clear exactly what it meant, was supported by 48.1% of the population (36.4% did not support it and 15.5% had no opinion). However, a majority of the population is also afraid that the Kurds want a separate state (64.4%), and that Öcalan and the PKK do not represent the Kurds (50.1%) (SETA, 2009). Another study surveying only Kurds and Zazas<sup>17</sup> found that while the Kurds who had voted for DTP in the 2007 national elections were less willing to live together with Turks (62.9%) compared to those who voted for other parties

<sup>16</sup>The imprisoned PKK leader put forth his road map, that is, his understanding of how Kurdish Question should be addressed by the Turkish state, to the prison prosecutor on August 20, 2009. State representatives did not disclose the content of the letter. Öcalan also asked his lawyers to send the text to the European Court of Justice, which takes some time (*Bianet* 08/27/2009).

<sup>17</sup>Zazas are differentiated from Kirmanji-speaking Kurds based on the language they use. Whereas most Kurds speak Kirmanji, Zazas use Zazaki. There are debates among scholars as to whether Zazas are an ethnic group by themselves or a sub-group of Kurds. This study did not engage in these discussions, and regarded Zazas as part of the Kurdish culture.

(84.8%), overall, Kurds do not want a separate state. The same study also revealed that only around 19.77% of the population believes that Öcalan should be released (BİLGESAM, 2009).<sup>18</sup>

However, as violence started to spiral once again in 2010 and the government was unable to come up with concrete plans for peace, the support for the initiative started to decrease. According to a study done by the A&G Research Institute, the support in June 2009 for resolving the Kurdish Question through non-violent means dropped drastically over the months to follow (from 69% in June to 46% in August and to 31% in November) (A&G as cited in *Taraf* 26/01/2010). Another study reached interesting conclusions concerning the performance of the government and how society sees the solution to the Kurdish Question. According to this study, compared to 2009, there was growing hope among Turkish citizens that the issue of “terrorism” could be resolved through peaceful means (increase from 52.3% in 2009 to 64.5% in 2010). However, in contrast, only 30.9% labeled government performance in “terrorism” as “good” and 30.1% saw government policies as the biggest reason for “terrorism” (Baybars Hawks, 2010). Besides these contradictions, it is also important to note how social science rhetoric on the issue is still confused in terminology: “the initiative,” “terrorism,” “support for non-violent means,” “support for peace” are all used to refer to the same phenomenon, which is in fact, complex, multi-layered, and deep-rooted.

Even though, the so-called Kurdish initiative was welcomed by the Kurds and most Turks [except for some ardent supporters of the opposition parties *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP) and *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP)], its popularity decreased as the government did not clarify its contents, all the while silencing the legal Kurdish voices. The recent operation against the elected Kurds in the southeast, in particular, led to

increasing stone-throwing incidents by Kurdish children and PKK attacks on Turkish military bases. An indictment completed in June 2010 charged 150 people, including 11 BDP mayors from Southeast Anatolia, with membership in the illegal Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), the allegedly underground urban organization of the PKK (*Hürriyet*, 2010).

Besides all these shortcomings, however, the most important consequence of this recent initiative has been the positive atmosphere it created and the hope for a common future in the society. Yet, at the same time, many fear that if this chance of resolving the conflict is missed, social polarization of Kurds and Turks might result. Contrary to what many scholars and Turks argue, the Kurdish Question is not only a conflict between the state and the Kurdish separatists. As asserted by Çelik and Blum (2007), “it is possible to identify three fault lines along which the Kurdish conflict in Turkey plays out. At one level, the conflict is between the Turkish state and an ethnic minority. At another level, the conflict is between the Turkish state and an insurgent group, the PKK. At a third level, the conflict exists in the form of social tension between Turks and Kurds throughout Turkey, especially in the bigger cities in western Turkey” (p. 65). If not recognized by the policymakers, this last level is the least addressed and hardest to deal with. In fact, there have been studies addressing this possible social polarization. A KONDA study in June 2010 shows that even though many Turkish citizens support the legal reforms safeguarding Kurdish culture, they are not as liberal when it comes to welcoming different ethnicities into their close circles. Another striking finding is the dominance of Sevres Paranoia in the ordinary Turkish citizens’ understanding of the issue. Almost three quarters of the people surveyed believed that Kurdish Question is the result of foreign countries’ provocation and more than half (around 54.7%) believed that Kurds want a separate state (KONDA, 2010), even though other studies show the contrary (BİLGESAM, 2009).

