

# **Kurdish Nationalism and Attitude of Turkish Government: Reconciliation and Repression Since Erdogan's Era**

KIRAN RAJ V  
K M SAJAD IBRAHIM  
*University of Kerala*

Kurds were one of the leading ethnic groups who lost their identity and unity with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Since then, they have lived in a geographical area that overlaps the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria in West Asia. They have faced atrocities as a minority in these countries since the post-World war period. Despite the constant insecurity and struggle for survival, the status of the Kurds is quite different in each of these West Asian states. The relationship between Turkey and Kurds is very problematic. For decades, the international community has debated the status of the various Kurdish-majority regions. As a result, it is surprising that no clear-cut solution to the problem has ever been devised. This article explores the connection between Kurds and Turks from the inception of the Ottoman Empire, to comprehend the emergence of political violence and the development of Kurdish nationalism. Concerning the Kurdish movement, this article examines the contradictions between Kurdish nationalism and Turkish state identities, as well as the effects of political violence, assimilationist policies, and state techniques employed by the Turkish government. Additionally, the consequences of the reconciliation strategies implemented by Erdogan's administration are examined in this article.

**Keywords:** Kurdish nationalism, the Turkish state, identity, Minority, Kurds

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The Kurdish Question is the oldest decaying problem in the West Asian region. The Kurds are the Muslim ethnic minority and known Arabic people who speak a language closely related to Persian. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, the fourth largest West Asian group and the most significant ethnic group in the globe without a sovereign state.

With a population of over 22 million, the Kurds are one of the world's largest non-state groups. Kurdistan is primarily in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, with smaller portions in Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Turkey was the first Ottoman land to gain independence, adopt real democracy, and look forward to the West, especially Europe and North America, for cultural models. The Kurds have been in Mesopotamia for 2000 to 4000 years. Kurds lived in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Qajar Empire regions (McDowall, 2000).



*Figure 1- Kurdish Inhabited area. Source: BBC News Website*

Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the European powers decided to create an autonomous Kurdistan at the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 as part of their plan to reshape the Middle East. The Sykes-Picot Deal, also known as the Asia Minor Agreement 1916, was a secret agreement between France and the United Kingdom to dismantle the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The deal divided Turkish-held Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine into several territories administered by the United Kingdom and France. France and Britain divided the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence following the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This agreement primarily neglected to provide the future scope of Arab nationalism. The Ottoman Empire was distorted at the end of World War I. In 1920, the Sevres treaty divided the Ottoman Empire territory into various autonomous regions, including a homeland for Kurds. This region is still referred to as Kurdistan by Kurds, spanning eastern Turkey, Northern Iraq, Western Iran, and parts of Syria and Armenia. However, the treaty of Sevres was ultimately rejected (McDowall, 2000).

Moreover, in 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, forming Turkey as an independent nation. European powers like France and England redesigned the area, often disregarding ethnic, religious, cultural, and historical factors when drawing political boundaries. They created new nations like Jordan, Iraq, and Syria with seemingly artificial boundaries. The treaty adopted the borders of modern Turkey, and they made no claim to its former Arab provinces and recognised British possession of Cyprus and the Italian procession of Dodecanese. Kurdistan, the region already endorsed for Kurds, is divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This new action triggered today's conflicts and tensions within the Middle Eastern nations.

### **Kurds in Turkey**

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict has emerged as a significant violent ethnic conflict since the 1980s, but the background can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Kurdish Question is an ethnic struggle predating the establishment of the contemporary Turkish Republic. It began with Kurdish rebels in the Ottoman Empire's periphery challenging the Ottoman state in the late nineteenth century. Turkey has

struggled with the Kurdish conflict since the Republic's inception in 1923. The Kemalist elite's early 'Turkification' agenda met considerable opposition from the Kurdish minority, sparking repeated outbreaks of revolt that were forcefully suppressed in Kurdish territories in the east and southeast.

Kurds are a significant ethnic minority in Turkey, with 47 ethnic groups that are concentrated in the 11 provinces of Turkey's southeast area. About 12 to 15 million Kurds live in Turkey, comprising 20 per cent of the population. Kurds in Turkey do not constitute a negligible population. Kurds are not immigrants; they have inhabited Turkey and its surrounding territories for centuries. The important reason for the politicisation of Kurdish social character is the move from the multi-ethnic, multicultural substance of the Ottoman Empire to the nation-state model (McDowall, 2000).

The Kurds are widely dispersed in Turkey in non-contiguous areas. Geographical dispersion is one of the reasons behind the relative weakness of the Kurd separatist movement. At the same time, the modes of oppression have varied in time and place. The Kurdish problem has a broader understanding. It has a more comprehensive relationship with the Kurds who inhabited Turkey. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, relations between Kurdish-origin citizens and the Turkish state have been somewhat strained. The Kurdish Question in Turkey is an internal issue and a global problem. They are divided across international borders like many other people (Akyesilmen, 2013).

