

Political Faultlines in the Middle East

Edited by

KINGSHUK CHATTERJEE



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd
New Delhi



Center for Studies in
International Relations and
Development (CSIRD)



Copyright © 2021 Center for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without first obtaining written permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN

Published in India by Kalpana Shukla



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd

4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road

Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002

Phone: +91 11 23263498/43528107

Marketing: kw@kwpub.com

Editorial: production@kwpub.com

Website: www.kwpub.com

Printed and bound in India

The content of this book is the sole expression and opinion of its author(s), and not of the publisher. The publisher in no manner is liable for any opinion or views expressed by the author(s). While best efforts have been made in preparing the book, the publisher makes no representations or warranties of any kind and assumes no liabilities of any kind with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the content and specifically disclaims any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness of use of a particular purpose.

The publisher believes that the contents of this book do not violate any existing copyright/intellectual property of others in any manner whatsoever. However, in case any source has not been duly attributed, the publisher may be notified in writing for necessary action.

Contents

Contributors	ix
1. Introduction	1
2. <i>'A Fantasy Brought to Life': Revisiting Neo-Ottomanism in Yeni Turkiye</i> <i>Anita Sengupta</i>	9
3. Trajectories of a Stalemate: Turkey's Kurdish Question <i>Necati Anaz and Mehmet Ozkan</i>	29
4. The Lebanese Revolution and Hizbullah's Shi'i Axis of Resistance <i>Joseph Alagha</i>	47
5. Imperial Storm Troopers and the Return of the Mahdi: A Historical Perspective of the Israeli-Iranian Struggle <i>Dr. Nir Boms and Maj. (Res.) Stéphane Cohen</i>	97
6. Saudi Arabia: Navigating a Perilous Regional and International Politics <i>Muddassir Quamar</i>	111
7. Safeguarding the Islamic Republic: Structural Factors and Generational Shift Shaping Tehran's Foreign Policy <i>Kingshuk Chatterjee</i>	131
8. From Proactive to Reactive Shift in American Middle East Strategy <i>Binoda K. Mishra</i>	151

9. The Return of the Prodigal: The Lengthening Shadow of
Russia in the Middle East 163
Hari Sankar Vasudevan and Kingsbuk Chatterjee
10. China, Iran and West Asia: Civilisational Co-operation in the
Twenty-first Century 179
Jigme Yeshe Lama
11. The Unstable Middle East and India's Options 195
Ambassador Anil Trigunayat (IFS Retd.)

3. Trajectories of a Stalemate: Turkey's Kurdish Question

Necati Anaz and Mehmet Ozkan

Introduction

Turkey's Kurdish question is not a typical question in international politics. It started with right demands but went out of control as both sides escalated the conflict. Since the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2002, there has been a sea change in terms of the Turkish state's approach to the issues. Ankara no longer sees the issue as purely denying Kurds' rightful cultural demands, rather it sees in a broader question of Turkey's inclusiveness, democratization and creating a 'new Turkey'. Ankara's good intentions did not result in a positive outcome yet in writing off the issue from current Turkish politics, nevertheless it has made so much effort that now it is clearer to talk about a PKK issue rather than a Kurdish issue in Turkey. This essay therefore will try to outline the general and changing dynamics of the issues from the beginning to the present aiming to shed a light on what the future holds.

Background

Commonly known as the Kurdish question, from a Turkish standpoint the issue mainly possesses two categorical traits.¹ On one hand it contains cultural and identity factors desiring pluralistic answers to the question. On the other hand, it contains geopolitical aspirations including self-determination and territorial ambition that elevates the case to the level of security and a matter of military operations. These two categorical dispositions sit on a binary background, one which goes back to the Treaty of Sevres and the second has ties with regional and international