With the government’s new initiative, the tension that had been rising between the Kurds and Turks since the mid-2007 has started to give way to a

<sup>18</sup> However, these findings should be taken with a grain of salt since answering questions about demands for separation and Öcalan is still not easy especially in survey studies where the interviewer is not known to the respondent.

possible peaceful coexistence. As pointed out by a renowned Turkish journalist, Cengiz Çandar, at a meeting bringing together Kurds and Turks of different political ideologies for the first time, some 10 years ago, it was very difficult to see together an imprisoned Kurdish parliamentarian (Hatip Dicle), an ex-PKK member who had returned Turkey from abroad as a gesture of showing PKK's commitment to peace in 1999 and imprisoned afterwards (Seydi Fırat) and an ex-deputy secretary of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (Cevat Öneş). However, it is hard to see such positive developments at the societal level since such long-lasting conflicts leave a legacy of mistrust and pain, which need time to heal. That is also why the initiative also attracted the reactions of the nationalists on each side, which assumed the form of violent urban unrest in several cities of Turkey in late 2009 and mid-2010.

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## 7 Conclusion

From the foundation of the Turkish Republic to the mid-1980s, official Turkish discourse did not recognize the Kurds as an ethnic group in Turkey. When the "Kurdish Question" became publicized on Turkish political scenes through the PKK's activities, many state officials perceived the conflict as a "terrorist act," the aim of which was to carve out an independent Kurdistan within the territories of the Turkish state. The Turkish state refused to consider the PKK as the legitimate "other" in the conflict and treated its Kurdish population as part of its whole Turkish citizen population. That is why the "Kurdish Question" was mostly considered in terms of "terrorism" or, at best, a "southeast underdevelopment problem" by state officials and most of the rest of Turkish society.

The Kurdish Question, even though having unique historical reasons, shares some commonalities with other conflicts around the world. Most importantly, Kurdish and Turkish nationalisms have followed similar dominant ideologies and political movements. Kurdish nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s adopted a socialist discourse

vis-à-vis the Turkish state's political and economic dominance. These reactions later took the form of asking for cultural rights and constitutional guarantees in the late 1990s and 2000s commensurate with the increasing globalization of human rights all around the world (Çelik, 2005). Turkish nationalism, on the other hand, perceived the Kurdish Question "mostly in terms of a fatal rivalry between the backward, pre-modern and tribal past and the prosperous present in the first half of the century," and

"in terms of a tension between the peripheral economy and national market in the fifties and sixties. In the 1970s, the Kurdish unrest was believed to be a product of communist incitement. Despite this impurity in perception, one thing has remained nearly unchanged for Turkish nationalism: Kurds could become Turkish. In other words, Turkish nationalism of the republican era has principally perceived Kurds as future-Turks. (Yeğen, 2007, p. 119).

Today, for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, the Kurdish Question is being discussed along all of its dimensions, even though possible solutions might not necessarily address all issues. Yet, at the same time, this issue is also regarded as a "democratization problem," which can be tackled through legal reforms and constitutional changes by the government. Even though the conflict has historically pitted the state against an ethnic group, the long-lived war in the south-east and its spillover effects in the big cities have also led to a societal polarization in almost all cities in Turkey. The social polarization dimension of the conflict is the most neglected side of the issue. Presenting cases like the Kurdish Question as a problem of "terrorism" mostly legitimizes the acts of governments in other countries as well. However, long-lived violent conflicts leave a legacy of mistrust between the citizens and states but most importantly among different strata in the society. Whereas most Kurds feel a lack of justice, humiliation, and silencing, many Turks feel afraid (that "their land" will be taken away), angry (that "terrorism" took away their sons), and proud (to be a "Turk" for centuries). These feelings need to address "each other" and be opened up to dialogue. It is only when such conflicting claims as justice, recognition of and respect to identity, some sort of self-governance,



re-constitution of trust towards the state and recognition of past mistakes on the part of the Kurds meet the demands of the Turks who ask for guarantees that Kurds will not partition the country and will use “Turkish citizenship” as an umbrella identity for peaceful co-existence. Undertaking this task, first and foremost, requires “communalization” of the pains that the war caused and producing a common language.<sup>19</sup>

It is essential to note that in the last 80 years, the Turkish state has moved from denial of the existence of Kurds to the recognition of cultural differences and a commitment to respect their culture. However, peaceful coexistence of people requires addressing social polarization and mistrust. There is a need for Turks, Kurds, and other groups in Turkey to come together and discuss what brings them under the same roof and whether their projection of future is commensurate. Even though, for the first time, Turkey’s membership acceptance to the EU increased the hopes of many for peaceful existence in a democratic Turkey, the problems of mistrust, social polarization between Kurds and Turks, and non-recognition of past mistakes still stand as barriers to such a shared future. Violent events between Kurds and Turks in the big cities of western Turkey following the discussions of the Kurdish Initiative can be presented as evidence of such problems. The violent events between the Turks and Kurds in the two towns in the north and south of the country in July 2010 worried all those who believed in the positive atmosphere that the Kurdish initiative has set. To address the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict, various strategies are needed. Whereas macro changes such as constitutional and legal reforms can guarantee the political, social, and legal rights of the Kurds and their culture, there is also a need for micro changes to address the long animosity between

the Kurds, Turks, and the state. Track II workshops consisting of intergroup dialogues, joint projects, and other strategies can be designed to target specific problematic neighborhoods in the larger cities. The history of violence also creates the needs for programs, such as trauma healing, and individual skill-building that can be designed to support victims and perpetrators of violence, to encourage healing, to foster individual reconciliation and bridge between the state and the Kurdish citizens (Çelik and Blum, 2007). Social change towards peaceful co-existence is a long and a rough road, and there will always be spoilers and loss of hope on the journey to peace.