There are some shared features among Kurds; first, the areas of Kurds overlap between Nation-state boundaries. Second, the Kurdish territories of these countries are typically the poorest, least developed, and systematically neglected by economic power centres. Third, Kurdish repression, assimilation, and resistance dynamics in each country have impacted the direction and result of Kurdish struggles in neighbouring countries. The fourth shared feature is that the Kurdish societies are internally complex and carried out with differences in politics, ideology, and social class. Despite a long and tedious struggle, Kurdish nationalism has failed to achieve its goal of achieving independence. (O'Leary, 2007)

The Kurds rapidly reformulated their own ethnic identity as a community bearing long customs and culture of their own for two millennia, seeking its voice in legal terms in the cultural and political territory of Turkish life. Turkish critical internal fights centre on the role of its significant Kurdish minority, having ethnic and linguistic distinction in a state that constitutionally consists only of Turkish citizens.

Turkey is a country reasonably functioning in a democratic order. It generally had free elections for nearly 40 years, disrupted by only three brief correctional military coups. Turkey has a broad, active civil society, a democratic free press, and institutions. But the tragedy is that these democratic institutions never addressed the Question of the Kurdish Population.

### **Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey**

Ethnic communities, nations, and nationalism as an ideology are all constructed on myths, symbols, and memories. Nationalism is both a cultural and a political pursuit, which explains the supposed distinctions between 'political' and 'cultural' nationalism. Culture, mainly ethnic and nationalist, plays a vital role in nation-building and nationalist beliefs.

In Turkey, there is no widely accepted description of the Kurdish problem. Different elements of Turkish society identify the Kurdish issue as a case of underdevelopment, terrorism, a southern concern, and so on, labelling the conflict with these terms. Kurdish nationalism can be seen based on two dichotomies in Turkey. The first one is that Civic nationalism is more virtuous and liberal than ethnic nationalism, which is typically viewed as dangerous and exclusive. The second is Turkish nationalism, which promotes Turkish ethnicity and fosters and radicalises Kurdish ethnic nationalism (Tezcür, 2009).

“Kurdish nationalism is seamlessly developed in the twentieth century as a stateless ethnic reaction against repressive official state nationalism of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.” The relationship between Kurdish-speaking groups and the Turkish state is antagonistic and conflictual. Since 1925, the relations of state dominance between the Kurds have been characterised by systematic persecution, marginalisation, and humiliation of Kurdishness. The Turkish state’s policies and approach toward its Kurdish citizens cannot be described as assimilationist and repressive (Tezcür, 2009).

The primary focus of Turkish nationalism was on a civic culture in which anyone who professed loyalty to the state was considered a Turk, regardless of culture, religion, or language; cultural nationalism served as a supplement. Turkey has constitutionally adopted civic nationalism. It is also ‘enhanced by social nationalism,’ which includes residents who ‘disguised the heavenly body of beliefs, qualities, and frames of mind that offer ascent to a ‘we’ feeling has been regarded as genuine Turks (Bruinessen, 1975).

One could become a real Turk to the extent one accepts the ideas, values, and attitudes of the ethnic Turks. Turkish state never practiced the policies of assimilation towards the Kurds. The Turkish state renamed the villages with Kurdish names into Turkish. Parents were prohibited from giving Kurdish names to their children. In response to these constructions of Turkish nationalism, Kurdish nationalists employ several ethnic boundary-drawing strategies (Tezcur, 2019). Kurdish Nationalists argue that the designation of Turkish nationalism as civic is merely a guise to perpetuate the dominance of Turkish People’s ethnicity (Brosnaham, 1994).

Kurdish nationalists narrow the boundaries of ethnic identity to distinguish the Kurds from the Turks as distinct nations. Kurdish ethnicity stands in stark contrast to the multidimensional and ambivalent identities of Kurdish-speaking citizens of Turkey (Tezcür, 2009). “Kurdish nationalists pursue an ethnic boundary-making strategy called ‘Transvaluation’ (Tezcür, 2009). Kurds explicitly challenged the normative hierarchy established by Turkish nationalism and argued that Kurds should have equal symbolic status and political power.

Kurdish nationalists have glorified the Sheik Said Rebellion of 1925 and the Dersim Revolt of 1937, trying to set up congruity in the Kurdish protection from severe and overbearing state authority. Also, the Kurdish nationalist development tends to decipher all contentions in which Kurdish-speaking peoples are included as abhor assaults that focus on the Kurds precisely due to their ethnic identity.” ( Brubaker, 1998). “Kurdish Nationalists insist that the PKK has restored dignity to Kurdish identity and prevented further humiliation (Tezcür, 2009).

Kurdish nationalists oppose Turkish nationalism and seek to articulate a unified conception of Kurdish nationality. Kurdish identity is produced, determined, and

experienced in diverse ways, making it difficult for Kurdish nationalists to rally all ethnic Kurds to their cause. Certain people who speak the Zaza dialect of Kurdish to being labelled Kurds and pursue their version of the 'contraction' technique are awe-inspiring. Kurdish identity is expressed in several ways, including tribe, kinship, language, religion, and history. Folklore, literature, art, and music, among other cultural qualities, all play an equal part in creating the Kurdish identity. Even though Arabic, Turkish, and Persian are the only primary languages in which education is permitted in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Kurdish literature has maintained its uniqueness, evolved, and contributed to consolidating national sentiment" (L.Meho, 1997).