actors.² Turkey's Kurdish question thus happens to be both international and domestic in character, intersecting different blocks of issues and necessitating a holistic approach to the matter without essentialising it to a certain provision. Thus, to understand Turkey's Kurdish question, we need to look at how the 'matter' evolved in time and space and how the answers to the problem are addressed. The idea of Kurdishness as a distinct identity and nation has been recognized more recently than used to be the case earlier. Although number of Kurdish resentments against the Ottoman Empire has been recorded, political and cultural struggles are documented from 1920s to these days (Sheikh Said in 1925, Ihsan Nuri Pasha in 1930, Sheikh Seyyid Riza in 1936). Especially during the single party period, the very existence of Kurds had been denied at the state level and any sort of resentment was treated as a 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".³ This psychological predisposition has shaped many of the minds of the ruling elites throughout history of the Republic. From time to time diversity of the Republic has been recognised, however consistent embracing of the country's eastern problem and restoring the social harmony did not move forward. With the Law on the Transfer of Certain People from the Eastern Regions to the Western Provinces (Law No. 1907), people of Kurdish origin were moved forcibly to the western provinces creating further cultural, social, economic and political distress that still have its impact felt on Turkish and Kurdish society today.

Internal migration from eastern cities to the western cities of Turkey whether these movements were the result of state action or economic and cultural factors led the Jinn out of the bottle. Western cities continued to receive migrants from Kurdish towns and villages creating new rigors in metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Mersin which in the end made Istanbul the biggest Kurdish city in the world. This mobility in such large scale did not only change the cultural landscape of metropolitan cities, but also changed the epicenter of Kurdish rebellion from east to the west. More and more young people joined Kurdish

resistance in slums especially in Istanbul and Ankara. What is more, Kurdish movement found its new nesting sites and voices. Traditionally, Kurdish question had been the concern of those who were of Kurdish origin but after 1960s, people who had Turkish origin also embraced the matter and moved it to the next level. Essentially forced migration by the state from Kurdish villages and towns aimed to break out of the tribal unity in Eastern Anatolia while pushing socio-cultural assimilation of Kurds wherever they were transferred. This population control and mobilisation also caused retarding of Kurdish opposition to the state until late 1960s.

Another visible consequence of this east to west mobilisation was that Kurdish movement changed its religious and tribal character to the secular and leftist one.⁴ Even during the Ottoman time, rebellions against Istanbul showed religious and tribal character more than those of nationalist and secessionist varieties. Until recently Kurdish groups were led by either religious leaders or tribal chiefs. It was the international moment that was championed by students, women and factory workers and influenced by socialist parties and organisations in 1960s. Students and leftist organisations metropolitan cities in particular have appropriated Kurds' social, economic, political and ethnic struggles against Turkish state. Thus, the Kurdish question changed its direction and became the matter of urban areas as well as those of eastern towns and villages. Meanwhile, Kurdish cause began being flagged more and more by secular and leftist groups than by traditional authorities in eastern cities and rural areas. Because of this change of orientation, Kurdish question became more political and ethnic than ever before. In turn, Turkish state also began to see the development as a matter of national existence even more.

Again it was the atmosphere of 1960s that brought relatively greater freedom for political mobilisation in which trade unions and student organisations flourished and became active. The 1961 Constitution provided some sort of liberty for associations and political parties that paved the way for much greater number of Kurdish political activities and publications. Although the 1960 coup d'état brought strict control

over Kurdish populated areas including changing names of Kurdish towns and villages, Kurdish youth and union activities in metropolitan areas accelerated and institutionalised. For example, the Establishment of the Workers' Party of Turkey (WPT) in 1961 was a turning point in mobilising Kurdish matters.⁵ In big cities, the party attracted middle-class and progressive fans while it gained the attention of Kurds and Alevis in the rural areas. According to Celik, the party based its campaign on class struggle against capitalist exploitation in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir while focused on liberating people of the east from the institutions of Sheikhsism, squirarchy and feudalism. The WPT kept its socialist tendencies and leftist orientation while giving birth to new revolutionary fractions through which the Kurdish question was brought to the public's attention for the first time. For Celik, it was Mihri Belli who first publicly talked about the Kurdish question in his article entitled "the National Reality" in monthly journal *Aydinlik*.⁶ Celik also notes that the WPT as a legal political party in Turkey recognised publicly the existence of Kurds in Turkey announcing 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 assimilating and intimidation, which has often become bloody repression.⁷

