

Rise of Militaristic Sentiment and Patriotic Discourses in Turkey: An Analytic Review

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Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, its official policy had been to deny the existence of a Kurdish identity. Since the 2000s, there has been a discursive shift towards acknowledging the Kurdish identity falling short of its official and legal recognition as an identity—national, ethnic, minority, or other. It seems that the halfhearted discursive shift towards recognizing the Kurdish identity has ironically served the cause of exacerbating the conflict. The superficial acknowledgment in the official discourse has promoted the acceptance of the Kurdish identity, yet the conflict has shifted from being politically framed to being identity-based or ethnically-framed. This paper aims to trace the shifts in these frames and paradigms and the rise of the nationalist and militarist discourses in Turkey.

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Kurds in Turkey: Changing Images of the 'Other'

The Changing Frames of Conflict: From Political to Identity-Based

Political discourses are often used to hold together the two most populous identities of Turkey—the Turks and the Kurds: “We have been brothers for a thousand years”, “We fought against our enemies as far back as Malazgirt¹ and all the way to Çanakkale²”, “Our religion/sect is the same”³. Despite all these unifying discourses, the conflict is increasing steadily. Considering the events of recent years in Turkey, it is no exaggeration that “Turkish” and “Kurdish” identities are now positioned as “Others” for each other.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, its official policy had been to deny the existence of a Kurdish identity. This view was accepted among the Turks and some Kurds. For this reason, the Kurds fighting for their identities only experienced a political conflict with the state. However, since the government’s de facto acknowledgment⁴ of the Kurdish identity, many ordinary Turks and Kurds needed to face the new identity-based heterogeneity of their society. Political calculations stood behind the government’s new discourse of halfhearted recognition, and its reluctance to take the necessary democratization steps to meet Kurdish demands ultimately led to more polarization in society. Moreover, the government’s anti-Kurdish position in

¹The Battle of Manzikert (modern Malazgirt in Turkey’s Muş Province) was fought between the Byzantine Empire and the Seljuq Empire in 1071.

²The Battle of Çanakkale, also known as the Gallipoli Campaign or the Dardanelles Campaign, took place during the First World War on the Gallipoli peninsula (Gelibolu in modern Turkey) between April 25, 1915 and January 9, 1916.

³ Most Turks and Kurds living in Turkey and practicing religion are predominantly Sunni Muslims.

⁴ With the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, only three minorities were and continue to be officially recognized in Turkey—Armenians, Jews, and Greeks. In the 2000s, there has been a discursive shift towards acknowledging the Kurdish identity falling short of its official and legal recognition as an identity—national, ethnic, minority, or other.

the ongoing war in Syria further deepens the polarization. This inevitably leads to reciprocal accusations, hatred, and anger, creating and deepening the gap between the sides. Therefore, people identifying with or sympathetic to either side tend to neglect problems of poverty and class structures and are increasingly foregrounding the perception of identity.

For a long time, among the Turks, only the PKK⁵ was held accountable for the conflict. Slogans were aired only against the PKK and mostly at military funerals. Now, however, two divergent tendencies have emerged. On the one hand, more and more people distinguish the PKK and Kurds in general. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to levy the responsibility of the conflict directly on Kurds. Slogans targeting Kurds have become more audible and visible at the funerals of military personnel killed by the PKK. Fighting has broken out between children; Kurdish houses and businesses have been stoned, looted, and even set on fire by Turkish nationalist groups.

On the Kurdish side, for years, the state or the power and the regime was given the sole responsibility for the suffering that the Kurdish people have experienced since the foundation of the Republic. In the past, people who were forced to leave their villages pointed their fingers at the regime as the perpetrator. And again, according to them, thousands of Kurds were killed by the state. However, in recent years, instead of the state or the government, ordinary Turks have become the addressee of the responsibility. The perpetrator of a child shot in the street is now called the “Turks”, not the state. Although Turks are not yet being lynched in the Kurdish provinces, that potential is growing by the day. For instance, after the Kurdish politician Ahmet Türk was punched by a Turkish nationalist in Samsun⁶, slogans like “Amed”⁷

⁵ The Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* in Kurdish) is a left-wing organization based in Turkey. Since 1984, the PKK has been involved in an armed conflict with the Turkish state. The PKK is considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish state as well as many other states and organizations.

⁶ On April 12, 2010, Ahmet Türk, the former leader of the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP), closed down by the Constitutional Court in December 2009, was attacked and punched in the face when leaving a court in the city of Samsun.

⁷ “Amed” is the former name of the province of Diyarbakır. Kurds still use “Amed” instead of “Diyarbakır”.

will be Samsun's graveyard⁸" and "Revenge" were spoken by Kurdish protesters.

It seems that the halfhearted discursive shift towards recognizing the Kurdish identity has ironically served the cause of exacerbating the conflict. The superficial acknowledgment in the official discourse has promoted the acceptance of the Kurdish identity, yet the conflict has shifted from being politically framed to being identity-based or ethnically-framed.