Kurdish nationalism in Turkey is built on Kurdish and Kemalist nationalism. Kurds in Turkish Kurdistan have been oppressed, suppressed, and fought against since the establishment of modern Turkey in 1923. Ankara's policy toward the Kurds was based on the militant Turkish nationalism initiated by Ataturk, the father of the Turks, and perpetuated by succeeding governments. "Ataturk adopted a policy of assimilation or 'Turkification', aiming to abolish the Kurdish language and replace it with the Turkish" (Haddad, 2001). Turkey considers Kurdish nationalism as a challenge to the Kemalist vision. With the birth of the new Turkish Republic, the entire system was reorganised. The caliphate was abolished, religious orders ended it, and history was written to suit the needs of the new Republic. The Arabic alphabet was rejected in favour of a Western one and adopted a new dress code. After the dissolution of the multi-ethnic nature of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish government initiated a radical nationalist program centred on defending the Turks, the new citizens of the nation, and assisting the 'Turkification' of non-Turkish minorities.

The new nationalist ideology, unlike the Ottoman empires, relied on a more encompassing Islamic theme. It was cautious about where the country should express homogeneity from Ethnic solidarity, and this solidarity would be communicated in a single voice. The state's policies are the determining factors in the evolution and modulation of Kurdish ethnonationalism. The shift from the multi-ethnic, multicultural realities of the Ottoman Empire to the nation-state model is the primary reason for the politicisation of Kurdish cultural identity (Shatzmiller, 2005). Islam and the caliphate, the ancient basis of legitimacy, have been removed. The new regime of compelled homogenising nationalism has been Turkey's principal cause of strife. Current claims of identity reflect a more profound yearning for legitimacy and significance in post-Ottoman society.

The centralisation efforts brought the question of governance, which created a fight between local power structures and the state. The immensely successful modernisation project of Mustafa Kemal in urbanisation, education, and communication began regional differences and responsive Kurdish ethnic elite. The Kemalist reforms, which attempted to civilise Turkey's people and create a secular nation-state, resulted in Kurdish ethnonationalism. Turkish nationalists viewed the Kurdish question in the first half of the twentieth century as a fatal rivalry between the backward, pre-modern, and tribal past and a prosperous present. In the 1950s and 1960s, tension between the peripheral economy and the national market seemed to exist. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, global forces and domestic developments have primarily shaped the Kurdish question. The rise in popularity of the Kurdish Question following the Gulf War, the growing influence of the European diaspora on Kurdish mobilisation, and the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish

administration in northern Iraq are all direct results of globalisation (Yegen, 2015).

In the 1980s, modern communication technology and political liberalisation played unique roles in articulating Kurdish identity. “In Turkey, ethnically politicized Kurdish intellectuals acted as ethnic entrepreneurs by interpreting past and present events to historicise and legitimise Kurdish nationalism” (O’Leary, 2007). The main difference between Turkish and Kurdish nationalism is the state presence. It is the modernising nation-state that formed Turkish nationalism and stressed the civic aspect of the nation. Since Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq evolved to modernise nation-states, it always emphasises ethnic differences, sometimes evoking racism to historicise them.

### **The Turkish Attitude towards Kurds**

The Turkish-nationalist elite, known as the Kemalists after the Republic’s founder, viewed the Ottoman Empire’s diverse society as an impediment to progress and westernisation. They believed that only a homogeneous and secular nation-state could achieve the current level of civilisation and worked to establish a national identity following the Turkish language and culture and a unified Turkish nation (Derisiotis, 2019). By its constitution, Turkey has a functioning democratic order in which governments are routinely elected and dismissed from office. Turks believe that elections can change their lives—a meaningful sign of democratic principles at the grassroots work. While the democratic order is far from perfect, it is becoming increasingly solidified; public opinion substantially influences Turkey’s policies.

Kurdish cultural demands were violently suppressed by Atatürk, who feared that they would contradict the nation’s homogeneous traits. By 1924, Turkey had banned all public manifestations of a distinct Kurdish cultural identity, including schools, clubs, publications, and religious organisations. Any open expression of Kurdish culture became a crime punishable by death under dissidence laws because it posed a threat to national reconciliation; it served to highlight a people’s unique worldview. Interestingly, Kurdish communication was restricted when only three or four per cent of Kurds could communicate in Turkish. The Kurds needed to embrace the long-held belief that Turks and Kurds had sprung from the same ancestor and that Kurds had forgotten their primary tongue due to isolation in Anatolia’s highlands (Derisiotis, 2019).

Since the early 1990s, two issues have dominated Turkey’s political agenda: the position of a sizeable ethnic Kurdish minority, estimated to be between 10 and 20 per cent of the population, and the role of Islam in a predominantly Muslim majority country but officially secular nation. Since 1984, south-eastern Turkey has been the site of an intense fight between the régime and the PKK (Workers’ Party of Kurdistan), a militant armed Kurdish organisation whose demands range from complete independence to regional autonomy within Turkey. The conflict reached its peak between 1992 and 1995 and was marked by grave human rights violations committed by state forces and the PKK.

The government stepped up its counter-insurgency operation against the PKK, evacuating and torching rural areas. In 1991, an Anti-Terror Law was passed, which resulted in the repression of nonviolent expression—particularly debate on the Kurdish issue—as well as the imprisonment of writers and intellectuals. By 1992, the war in the southeast had spiralled out of control. Torture and fatalities in detention



have escalated, as have inexplicable disappearances (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Therefore, the Turkish state's homogenisation process has led to the abolition of ethnic distinctiveness while failing to regulate Kurdish nationalism. The Kemalist system maintained a digesting procedure and persecuted the Kurds until 1991 when Ozal lifted the 1983 ban on open Kurdish communication. Süleyman Demirel announced in his Diyarbakır discourse that Turkey perceived the Kurdish reality (Waldman, 2017).