The WPT's understanding of the Kurdish question was heavily influenced by its leftist position and ideological stand highlighting that the Kurdish cause is a matter of class struggle and colonisation of the region by the Turkish dominant class. The party placed a solution before the revolutionary movement, suggesting an end to imperialist policies toward the region through which the long-standing oppression toward Kurds will disappear. Therefore, the WPT suggested more of structural changes and revolutionary remedies to the eastern problem. It is important to highlight here that the WPT was not the only legal organisation to voice Kurdish matters. Many more legal and illegal organisations had undertaken to voice Kurdish consciousness. Their mutual area of focus

seemed to be that they opposed inequality, exploitation and tribal practices in the region and elsewhere in the country. However, as in the case of 1960 coup d'état, the 1971 memorandum banned many of the organisations and associations as well as trade unions and student movements for being a threat to the state and social harmony in Turkey. According to Celik, once again, Kurdish political mobilisation was silenced until the 1974 general amnesty, which brought political and opinion leaders back into the public arena.⁸

1960s and 1970s saw exceptional examples of Kurdish resistance to state policies and marked the era of Kurdish consciousness beyond the Kurdish region in the east. Inspired by leftist and militaristic ideologies, a number of illegal organisations emerged and partially took control of Kurdish political mobilisation. Among these were the Revolutionary Democratic Cultural Associations of 1974 from which the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) emerged later. Parallel with a number of overt cultural associations, many covert liberation groups worked to promote the idea of Kurdish autonomy and independence. Until Kurds organized their own groups, radical leftist groups created by Turkish students carried the flag of demanding greater Kurdish autonomy in their programmes.⁹

By the time Turkey experienced another military intervention in 1980, the Kurdish problem had become a well-known issue both nationally and internationally. The environment brought about by the coup d'état in 1980 marked another wave of strict state control and imprisonments throughout the country. Since the coup was a result of extreme ideological polarisation in the society, harsh sanctions came from the military junta imposed on different sects of the society. As a result, thousands of people were imprisoned; hundreds of them received death penalty and even more were striped from their political affiliations and banned for their political activities. Although Turkey moved to the civilian rule in 1983, Turkish bureaucratic structure formed in the light of the 1980 coup d'état and legalised by the 1982 Constitution remained as a barrier for the recognition of Kurds as a cultural distinct group in Turkey (Celik, 2012: 249).¹⁰

Militarization of the Conflict

It was the 1980s militarist environment in which the PKK¹¹ was founded by Abdullah Ocalan and his friends in Ankara. Ocalan was a student in one of the prestigious state universities in Turkey (Faculty of Political Sciences at Ankara University) when he founded the PKK and later became an unchallenged leader of the organization. Being of Marxist origin, the PKK “represented the most marginal sections of Kurdish society and recruited the lower class Kurds such as the peasants who form the majority of population”.¹² As discussed later, one of the main goals of PKK was first to destroy the traditional Kurdish social structure that has tribal ties and then to create an independent socialist Kurdish state. Therefore, oxymoronically PKK fights to eliminate Kurdish traditional social structure and tribal elites to become international and on the other hand employs much of its energy and time for the awareness of Kurdish Nationalism. As in many secessionist movements, PKK also emerged as a leftist organisation to achieve a nationalist goal.

Soon after the military took control of the government in 1980, the PKK cadre left Turkey for Syria-controlled Beqa’ Valley where PKK militants are trained by Palestinian fighters(Galletti 1999).¹³ According to Galletti, here in the Beqa’ Valley “Ocalan consolidated the party structure and established himself as the undisputed leader, often employing brutal methods against dissenters”.¹⁴ Ocalan led PKK till he was abducted by the Turkish National Intelligence in Nairobi, Kenya in February 1999. Today, Ocalan resides as the sole prisoner on Imrali Island in the Sea of Marmara. Although his leadership is bypassed by war hawks in the mountains, Ocalan still remains to be an important authority in the PKK and its affiliated organisations.