The Irony of Resembling the 'Other'

The Republic of Turkey was founded on the ideology of the existence—or claim to the existence—of a homogenous Turkish identity. Different identities were either ignored, assimilated, or expelled from the country through "acts" such as the "population exchange treaty"⁹ or the "Wealth Tax"¹⁰, and the "Events of September 6-7"¹¹ applied to the remaining non-Muslims in the country (Oran 2015). In brief, everyone was considered to be a Turk, and this identity was further narrowed to a Muslim, Sunni, and Hanafi¹² Turk. As a matter of fact, this leveling of difference concerned not only ethnic and religious but also all other markers, such as class, in an attempt to rule out all sources of conflict. Mustafa Kemal¹³ defined the "people" as a classless and non-privileged community. State institutions were also shaped according to this envisaged uniform identity.

⁸ Samsun is a city on the Black Sea coast of Turkey.

⁹ The 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey was postulated by the "Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations" signed at Lausanne in 1923.

¹⁰ The "Wealth Tax" was a tax levied on Turkish citizens in 1942, with the stated aim of raising funds for the country's defense in case of an eventual entry into the Second World War. However, it is largely accepted that the underlying reason for the tax was to inflict financial ruin on the country's minority non-Muslim citizens, terminate their prominence in the country's economy, and move the assets of non-Muslims into the hands of the Muslim bourgeoisie.

¹¹ The "Events of September 6-7" were organized mob attacks directed primarily at Istanbul's Greek minority on September 6-7, 1955.

¹² The Hanafi sect is one of the four Sunni Islam sects. Most of the Turks practicing religion are Hanafi in Turkey.

¹³ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, is still regarded as an important leader for secular nationalists who call themselves "Kemalist".

Similarly, in his speeches Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan frequently uses his motto of “One Nation, One Flag, One Homeland, and One State” (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2017). Now we see that the same tendency to reduce a multiplicity of identities into an imposed homogeneous block is also practiced by Kurdish politicians within and beyond Turkey. The identities of Kurmanc, Soran, Zaza, Goran, Yezidi, Kurdish-speaking Alevi, and others are all included in the Kurdish identity in the discourses of Kurdish politicians, but in fact they are groups with different identities, either linguistically or religiously. However, the Kurdish political movements declare those who emphasize the differences of these identities as “treacherous” and “separatist”. Furthermore, just like President Erdoğan, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq has also used the “one culture, one nation, and one state” phrase in campaign videos prepared for the independence referendum scheduled for September 25, 2017 (Diken.com 2017).

It seems that by challenging the homogeneously framed identities that left no room for diversity, the Kurdish political and societal discourse is in the pitfall of the same nationalist paradigm using the same nationalist tools to paint a unitary and homogeneous imagery of Kurdishness in opposition to “Others”.

The Dilemma of the Lazy and Hardworking ‘Other’

According to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, nationalism offers a privileged space for the eruption of enjoyment into the public space (Žižek 1992, 165). In connection with this, Žižek explains the perception of the “Other” as follows:

What really bothers us about the “other”, is the peculiar way he [sic] organizes his enjoyment (the smell of his food, his “noisy” songs and dances, his strange manners, his attitude to work—in the racist perspective, the “other” is either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler living on our labor) (Žižek 1992, 165).

When we look at the official ideology in Turkey through Žižek’s explanations, Kurds regarded as the “Other” are imagined as no longer suitable to “contemporary Turkey” with their “smells”, “clothes”, “music”, “tribal traditions”, and “extensive family structures”. They are framed as a “primitive community” that damages the “Turkish image”. Perhaps that is why lynching movements towards the Kurds are more common in western coastal cities of Turkey, which are considered to be the contemporary face of Turkey.

The “workaholic” and “lazy” dilemma expressed by Žižek is a very suitable example for Turkey. We often hear the following comment in Turkey: “The Southeastern region has not developed because the Kurds are very lazy”. Moreover, the Kurds are regarded as parasites expecting everything from the state¹⁴. However, Kurds who have settled in Turkey’s western cities actively engage in various branches of business. Some people experience discomfort seeing them owning businesses and consider Kurds “invaders”¹⁵. In other words, these discourses frame Kurds as having an entrepreneurial and hardworking spirit in the west of Turkey as migrants while being lazy and parasitic in their homeland. Therefore, in both cases, Kurds are referred to as an ethnic group with negative traits “compromising the quality of life of Turks”. In the first case, resentment is expressed that most of the tax paid by Turks is sent to the Southeast, so that “the lazy Kurds can survive thanks to hardworking Turks”. In the second case, it is emphasized that “Kurds have seized jobs” in the western cities because they are “invaders”, and as a result, “Turks are unable to find jobs or have to work for low wages”.