The PKK, for its part, is also guilty of grave human rights violations, including intimidating and murdering those who oppose it. Individuals suspected of "cooperating with the state," such as teachers, civil servants, and former PKK members, were assassinated by the PKK. Between 1992 and 1995, the PKK is thought to have carried out at least 768 politically motivated assassinations. Furthermore, it committed large-scale killings against towns that had joined the government's civil defence "village guard" program, killing village guards and their families (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

### ***Restrictions on Free Expression***

State prosecution and repression are severe for ethnic Kurds who exhibit a primarily Kurdish or political identity. The ideological spectrum of "pro-Kurdish" or "nationalist Kurdish" publications and authors is expansive. Some have an editorial policy that is favourable toward the PKK or openly supports the PKK. Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK's leader, used to write a column under the pen name "Ali Euphrates" in one of the Kurdish-nationalist dailies, *Ozgür Gündem*. Other Kurdish-nationalist periodicals, such as Kemal Burkay's Socialist Party of Kurdistan, promote one of the smaller legal political parties or parties that, while not violent, remain illegal in Turkey (SPK) (Basaran, 2017).

All of these newspapers, however, have one thing in common: they are all subjected to terrible abuses, the assassination of journalists by shadow death squads, imprisonment, and brutality while detained by police, and the confiscation and closure of newspapers. When cases are filed against employees of Kurdish-nationalist media, the likelihood of a guilty conviction and detention into custody appears to be higher than in trials of mainstream journalists. Such crimes are typically, but not always, prosecuted under Article 312.2 of the penal code and Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

### ***Restrictions on the Use of Kurdish Language***

The use of languages other than Turkish is outlawed in education, politics, and the media, with a few exceptions. Turkish is declared the official language in Article 3 of the constitution. Article 42.9 states that "apart from Turkish, no other language shall be studied or taught to Turkish nationals as a mother tongue in any language, teaching, or learning institution." While these restrictions are theoretically geared against all of the languages spoken by Turkey's various ethnic groups, whether Circassians or Laz, the primary targets are Kurds (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Following the formation of the Republic of Turkey, its government embarked on a radical nation-building effort. Ethnic diversity was viewed as a challenge to the state's integrity, with the Kurds, the largest non-Turkish ethnic minority, clearly posing the most significant threat. They were decreed to be Turks, with Turkish

language and culture. All external manifestations of their ethnic identification were prohibited. There was no formal prejudice against Kurds who accepted to be assimilated: they may advance to the highest levels of the state machinery. On the other hand, those who rejected were frequently subjected to harsh repression. Kurdish, like other languages, was forbidden in schools, as well as in public.

### ***Education and Cultural Identity***

Another arena where heated politics and hostile relationships exists is education. Kurdish society has a low degree of education compared to the rest of the country. There are several reasons, first, regarding bad educational records and economic underdevelopment among the Kurdish population. Second, Turkey's economic underdevelopment hampered the government's ability to create schools throughout the country, notably in the Kurdish region, until the 1980s. Third, the Kurdish people's traditions and cultural understanding are barriers to education, particularly for girls.

Last but not least, schooling in one's mother tongue (Kurdish) is outlawed, and students must attend school in a language other than the one taught to them by their parents. Equality and discrimination are two interconnected ideas in Turkish social and economic concerns. Although all citizens are deemed equal under the law and on a legal basis, many discriminatory rules exist in social life, albeit informally. Kurdish is prohibited from being used in commercial transactions or other economic activity. Whether true or not, Kurdish people believe they face discrimination while applying for jobs, particularly in the military, police, diplomacy, and other high-ranking decision-making positions. Although the sense of discrimination in the public sector has lessened in recent years due to democratic and political reforms, politicised Kurds continue to hold this view (Larrabee, 2011).

### ***Political Status***

The Kemalist idea of a secular republic and a unitary country and state meant that Kurdish rights were consistently denied. Kurdish national consciousness has been viewed as a fatal danger to the state's territorial integrity and unity. The Turkish government was determined to eliminate everything in the country that represented a separate Kurdish identity: Those who were not of pure Turkish descent had no rights other than to be enslaved. There are two notable exceptions on the Turkish political scene: the Islamist Welfare (Refah) party and the New Democracy Movement (Yeni Demokrasi Hareketi, YDH), which adopt different approaches to understanding Turkey. The two parties emerged on opposing sides of the election results in December 1995: Welfare emerged as the single largest party, while YDH fell away (Yeßen, 2022).