Several observations can be made about the PKK. One is that PKK emerged as an armed force to fight against Turkey’s military presence in the east of the country. As part of the self-assignment, PKK positioned itself as the sole unchallenged military unit of the Kurdish struggle toward cultural and geographic independence. Accordingly, the PKK legitimised all its actions toward swallowing all sorts of oppositions and possible contenders as it successfully pushed the Kurdish question

into the hands of armed groups which understood the Kurdish problem as one that could only be addressed within the parameters of military posture and through dissemination of endemic violence and unexpected terrorism strategies. In this sense, the PKK organised its first overt attack on Turkish military in southeastern Turkey in 1984. Since then more than 40,000 people have died and countless more have suffered from the violent conflict. The 1980 coup d'état and the martial law that preceded it put further restrictions on the rights to organise and communicate in their mother tongue. In returned, ethnic and cultural tension toward the state increased and gave more legitimacy to the PKK for greater mobilisation in the following years (Celik, 2012).¹⁵

Second, the PKK, inspired by radical-leftist ideology, aimed to unite international Kurds under the flag of independent socialist Kurdish state embracing the Kurdish regions of today's Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. PKK based its arguments on the claim that Kurdish regions are colonised by fascist states and only revolutionary forces of PKK could liberate the area. For that reason, PKK was obliged to fight on two fronts; one was against Turkish army and its establishments and the second fight was directed to the traditional structures and non-revolutionary Kurdish authorities which were hesitant to support Kurds to unite under the flag of PKK. These authorities are announced to be the Kurdish feudalists (religious and tribal leaders) and bourgeoisie (landlords). PKK targeted all sorts of Kurdish groups and structures that opposed its terror tactics and philosophy. Accordingly, PKK forced dissident Kurdish population toward west and deliberately aimed at to empty villages that hesitated to support strategic goals of PKK. These Kurds were not even supporter of Turkish state per se. For PKK, targeting the Kurdish opposition was easily justifiable. If PKK did not revive a substantial support from its cause, any action against the opposition was legitimate. Thus, another wave of human mobilisation and politics of silencing took part as a consequence of PKK violence on Kurds. This competition was not always unique to Turkish-Kurds. Kurdish organisations in the region contested each other over dominating the voice of the ethnic group on a geographical basis. For example, Tezcur notes that how decades-old power struggle between

the PKK and KDP indicate strategic organisational interests prevailing over common ethnic identity.¹⁶ Tezcur states that “the rise of the PKK as a mass movement was a significant ideological and territorial challenge to the KDP”.¹⁷ These inter/intra Kurdish rivalries further complicated the Kurdish question even up to today.

It is also important to note here that Kurds should not be counted as a homogenous nation not only because of political reasons but also for geographical and cultural grounds. Majority of Kurds (in Turkey and outside) do not support PKK’s politics and philosophy. There are a number of Kurdish political parties and organizations that are far apart from the PKK both in their means and objectives. The current ruling dispensation in Turkey, the AK Party, since its inception has enjoyed being the most popular party among the Kurdish population. Kurds in Northern Iraq is another example for the case. Urrutia and Villellas note that “Kurdish political aspirations have been constrained by internal strife and divisions, leadership rivalries, distrust, and the complex matrix of cross-border relationships”.¹⁸ However, many Kurds today remain neutral because they often like to take advantages of the political and cultural outcomes of the armed conflict. Kurds are not united geographically as they are spread out in different countries and regions including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Azerbaijan, and Europe. The terrain also blocks Kurdish unity further and jeopardises possible awareness of Kurdish nationhood. Furthermore, Kurds are also apart with regard to religion and language (Sheyholislami, 2015).¹⁹ For example, Celik states that “Kirmanji, 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 as few, especially in Iran”.²⁰ Kurds in Sulaymaniyah city experience a different form of life than those who live in western Turkey.