Yet Turks, who have become the “Other” for Kurds, are being perceived as “pleasure thieves” as well, preventing Kurds from developing and modernizing. Analogous to this, Žižek said that the former Yugoslavian

¹⁴ A part of a column entitled “Parasitic Brotherhood” confirms Žižek’s thought: “The naïf state is still vested into the process of increasing the population of Kurds [even though they are] loyal to the PKK. The state pays 20-50 Turkish Lira for each child of the ignorant Kurdish people from our pocket [...]. There are those who say a federative government is the solution. I am not against a federative state. But I saw it in Spain: Catalonia and the Basque Country are the richest and most educated, self-sufficient. They do not get a penny from Madrid; on the contrary, they are autonomous because they contribute to the central government, not vice versa! Why do Kurds who want a federation not want independence? Because it will both draw its flag and become autonomous, and it will finance its autonomy from our pocket!” (This Article of Mine Kirikkanat’s will be discussed a Lot! 2005).

¹⁵ In an online platform, the following was said about Kurds: “Kurds are not dividing Turkey, they are invading it. Today, half of the Kurds live in our western cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, Izmit, Adana, Antalya, Mersin, Konya, Manisa, Aydin, and Samsun. Even in Thrace and the Black Sea, the Kurdish population is growing rapidly. [There are s]o many [of them] that, more Kurds live in other parts of Turkey than in the Southeast that Kurdish nationalists call Kurdistan. Moreover, Kurds are occupying the most important locations in all the regions they live in and are rapidly rising in economic, social, and cultural terms” (Cxonbasi.blogcu.com n.d.).

peoples blamed each other for depriving them of pleasure and wealth (Žižek 1992). And what Žižek says about the former Yugoslavian peoples can also be considered for Kurds. Among Kurds, there are complaints that their underground and aboveground resources were exploited by Turks, Arabs, and Persians, and that they were deprived of electricity even from the dams built on their rivers. According to these voices, had there not been colonial countries like Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, Kurdistan would have been among the richest and modern countries of the world¹⁶.

In fact, at the heart of this idea lies a developmentalist and modernist ideology. Since the beginning of this conflict, Kurds have reacted to Turkish nationalism because nationalists ignored their identities. Despite this causal relationship, Kurdish nationalism has modeled Turkish nationalism and defended essentially the same conflict-promoting principles. We can say that Kurdish nationalism is built on an effort to transform the modernization project initiated by Turkish nationalism into Kurdish modernization. Ironically, while Kurds support Turkish modernization in the context of democracy and human rights, the pioneers of Turkish modernization—the Kemalist elites—oppose this process because of a fear of revitalizing the discourse of the Treaty of Sevres. In summary, roles and expectations are reversed. Kemalist modernization, which initially created problems for the Kurds, has become the hope of liberation for Kurds, while it meets the resistance of Kemalists themselves.

Entering an Uncompromising Path

The Kurdish issue is following an inconsistent path at an official level in Turkey. In 2005, the Turkish government began expressing commitment to solve the Kurdish problem. Beşir Atalay, the then Interior Minister and one of the

¹⁶ In connection with this idea, in an anonymous article titled “The Question of Nationalism and Colonialism from Past to Today and the Kurdish Problem”, the following is said: “Let’s also think about it like this: What would happen if the Kurdish nation and Kurdistan had not been divided, and Kurds had set up a national state, and there was no foreign occupation? Of course, capitalism would develop with its own internal dynamics in Kurdistan, and it would come to be a developed capitalist country. So, the reasons for the non-development of northern Kurdistan are capitalism’s uneven development law and foreign occupation. The resources of North Kurdistan are plundered by imperialists and local collaborators. Capital accumulation and wealth flow from North Kurdistan to the West, thus preventing an independent economic development” (Halkinbirliđi.net n.d.).

coordinators of the process, pointed out that a change of paradigm in the resolution or peace process was launched by President Erdoğan's speech in 2005 in Diyarbakır, and the "National Unity and Brotherhood Project" initiated in 2009 followed by the "Democratic Initiative" were the continuation of that change (International Crisis Group 2011). Then a series of steps were taken for the amelioration of the situation. For example, a Kurdish-language television station started broadcasting. Kurdish language and culture departments and institutes were established in universities. Various negotiations were held between the Kurdistan Workers' Party and some state institutions.

However, in 2015, the resolution process was abandoned, and the conflict resumed. In 2016, arrests of Kurdish politicians began. Both sides blamed each other for bringing the resolution process to a halt. The termination of the resolution process took place in parallel with the war in Syria. Kurds in Syria have obtained a considerable amount of land and have declared the establishment of cantons there. Moreover, these achievements of the Syrian Kurds are also greatly supported and accepted by the international community. These developments in Syria inevitably worry the Turkish government because the latter foresees that the Kurds in Turkey will also aim at separating from Turkey. For this reason, the Kurdish movement in Syria was declared a terrorist movement by the Turkish government and became a target of attack (Holland-McCowan 2017). The Turkish government even performed a military operation in Syria to prevent the unification of Kurdish cantons. As a result, the boundaries of the ethnic identities of Turks and Kurds are becoming more and more pronounced, and both groups are going down an uncompromising path.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

PKK – *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party)

Author

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