The Welfare Party's stance on the Kurdish inquiry and countless other investigations is of considerable importance to Turkish political concerns and the region, as it pertains to the largest Islamist party seeking election dominance in West Asia. On the surface, the Welfare party's view on the Kurdish inquiry had consistently differed from that of the formal gatherings, which was not particularly significant when Welfare was restricted. Regardless, Welfare had taken charge of the situation. Because of the decision to use Turkish nationalism as the sole foundation of the new state, a strategy that purposely ignored and distanced the Kurds from the Turkish Republic, the Welfare Party, and Islamists generally consider the Kurdish issue as



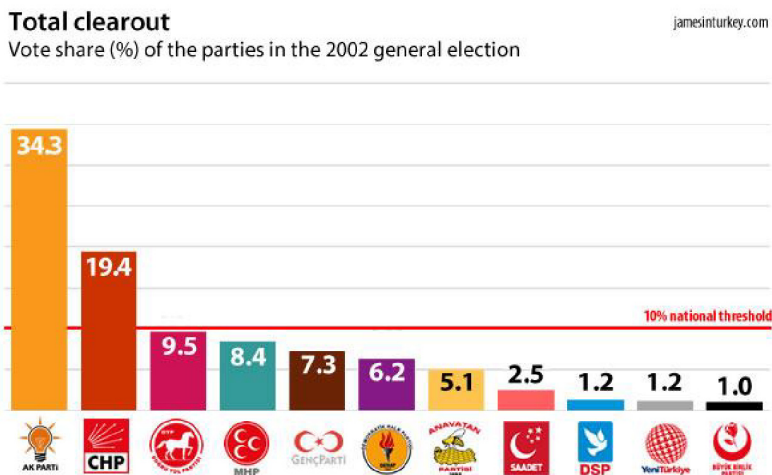
one created by the state. Ethnic divides are fictitious; the Welfare Party frequently argues that the Kurds would not have felt excluded if Islam had framed the state's founding. Even though the AKP took power in 2002, it did not begin to address the Kurdish issue until 2005, claiming that rather than being a matter of nationalism, it was a matter of restricted secularism and Turkish patriotism imposed by the Kemalist belief system. The solution is to end the stringent security measures that Kemalist regimes have implemented in favour of a softer approach favoured by the AKP, which would include a focus on regular Islamic ties and fraternity, thus bringing the dispute to a close (Yavuz, 2009).

To the extent that the Kemalist-party governments were concerned, Turkey's Kurdish Question was traditionally considered a security issue. The Kemalists wanted a secular, Turkish country state, which the Kurds had rejected since the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Compared to the secular hardliners who governed Turkish legislative issues until 2002, the AKP had a gentler attitude toward the Kurdish issue in its early years.

### ***Reconciliation and Repression: Erdogan's Era***

With a promise to resolve Turkey's long-standing Kurdish problem through negotiation rather than confrontation, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the election to office in 2002. Due to the outright failure of the Kemalist denial and forced assimilation program, the AKP initially embraced reconciliatory language to handle the Kurdish issue and approached it from a different perspective. The newly elected AKP government recognised that military methods would never settle the Kurdish problem. The era of AKP, also known as the era of the current president Erdogan's era, is a period of Turkey when the face of politics and policies changed into a new and unique stage. The party, which was established by Erdogan has become an alternative door for the replacement of the usual political conjuncture (Yılmaz, 2016).

Figure 2: Results of general election in Turkey 2002



As a result of the election in 2002, the AK Party 363 and the opposition group, CHP (Republican People Party), gained 178 deputies. As no one expected, the AKP had a significant impact on the other political parties; indeed, since it was only a newly founded party with the majority of the votes in the country, it was a surprising result. With the principle of “conservative democracy,” the AKP could collect people from different sections, ideas, and ethnic groups, as well as the Kurds and the Turkish nationalists, under its umbrella (Yılmaz, 2016).

The Erdogan administration has made significant efforts to defuse the Kurdish conflict. One of the most crucial aspects of this effort has been a policy shift toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Ankara avoided open engagement with the KRG in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War, fearing that it would strengthen the KRG’s drive for independence and lead to further demands for more autonomy and freedom on the side of Turkey’s Kurdish community (F.Stephen Larrabee, 2011). Since taking power in November 2002, the Erdogan government has implemented several changes to improve relations with Turkey’s Kurdish people. Kurdish-language broadcasting began on a trial basis in August 2002. Classes in Kurdish were also permitted on a limited basis as part of the same reform initiative. These measures initially helped the AKP gain political support among Kurds, who comprise around 20 per cent of Turkey’s population.

In contrast to the secular hardliners who had controlled Turkish politics up until 2002, the AKP first adopted a comparatively softer stance on the Kurdish problem. With his historic statement in Diyarbakir on 12 August 2005, then-Prime Minister Erdogan became the first head of state in contemporary Turkish history to acknowledge that Turkey had mishandled the Kurds. He also emphasised that more democracy rather than more repression was the solution to the long-standing problems of the Kurds and that there was no military solution to the Kurdish issue (Derisiotis, 2019). “Erdogan said that the situation might be solved by the shared religious ties between Turks and Kurds and the democratic process” (Christofis, 2019). To combat Kurdish nationalism, Erdogan invested in a Muslim solidarity strategy. His party benefited from this anti-establishment image and attracted significant Kurdish support in the 2007 general election and the constitutional referendum.

Several developments have altered the environment where essential actors see the Kurdish issue. The strengthening of civilian influence over the military in Turkey has made it easier for Ankara to modify its stance on the Kurdish question. Throughout much of the post-war period, the Turkish army functioned as a state within a state, but significant legislative changes have diminished its political dominance over the past decade ( Larrabee, 2011).