Since 1990s, the PKK became number one security problem domestically but an important actor internationally. During this time several developments took place. First, Kurdish politics legally entered to Turkish parliament. Although Kurdish democratic struggle in the

parliament was often interrupted by party closures and imprisonments of their members, one way or another Kurdish voice in the parliament was heard since People's Labor Party (HEP) inducted 21 Kurdish politicians to the parliament through a coalition with Social Democratic Party (SHP) in 1991. When HEP is closed in 1993, Democracy Party (DEP) was established. When DEP was shut down the next year, Peoples' Democracy Party (HADEP) was established in 1994. HADEP collected more than a million votes in 1995 elections and won 37 municipalities in local elections in 1999. Due to the national threshold, HADEP did not enter the parliament but Kurdish nationalist politics was always hot topics in Turkey. The main purpose of these legal establishments were to open another channel for independence and to give voice to the Kurdish cause other than relying on the outcomes of the armed struggle.

The second development considers internationalisation of the Kurdish question. Mainly it took shape on two fronts. On one hand, legal political and cultural Kurdish organisations in Turkey took the case on to the world stage. Especially interest groups, think-tanks and cultural associations produced written materials in languages other than Turkish and organised international conferences to express social, political, economic and cultural issues regarding Kurdish-populated regions and towns. Also, legal cases that are taken to the European Court of Human Rights related to wrong doings of military personnel, the governors of the cities under the OHAL and the deep-state in eastern Turkey. In 1990s, eastern part of the country saw notorious implications of the emergency rule by the state. This, in turn, created systemic violations of human rights for Kurds. Cases that gained no leverage in the Turkish judicial circles were taken to the European Court of Human Rights. This helped the Kurdish question to become more international than before.

On the other hand, Kurdish diaspora via legal and informal channels introduced Kurdish issues to the western audiences as a firsthand informer. As mentioned earlier, security calculations of the state and emergency rules in eastern Turkey resulted in emanations of thousands of dissidents from Turkey to the Western Europe and the North America. People who took asylum in western countries organised to lobby on

behalf of Kurds in Turkey and committed to the Kurdish question to be addressed internationally. Furthermore, the Kurdish diaspora not only become the voice of Kurds in western cities but also become powerful sponsor of Kurdish struggle in Turkey. Thus, on one side, the armed conflict continued on the ground via attacks of PKK, while political and cultural fight in the capital cities abroad went on.

Ankara's Kurdish Openings and Peace Efforts

The first serious attempt to settle the Kurdish issue occurred in 2005 when then-Prime Minister Erdoğan publicly accepted the existence of a Kurdish issue and pledged to tackle it in all its aspects in earnest in a speech delivered in front of a crowd in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish-majority city in Turkey.²¹ However, this opening soon failed mainly because Turkey did not engage an organic Kurdish partner for the settlement of the issue. Learning from this failure, Turkey embarked on a second trial through secret talks between government officials and PKK representatives in Oslo in 2009. This too came to a halt with the outbreak of violence in 2011.²² The talks also took place without public knowledge; hence the process would have faced a major crisis if the talks were disclosed. Drawing lessons from this attempt and failure, Turkey's most audacious attempt to date was announced by Erdoğan on the closing days of 2012 when he said that the state was talking with Ocalan, the most important Kurdish political figure in Turkey, with the aim of a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue. Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party threw their full weight behind the process.²³ This last attempt, which had the full support of the primary decision-makers in Turkish and Kurdish politics, is unrivalled in the history of Turkey's search for a settlement in the Kurdish issue. However, The Suruç bombing in 2015 collapsed the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government. In addition, a regional upheaval, particularly the Syrian imbroglio and its Kurdish dimension, has upset this peace process.

Since the start of the search for a resolution of the issue in 2005, the process has failed three times. Each restart has built upon the experience gained and the lessons learned from the previous process. The

lessons learned from the failure of the 2005 opening set the stage for the opening of 2009. Likewise, the lessons drawn from the failure of 2009 paved the way for the 2013 opening. In the meantime, society has been conditioned more for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue, which in return has freed politicians' hands in being more forthcoming on the settlement.²⁴ For instance, Kurdish peace process initiation announced a committee of 63 'wise men' from seven regions in 2013, including well esteemed persons such as authors, artists, academicians and NGO representatives.²⁵

Lessons learned: three tracks to the peace process

The first track consists of the contacts between the government and the PKK. A March 2013 unilateral PKK ceasefire – the ninth of the insurgency, by the PKK's count – has survived numerous incidents. This has been largely thanks to interventions in favor of the process by the leaders of the two sides. The presence of two strong charismatic men, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, means that both sides have someone who can negotiate, agree and implement a deal if they want to. There have been many visits to Öcalan by Erdoğan's representatives and by legal pro-PKK Kurdish parliamentarians, the latter of whom shuttle between Öcalan, the diaspora and the PKK. In mid-2014, the government legalized the process and set up a ministerial board to oversee it, including 11 commissions that will deal with core matters like transitional justice and disarmament.