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### **Appendix: Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey Timeline**

1984 – Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) launches separatist guerrilla war in southeast Turkey.

1987 – Turkey applies for full European Economic Community (EEC) membership.

1990 – Turkey allows US-led coalition against Iraq to launch air strikes from Turkish bases.

1992 – 20,000 Turkish troops enter Kurdish safe havens in Iraq in anti-PKK operation.

1995 – Major military offensive launched against the Kurds in northern Iraq, involving some 35,000 Turkish troops.

1995 – Turkey enters European Union (EU) customs union.

October 1998 – Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, leaves his base in Syria after Turkey threatens to invade Syria.

February 1999 – PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan captured in Kenya.

July 1999 – Öcalan receives death sentence, later commuted to life imprisonment.

August 2002 – Turkish Parliament approves reforms aimed at securing EU membership. Death sentence to be abolished except in times of war and bans on Kurdish education, broadcasting to be lifted.

January 2004 – Turkey signs protocol banning death penalty in all circumstances, a move welcomed in EU circles

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<sup>19</sup>One of the barriers of dialogue between the Kurds and the Turks is the conflicting language they use in describing their pains and referring to their history. The simplest example is that many Kurds call the deceased PKK militants “martyrs,” whereas for Turks martyrs are the soldiers and security forces who die during the “fight against terrorism.”

May 2004 – PKK says it plans to end a ceasefire because of what it calls annihilation operations against its forces.

June 2004 – State TV broadcasts first Kurdish-language programme. Four Kurdish MPs, including former MP Leyla Zana, freed from jail.

December 2004 – EU leaders agree to open talks in 2005 on Turkey’s EU accession.

April 2006 – At least a dozen people are killed in clashes between Kurdish protesters and security forces in the south-east. Several people are killed in related unrest in Istanbul.

September 30, 2006 – PKK declares a unilateral ceasefire in operations against the military.

December 2007 – Turkey launches a series of air strikes on fighters from the Kurdish PKK movement inside Iraq.

October 2008 – Trial starts of 86 suspected members of a shadowy ultra-nationalist Ergenekon group, which is accused of plotting a series of attacks and provoking a military coup against the government. Terrorist activities peak with the PKK’s, killing of 17 soldiers at the Aktütün military outpost.

January 2009 – The state-run Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) launches a Kurdish-language broadcast.

February 2009 – Protesters marking the 10th anniversary of the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the banned Kurdish PKK movement, clash with police in south-east Turkey.

Prominent Kurdish politician Ahmet Turk defies Turkish law by giving speech to parliament in his native Kurdish. State TV cuts live broadcast, as the language is banned in parliament.

July 29, 2009 – Interior Minister Beşir Atalay announces the government’s Kurdish move, vowing to solve the problem through “more freedom and more democracy.”

August 1, 2009 – The government holds its first workshop to hear suggestions on the move from important intellectuals, including columnists and academics.

August 20, 2009 – Öcalan delivers his own 160-page handwritten road map to resolve the Kurdish issue through his attorneys. It is confiscated by prison officials at İmralı Island where he

is being held and Öcalan criticizes the AKP for its lack of sincerity.

October 19, 2009 – A 34-person “peace group,” comprising eight PKK members and 26 residents of the Makhmour refugee camp in northern Iraq, heeds a call by Öcalan and surrenders at the Habur border gate between Turkey and Iraq. The welcoming ceremony held for the group and the members’ release by judges at the border spark a huge public outcry.

December 7, 2009 – Seven Turkish soldiers die in a terrorist attack in the Reşadiye district of the central province of Tokat.

December 11, 2009 – The Constitutional Court closes the pro-Kurdish *Demokratik Toplum Partisi* (DTP).

May 31, 2010 – Six soldiers are killed in a PKK attack on a Turkish naval base in İskenderun, a district of the southern province of Hatay.

June 19–20, 2010 – Twelve soldiers are killed in PKK attacks in the southeastern province of Hakkari.

June 22, 2010 – Four soldiers and one teenage civilian are killed in a bomb attack on a military bus in Istanbul’s Halkalı district. A PKK-affiliated group claims responsibility.

Adapted from BBC News Online (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1023189.stm>), and Hurriyet Daily News (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=from-hope-to-misery-kurdish-move8217s-journey-2010-06-22>) visited on 7 July, 2010.

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