Despite its legalisation, removing all restrictions on Kurdish broadcasting was only made possible in 2009, and political propaganda during elections in languages other than Turkish was only made permissible in April 2010. By then, Kurds in Turkey had lost faith in the AKP and had switched to the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) instead of the AKP for the 2009 local elections. They also boycotted the 2010 referendum, highlighting that the new constitution did not mention Kurds as a separate ethnic group in Turkey (Christofis, 2019).

Even though its efforts quickly proved superficial, the Turkish government has been relatively diligent in dealing with the Kurdish issue, especially compared to previous Kemalist regimes; all of this activity represented a radical departure from

Turkey's traditional views and drew strong opposition from nationalist political parties. Essentially, Ankara brought the PKK and the BDP to the negotiating table, effectively accepting the BDP as the PKK's official political wing, practically impossible under Kemalist governments and their primary justification for banning a series of pro-Kurdish parties over 24 years (Derisiotis, 2019).

The administration was exceedingly slow in executing even the ethnic-linguistic rights for the Kurds that had been voted by the outgoing coalition government in 2002, rendering the AKP's rhetoric worthless and Erdogan's lofty claims somewhat superficial. The PKK resumed operations in 2004 in response to the Turkish government's slow pace and hesitation in promoting reforms and peace. Many more victims were killed on both sides in the years that followed. Turkish municipal elections at the end of March 2009 indicated growing Kurdish unrest. The AKP won the majority of cities in the predominantly Kurdish southeast in the July 2007 national elections. However, in March 2009, the party suffered a crushing defeat in the southeast at the hands of the Democratic Society Party (DTP). This primary pro-Kurdish party campaigned on a platform of Kurdish cultural identity (Yılmaz, 2016).

The AKP's dismal performance in Kurdish areas acted as a significant wake-up call, emphasising the importance of taking Kurdish concerns and frustrations more seriously. As a result, the administration announced the 'Kurdish Opening.' The project, launched in the summer of 2009, was the first significant attempt to resolve the Kurdish issue since Turgut Ozal's prime ministership in the mid-1980s (F. Stephen Larrabee, 2011). In 2009, discussions about granting Kurds more rights as part of the Kurt Aclm (Kurdish Opening-Democratic initiative process is the name of the project launched by the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to improve democracy, freedoms, and respect for human rights in Turkey) did not prevent violence between the two sides. Indeed, the legal amendments that allowed Kurds limited cultural and linguistic rights have not resulted in significant progress toward resolving the dispute (Christofis, 2019).

Despite Kurt Açlm and Ocalan's proposal to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the AKP's open-mindedness did not endure long. Although this democratic opening to Kurds was originally welcomed, suspicion quickly overtook it. The government's poor handling of the situation, the dissolution of the Democratic Society Party, which succeeded the Democratic People's Party in 2005, and the arrest of over 1000 members in the following months were formative aspects. In 2009, the discussions resumed in Oslo, but violence between the Turkish army and the PKK in the summer of 2011 put a two-year hold on them. (Christofis, 2019).

The Kurdish conflict is increasingly fought on political grounds instead of military ones. Kurdish priorities include bilingual education, expanded cultural rights, a general amnesty for PKK rebels, restoring Kurdish place names in eastern and south-eastern Turkey, and democratic autonomy in majority-Kurdish regions. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the largest Kurdish party, the successor to the outlawed DTP, and widely regarded as the PKK's political wing, openly support these goals (Larrabee, 2011).

The sessions, however, failed to yield results, and by 2011, officials from both sides had withdrawn. Following the breakdown of the negotiations and the June elections, fighting between the Turkish military forces and the PKK resumed intensely in 2011 after a relatively tranquil two-year period. The conflicts peaked in 2012

when Prime Minister Erdogan – alluding to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – warned that Turkey would not accept the emergence of a terrorist entity on its borders, describing it as “Ankara’s red line” (Derisiotis, 2019).

Between 2005 and 2011, the AKP administration orchestrated a mostly covert operation, including talks between Turkish intelligence officials and PKK commanders. These became known as the Oslo Meetings, and they ran concurrently with the government’s Kurdish initiative to obtain a deal on the armed group’s disarmament after 2009. The talks became more intensive between 2009 and 2011, involving other parties such as the Kurdistan Regional Government and Abdullah Ocalan. The government halted the Solution Process after the 7 June 2015 elections, in which the AKP failed to obtain a majority vote for the first time since 2002 and before coalition talks began. Furthermore, in a repeat of the 2011 elections, the AKP government announced that “there was no longer a Kurdish question in Turkey” and that “all available rights had already been provided.” As one more endeavour drew to a close, the entire country was engulfed in a new round of fighting. In retaliation, Turkish nationalist organisations assaulted many People’s Democratic Party (HDP) facilities, imposing a curfew in hundreds of primarily Kurdish neighbourhoods. When the PKK launched an assault, Turkish police and military people were murdered. Two suicide attacks in Suruc and Ankara resulted in the deaths of 104 individuals, and caused significant injuries to many more. (Derisiotis, 2019)

### **Hostilities since 2015**

Hostilities between the Turkish authorities and the Kurds in Southeast Turkey intensified in 2011 and 2012 before the PKK declared another cease-fire in 2013. The Turkish government initiated peace talks with the PKK in 2012, but these talks ended in 2015 with Erdoğan and the AKP moving to a more militaristic and nationalist approach (Walker, 2023).