On the second of the three tracks, the efforts aimed to remove the roots of the conflict. Turkey is already a better place than it was in the dark years of the 1990s. Five main goals have emerged: full-fledged education in vernacular language; decentralisation in decision-making throughout Turkey; full access to parliamentary politics for significant smaller parties like the Kurdish national movement; a rewording of discriminatory articles in the constitution; and a fairer counter-terrorism law. A state-run Kurdish-language TV has been broadcasting since 2009. Education in Kurdish and other languages spoken in Turkey is now offered as a career option in schools, even if there is systemic resistance to

its implementation on both sides. An incomplete first step towards better local government was taken in March 2014, with a quarter of Turkey's 81 provinces being assigned new powers for their elected mayors. These have been the most gallant steps toward the Kurdish people which were even unthinkable a decade ago (Erdem, 2016).²⁶

On the third of the three tracks, the general context and process, and the atmosphere is much more improved since the peace process began. Partly thanks to Erdoğan's embrace of ethnic differences, Kurdishness became normal and more widely respected and accepted at state level. At times when there was no deadly violence in the southeast and leaders used more states-man-like rhetoric, mainstream Turkish public opinion showed positive support for the effort. In Kurdish-majority towns, a decade of economic progress, road-building and relative stability has followed while the middle class of the region began investing in the deal in which they had a big stake.

Collapse of the Process: Regional Dynamics

PKK has missed an excellent opportunity to finish the decades of conflict. Turkey was very serious on peace negotiations however the Syria war has changed many regional balances and calculations on the side of PKK, and the peace process was no exception to this. The PKK has shown a relatively unprecedented ability to operate regionally in Syria and Iraq in 2014-2015; its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has succeeded in forging a previously unimaginable tie with the US, taking advantage of deteriorating Turkey-US relations. The Syrian Kurds' conflict with ISIS terrorists has also triggered unrest in Turkish Kurdish communities in Turkey and Europe. At the same time, the now evident, dangers of Syrian spillover have underlined how many shared interests Turkey, the PKK and Turkey's Kurds have in overcoming inertia in the talks, declaring some mutually agreed end-goals and making the most of the progress achieved over the past nine years. In the end, PKK's Syrian branch PYD took the deal hostage and later turned the table over for more promises that could come with aligning Turkey's opposition in the region.

Since the commencement of the Arab Spring, the PKK has heavily invested political capital in the Kurdish part of Syria, more popularly known by its Kurdish name, Rojava. The PKK does not regard Rojava as a separate case. Rather, it views the area as intrinsic to its regional strategy, including its political calculations vis-à-vis the peace process. Hence, developments in Syria function as a make or break point for Turkey's Kurdish peace process. This point was conspicuously confirmed when the PKK affiliated groups initiated waves of protests on October 6-8, 2014, which resulted in the deaths of more than 50 people and brought the whole peace process to the verge of collapse. Likewise, the latest developments in the Kurdish part of Syria, particularly the fight between the PKK and ISIS, which has spilled over into Turkey with deadly consequences, have gravely endangered the process.

The gap between the two sides' understandings of the Kurdish question and formulas for its settlement, unfortunately, has not decreased. Instead, it has widened since the commencement of the peace process in 2013. The Kurds' gain in Syria in the form of the de-facto establishment of Rojava has only emboldened them and made them less compromising on their demands vis-à-vis Turkey. Thus, further democratisation of Turkey seems unsuitable for the settlement of the Kurdish issue due to the PKK's political status-focused demands and aspirations.

The Syrian conflict has nevertheless emerged as a grave threat to the peace process (Ozkan, 2018).²⁷ Symbolically, Syria's Kurds have staked out ambitious goals of self-rule and being a dominant geopolitical actor in northern Syria which Turkey's Kurds regarded as a model. Practically, too, the war had, as now proven, the capacity to jump over the border into Turkey. Despite its much clear strength as a state, Turkey remains vulnerable to regional ferment because its society shares many of the ethnic, sectarian and political divisions of Syria and Iraq. This turmoil in the border of Turkey-Syria could only be seen as nothing more than the arc of opportunity for the PKK and its regional branches.

Then there is the drama of Kobani, the north Syrian Kurdish town on the Turkish border that has become an epic symbol during its struggle with ISIS, partly because everyone could follow the fight over Kobani live

on TV and social media. For Kurds in diaspora, Kobani also became the new Mahabad in Syria. For the PKK, the town has turned into the new frontier. Soon the Kobani fight turned into an international celebrity, PKK's Syrian branch PYD had unilaterally declared that Kobani was a self-ruling canton, the PYD's success was a model at last for its vague doctrine of "democratic autonomy". When it turned out that the PYD could not defend this democratically autonomous canton against ISIS; the PKK – and therefore opinion among Turkey's Kurds – blamed Turkey for the fact that nearly 200,000 Syrian Kurds lost their homes and Kobani itself came under devastating siege. This accusation was cynical, since Turkey could hardly be expected to either invade Syria to save Kobani, or to supply the heavy weaponry needed to equip a group against whom it is still effectively at war. Despite the PKK factor, Iraqi Peshmerga crossed Turkish border to enter the combat zone of Kobani with Turkish assistance and coordination to emancipate the city from ISIS occupation.²⁸ Interestingly Turkish towns and cities have been targeted by both ISIS and PKK affiliated terror groups as a result of Turkey's Kobani stand.²⁹

The result was an extraordinary outburst of violence in several Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey on October 6-8, 2015.³⁰ The leader of HDP Selahattin Demistas called Kurdish pupils to defend cities and blockade roads and towns against Turkish security forces in eastern Turkey. During the embroilment, nearly 40 people were killed in lynchings and shootings. Disturbingly, these protests did not so much pit Turkish Kurd national movement activists against the security forces, but against pro-ISIS Turkish Kurds. It may not be so easy next time: Kurdish public opinion has become highly volatile, and PKK leader Öcalan may not be able to use his political capital indefinitely in absence of real progress in the talks. The leadership of the PKK is hijacked by the mountain hawks and political falcons in HDP.

Conclusion

It is difficult to argue that at social level there is no Kurdish question in Turkey, because there are many inter-marriages and socially bonded

relations between Turks and Kurds. Islam has continued to be the main cement to get these two ethnic groups together and stronger. However, a systemic problem stemming from the foundation of Turkey – mostly to create Turkish identity – has left many years Turkey's Kurdish citizens ethnically feel excluded. PKK has utilised this opportunity to take this issue to further level and state's response accordingly shaped the conflict since 1980s. As Turkey has become a mature democracy and has come to terms with its past both at religious and cultural level, Ankara has started to approach to the issues from a different perspective. In Turkey today nobody denies the cultural and citizenship rights of Kurdish population nor are they being denied political rights. President Erdoğan since his tenure as leader of Turkey wanted to solve this issue; but regional dynamics, Syrian war, double-faced nature of the PKK in several peace negotiations made this issue more complicated. As of 2020, PKK is perhaps the only terrorist organisation which has a military arms composed of 8,000 people in the mountain and at the same having elected members in the Turkish parliament, cities and other elected offices. The problem now is to solve this anomaly and go forward for a more inclusive way. Turkish officials asked HDP leaders several times to denounce the PKK violence and put a clear distance between themselves and the PKK. They never did so, nor intended to do but continued to defend PKK. This has resulted in a new security centric approach from Ankara to move in a direction where anyone who has involved in terrorist activities have to be judged and put in jail. Today several prominent leaders of HDP are in jail and nobody knows how this strange stalemate of Turkey's Kurdish issues will be solved. A possible scenario is that Turkey will continue to crash PKK on the mountains till the weakened organisation becomes willing to sit and negotiate with Turkish state. In the meantime, the regional and international environment has become conducive for sustaining a possible peace deal – while almost the entire region in the Middle East is in disarray. That seems to be the only scenario in future. As of now, given the deteriorating regional dynamics (Libya, Yemen, Iran, Syria, Iraq, etc.) nobody knows how soon that future would be arriving.