The Turkish government increased its efforts to resolve its long-running dispute with the militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party from 2013 to 2015 (PKK). During that time, Turkey and the PKK maintained a cease-fire while negotiating the PKK’s demobilization from the military and the normalization of Kurdish politics in Turkey. The 2013 cease-fire was called off due to growing mutual distrust and divergent political agendas following the Suruç attack. Following that, a tremendous spiral of violence erupted once more. The cease-fire ended in July 2015 following an Islamic State attack that killed 32 Kurds near the border with Syria. The PKK accused the Turkish security forces of complicity in the attack. After two police officers were killed, allegedly by PKK supporters, the Turkish government launched hundreds of air strikes against the PKK in northern Iraq. The PKK then resumed attacks in Turkish territory (Walker, 2023).

A significant amount of infrastructure was destroyed during military actions in the south-eastern provinces of Diyarbakir, Mardin, Rnık, and Hakkari. PKK terrorists, on the other hand, have attacked essential sites in Istanbul and Ankara, killing dozens of Turkish state officials and citizens. The primary battle zones, which have resulted in the majority of losses, are located in the Kurdish districts of southeast Turkey. Following a suicide attack near the Syrian border by suspected self-proclaimed Islamic State militants in July 2015, a two-year cease-fire between Turkey’s government and the PKK was broken. Following the July 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan cracked down on a suspected coup plotter, arresting an estimated 50,000 individuals

and increasing air strikes on PKK terrorists in south-eastern Turkey. (Conflict between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups, 2022)

The failure of the Resolution Process in 2015 and the attempted coup attempt in 2016 are the primary reasons for the subsequent silence on the Kurdish question. Following the termination of the Resolution Process in July 2015, the so-called “city war” in Kurdish-populated metropolitan areas lasted several months between security forces, allied militants, and militia of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). These skirmishes bolstered the notion that the Kurdish question is primarily a security force while undermining the claim that it requires a political solution. Furthermore, the PKK’s defeat in these city wars and subsequent clashes in the countryside were interpreted as validation of the efficiency of military tactics, further discrediting the notion that the Kurdish question required a non-military solution. The July 2016 coup attempt, on the other hand, played an even more significant part in the declining public interest in the Kurdish question. The vast campaign of political persecution targeting pro-Kurdish M.P.s, mayors, NGOs, media institutions, and civilians during the two-year rule of emergency that followed the coup demonstrated that engaging with the Kurdish question would be costly for anybody who dared to do so. (Yeßen, 2022)

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimated in its 2017 report on the human rights situation in Southeast Turkey between July 2015 and December 2016 that security actions in the region resulted in the deaths of about 2,000 individuals. The individuals affected comprised around 1,200 local residents and 800 members of the security forces; an undisclosed number may have participated in violent or nonviolent operations against the State. (Walker, 2023).

Another reason for the silence on the Kurdish issue is the Turkish state’s series of military incursions into Syria beginning in August 2016. These operations, which primarily targeted the PKK-affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, fortified the securitisation of the Kurdish question. Simultaneously, the SDF’s swift departure from Jarablus, Afrin, and Tel Abyad in northern Syria persuaded Turkish decision-makers and the broader public that a political solution to the Kurdish question was unnecessary. While the PKK was defeated, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) withdrew from Jarablus, Afrin, and Tel Abyad due to Turkish military operations. The judiciary and security forces oppressed the People. Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey, the Kurdish question was neither settled nor resolved. Furthermore, even though several HDP lawmakers and mayors, as well as thousands of ordinary HDP supporters, were imprisoned and the party’s daily political activities were frequently outlawed following the coup attempt in 2016, electoral support for the HDP among Kurds remained strong. (Yeßen, 2022)

However, the results of the March 2019 municipal elections demonstrated that the HDP and Kurdish voters might be game changers in Turkish politics if two major political alliances fight for power. The country’s presidential system compelled significant parties other than the HDP to form two alliance blocs: the People’s Alliance (P.A.) and the Nation’s Alliance (N.A.). Before the 2018 election, the AKP and the MHP created the conservative-nationalist P.A., which was later joined by the conservative-nationalist Grand Unity Party (BBP) and the conservative New Welfare Party (YRP). After the 2019 election, the largest opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), and smaller National Assembly (N.A.) parties began to criticise



Erdogan's total securitisation of the Kurdish question over the past few years, indicating their disagreement with Erdogan's declaration that the Kurdish question had been resolved. Meanwhile, the composition and electoral support shift for the P.A. and N.A. cemented the HDP's status as a prominent player in Turkish politics. Despite its critical role, the HDP has not been invited to join the N.A., owing to opposition from the Good Party (Iyi), the Democrat Party (D.P.), and even some sections within the CHP. As a result, the HDP aims to form a third coalition with a few small left-wing parties and a few weak pro-Kurdish parties, implying that the HDP and its allies will compete as the third bloc in the next legislative election. (Yeßen, 2022)