Notes

1. See Ana Vilellas. *Turkey and the Kurdish Question: Reflecting on Peacebuilding* (Catalana: Quaderns de Construcció de Pau, 2011).
2. Gunes Murat Tezcur, "A Century of the Kurdish Question: Organizational Rivalries, Diplomacy, and Cross-Ethnic Coalitions," *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2019): 1-12.
3. Ayse Betul Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey: From the Denial of Kurds to Peaceful Co-existence?," in *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, edited by D. Landis and R.D. Albert, 241-60 (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2012), p. 244.
4. Taha Ozhan and Hatem Ete. *Kürt Meselesi: Problemler ve Çözüm Önerileri*, (Ankara: SETA, 2008).
5. Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey", p. 246.
6. Ibid., p. 247.
7. Cited in Ibid.
8. Ibid., p, 249.
9. CIA. *The Kurdish Problem in Perspective* (Washington: National Foreign Assesment Center, 2002), p. 22.
10. Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey", p. 249.
11. PKK is a terrorist organisation in Turkey and also recognised as a terrorist organisation by the United States, United Nations, NATO and the European Union.
12. Mirella Galletti, "The Kurdish issue in Turkey." *The International Spectator* 34, no. 1 (1999), p. 124.
13. Galletti, *ibid.*
14. Ibid., p. 124.
15. Celik, Ayse Betul. "State, Non-Governmental and International Organizations in the Possible Peace Process in Turkey's Conflict-Induced Displacement." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 26, no. 1 (2012): 1-26.
16. Tezcur, "A Century of the Kurdish Question".
17. Ibid., p. 5.
18. Pamela Urrutia and Ana Vilellas. *Reopening the Kurdish question: states, communities and proxies in a time of turmoil* (Oslo: NOREF, 2012), p. 11 .
19. Jaffer Sheyholislami, "The language varieties of the Kurds." In *The Kurd: History - Religion - Language - Politics*, edited by Alexander Schahbasi and Thomas Schrott, 28-51. Vienna /Austria: Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2015.
20. Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey", p. 243.
21. Anthony Derisiotis, "Erdogan, Turkey's Kurds and the Regionalisation of the Kurdish Issue," *New Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 53-68.

22. Galip Dalay, "The Kurdish Peace Process: From Dialogue to Negotiation?," in Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Reports, April 22, 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/04/2015422115349145185.html>
23. Halime Kokce, AK Parti ve Kurtler. First Edition. Istanbul: Okur Kitaplığı, 2011.
24. SETA, Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu Algisi. Ankara: SETA, 2009.
25. Anadolu Agency, "Wise men committee members announced," Ankara: Anatolian Agency, 2013.
26. Tarhan Erdem, Kürtler için mesele bir yerel yönetim meselesidir Türkiye için de mesele bu olmalıdır Heinrich Böll Stiftung / Türkiye, (30 April 2016).
27. Mehmet Ozkan, "Shaping peace processes: A comparison between Turkey and Colombia", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol 16, No 4, 2018, pp. 87-99.
28. F. Michael Wuthrich, "Kurdish Nationalist Organizations, Neighboring States, and "Ideological Distance," in *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Emel Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al, 85-112. Lawrence, USA: University of Kansas, 2018.
29. Soli Ozel, "Turkey: Military Action in a Strategic Void." *Mediterranean Yearbook 2017 Geopolitical Turmoil and its Effects in the Mediterranean Region*, no. 1 (2017): 1-5.
30. ISDP. Turkey's Kurdish Conflict: 2015-Present. Stockholm: Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2016.