### **Current Phase**

In 2020, Turkey initiated Operations Claw-Tiger and Claw-Eagle in the northern Iraqi province of Mosul. Turkey began threatening Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government in January 2021 with an attack on Iraqi and Kurdish forces in Sinjar. The Turkish Ministry of Defense confirmed the neutralisation of seven PKK fighters on 3 May 2021. The PKK attacked a Turkish military vehicle in the 'Operation Pence-Simsek zone on 11 September 2021, resulting in the death of one Turkish soldier and the injury of another. Turkey launched military operation Claw-Lock against the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Northern Iraq on 17 April 2022. Iraq filed a complaint against Turkey at the United Nations Security Council on 27 July, and Iraqi militias launched rockets at the Turkish consulate in Mosul. Both acts were taken in retaliation for a Turkish artillery strike on the Kurdistan Region resort of Parakh on 20 July, which killed nine Iraqis and injured thirty-three others. Turkey routinely conducts attacks in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, where the PKK has strongholds in Sinjar and training camps along the mountainous border with Turkey. In 2022, the Turkish military initiated airstrikes against the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates in three regions of northern Syria and Iraq. Ankara stated that the assaults targeted locations occupied by the PKK, the People's Protection Units (YPG), whom it considered a PKK affiliate, and other "illegal organizations" in the northern Syrian region of Derik and the northern Iraqi regions of Sinjar and Karacak (Osterlund, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The Kurdish Question has been one of the most pressing issues in West Asia for more than a century. Several Kurdish communities in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have battled to live as minorities. The Kurdish issue addresses the 12-15 million Kurds who live in Turkey, particularly the segment within the Kurds not ready to adopt the Turkish nationality. As examined in the study, Turk's notions of nationalism and identity differ entirely from Western mindsets. Turkey is more sensitive about disintegration and believes they have reached the highest political, economic, and humanitarian levels.

Ethnicity did not influence the Kurds or the majority of other Muslim minorities in Turkey during the Republic's inception; rather, they were extended invitations to become members of the Turkish nation (Eide, 2007). In Turkey, an estimated 15 million people of Kurdish origin constitute about one-fifth of Turkey's total population. The problems centre on recognising the separate cultural identities of the Kurdish Population and the use of the Kurdish language. However, the Turkish



government denies the Kurds as a distinct minority.

Kurdistan is a typical example of internal colonialism because the Kurds follow a different path according to the political and social evolution of the state and the relationships of forces between the central power and the Kurdish national movement. The achievement of Kurdish nationalism represents a political problem for Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, which consider Kurdistan an integral part of their states. Hence, the formation of Kurdistan is viewed as a challenge to the national unity of these states. For Turkey, as a democratic state, Kurds' recognition is considered a threat to its national integrity.

During the 1990s, the plight of Kurds in Turkey garnered increased attention, and international pressure was applied to find a solution. Recent developments indicate that the situation is improving, but a solution will necessitate a radical shift in mindset. There are definite indications that the Kurdish issue has affected Turks. Still, any solution requires time, and it isn't certain if extremist groups on both sides intend to give the government that time. The reorganisation of the system, which began in 1992 with a desire for democratisation regarding freedoms and human rights, has deepened its roots but has also led to increased terrorism and discontent with the government.

The AKP came to power with a strong Kurdish vote and a manifesto promising more democracy, whereas the Kurds expected full cultural rights. Despite great expectations, the administration could not garner sufficient internal support for cultural changes and thus failed to limit Kurdish nationalism. Apart from a few references to its short-lived 2009 attempt, Erdogan has substituted Kurdish votes with Turkish nationalist votes since the AKP's 2011 election manifesto, which did not contain any proposals to handle the Kurdish issue. The dead-end Oslo meetings and the abrupt ending of the Solution Process in 2015, immediately following the HDP's success in reaching the election threshold and the AKP's failure to obtain a majority vote, partly due to MHP boosting, testifies to that shift. His government was and still is under siege in Syria and northern Iraq, while at home, he has been pursuing his primary goal, which has been the transition to a presidential system. The issue is in the transition stage; it becomes deeper or a complete peace. It is open to both escalation and Transformation. Kurdish identity is gradually becoming an immutable category. The Kurdish national identity is, therefore, primarily dependent on the nature of the links between the nation and its historical ancestors and their glories, sufferings, achievements, and setbacks. (Derisiotis, 2019)

The Kurdish problem impedes Turkey's legal reforms and democratic and human rights implementation. Kurds should realise that there is no territorial and political room for an independent Kurdistan state in West Asia. Turkey should recognise Kurdish cultural rights and seek a new social contract in which Turkey's cultural mosaic may flourish. Subsequently, at the dawn of the 21st century, a dialectical process took place in West Asia: the weakening of nation-states and the empowerment of non-state actors. Turkish-Kurdish conflict is complicated to speculate about the potential course for such a process. More research is needed to understand how varied boundary-making tactics establish and redefine new identities, alter nationalist discourses, and change state actions. A rigidly defined state vs. society dichotomy understates the importance of varied interactions between state and society in the establishment of Kurdish political identity in Turkey. A rigorous state-society dichotomy, in particular, ignores the importance of electoral rivalry in determining

the policies of Kurdish nationalists, who have been genuinely concerned about threats to their political hegemony from other Kurdish players. To conclude, studies focusing on ethnic groups as significant actors in the political process fail to investigate the dynamic interaction between ethnic organisations and their ethnic constituencies.

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