

Kurds between Ethnicity and Universalisms

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The third largest political party in Turkey, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a party that has an almost perfect political monopoly in the Kurdish lands, does not identify itself as Kurdish. The same is true for the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)¹, an armed guerilla movement that has increasingly moved away from specifically Kurdish causes and demands. It no longer seeks independence for the Kurds but rather, in the words of its leaders, a revolutionary democratization of Turkey and the Middle East. While the PKK at least has Kurdistan in its title—almost as a relic from a previous era—the legal political party that is HDP bears no such trace. It is simply a party for “peoples” (*halklar*). In both their militant and legal-civilian modes, these monopolistic Kurdish political movements seem to have grown beyond, if not entirely abandoned, their Kurdish specificity.

A parallel transcendence of Kurdish specificity has been the hallmark of Islamist politics in general and of AKP-era Turkey in particular. Islamist Kurds who support AKP and Kurdish Islamists who strive to maintain a slight degree of autonomy with respect to AKP by forming separate political parties like HUDA-PAR² (Free Cause Party) all subscribe to the notion of one ummah

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1 - The PKK was founded in 1978 under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalan. For some classic accounts of the emergence of PKK, see Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (NYU Press, 2009) and Ali Kemal Ozcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan* (Routledge, 2006).

2 - HUDA-PAR (*Hur Dava Partisi*) was established in 2012 as the legal and civilian wing of a formerly armed militant group, Hizbullah, a self-consciously Kurdish, radical Islamist revolutionary group. Also known as Kurdish Hizbullah, the group is widely believed to have been supported by the Turkish deep state as a countervailing force

and invoke the idea of Muslim brotherhood. The idea of Muslim brotherhood as it is deployed by Turkish Islamists demands delay, suspension and ultimate elimination of the particularities of Kurdish identity. As a subset of the broader and overarching identity of Muslimness, Islamist approaches to Kurdish identity, too, seem to make Kurdishness redundant. In an astonishing turn of events, both the hegemonic secular Kurdish politics and the AKP-allied minor Islamist Kurdish politics pursue ideals that make Kurdishness unnecessary and profess no interest in Kurdish nationhood or independence.

Kurdish specificity is lost in both the leftist and Islamist frameworks of politics in Turkey. Universalist liberation ideologies such as socialism and Islamism render Kurdish identity unnecessary and fail to address specifically Kurdish grievances. An example of such a grievance would be language rights for the Kurds. Though both have paid equal lip service to it, neither Islamists (AKP) nor leftists (HDP) have ever made such a purely Kurdish issue a priority in their policy agendas. Many similar examples can be adduced.

In this essay, I highlight the contemporary challenge posed to Kurdish identity as a result of the dominant position of universalistic ideologies in Kurdish political life. While allowing the Kurds to gain ideological legitimacy and some broader appeal within Turkish society, such ideologies eclipse Kurds' cultural particularities and render Kurdish-specific claims inappropriate and divisive. Kurds seem to get lost between their ethnic-specific needs and the anonymizing effects of the universalist ideologies claiming to represent them.

Rather than proposing alternatives to the dominant strands of Kurdish politics, in this piece, I highlight the crisis of representation in contemporary Kurdish politics in Turkey. To the extent that the problem under discussion hinders the Kurdish ability to pursue liberty and equality vis-à-vis the Turkish state, diagnosing this malaise is a necessary step towards understanding the failure of Kurdish politics which, from the radical left to radical Islamism, has made not the tiniest gain for Kurds qua Kurds despite approximately forty years of armed struggle and 40 000 casualties. Although the Kurdish parties can justifiably claim that their honest efforts have been rendered moot by the ongoing persecution of the Turkish state, the degree of their ineffectiveness cannot be explained away by the obvious fact of Kurdish victimhood.

against the PKK. Kurdish Hizbullah had no connection to the Lebanese Shiite militia group except for the similarity in name. In the early 1990's Kurdish Hizbullah was the only armed group in Bakur (Kurdish Kurdistan) that could challenge the PKK, which had by then monopolized Kurdish political representation and the capacity for violence outside of Turkish state violence. Supported by the Turkish state, Hizbullah emerged as the third actor in the region's theater of violence. While the PKK still holds its monopoly over Kurdish violence, the only political group to which it extends a grudging respect is HUDA-PAR which, although now a civilian party, continues to reserve its right to resort to arms in self-defense against the PKK. For a detailed and fascinating analysis of the emergence and transformation of the Kurdish Islamist group see Mehmet Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey: Islamism, Violence and the State* (Pluto Press, 2017).

PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC PARTY:

'We are not Kurdish, we are Turkey-ish'

The contemporary Kurdish political movement in both its violent illegal (PKK) and civilian legal (HDP) components now subscribes to the idea that the emancipation of the Kurds is possible only with a radical democratization of the country. HDP's party program describes itself as "a party for Turkey's working classes, laborers, peasants, tradespeople, pensioners, women, youth, intellectuals, artists, LGBTQ people, the disabled, the oppressed and the exploited of all nations, languages, cultures and faiths."³ HDP defines itself also as an "anti-capitalist party of freedom and equality." It positions itself as pro-labor, pro-self-government, pro-gender-equality, ecological and pro-peace, but does not identify with anything that is specifically Kurdish. Faced with questions and accusations about being separatist and Kurdist, HDP representatives frequently respond by saying that, "We are not a Kurdish party. HDP was founded as a party of Turkey."⁴

HDP's overrepresentation of the Turkish left and underrepresentation of Kurds, who make up approximately 90 percent of its base, generates occasional resentment among the Kurds. Marginal radical left groups, long eclipsed in Turkey, are given disproportionate levels of representation and leadership roles. By aligning themselves with the Kurdish movement, these tiny factions gained "access to a popular base well in excess of anything the Turkish left could manage through its own efforts."⁵ There are both theoretical and practical reasons for this. The party's vision seems to have redefined the political problem from a *Kurdish national question to a radical democratic transformation of the state and society in Turkey (and the Middle East)*.⁶

HDP, by any standards, is a progressive party that represents the best of what one would expect from a political party. Nevertheless, the question remains: How Kurdish is HDP? Does it adequately represent the needs and grievances of its overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, Kurdish constituency?

The party was established with the aim of attracting and amplifying the Turkish left. It granted the status of major partner to ultra-left groups in Turkey, despite their electoral insignificance, as part of a program of alliance-bu-

3 - See "Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP) Tuzugu," <https://www.hdp.org.tr/tr/parti-tuzugu/10> (Accessed June 7, 2020).

4 - For a recent instance, see current HDP party co-chairperson Mithat Sancar's interview, <https://www.peyama-kurd.com/D%C3%BCnya/biz-kuert-partisi-degiliz-hdp-tuerkiye-partisi-olarak-kuruldu> (accessed on May 7, 2020). For another similar statement at a major party convention in 2016 by the past co-chairperson Selahattin Demirtas, see <https://www.medyafaresi.com/haber/hdp-2-olagan-kongresi/767984> (accessed on May 7, 2020).

5 - Cengiz Gunes, "Turkey's New Left", *New Left Review*, issue 107, 14.

6 - Abdullah Ocalan, *Democratic Nation* (Cologne: International Initiative, 2016).

ilding and resuscitation of the weakened Turkish left. The progressive Turkish radical who occupies a high rank in the party and the average Kurd who votes for the party have very little in common in terms of culture, identity and lifestyle. Yet the party is designed in such a way that the former leads and represents the latter.

Any political observer will immediately notice that the entirety of Kurdish politics has been squeezed into a radical left that remains implicitly Turkish in orientation and as such complements the Turkish right with its limited horizon of opposition, resistance, and protest. For the Turkish left, this is an absolute relief and a revolutionary achievement; it means that no matter how outlandish their ideas, they have a popular base that will support them. Seen from the side of the Kurdish masses, however, Kurdish politics appears either as the struggle of a helpless victim or as the labor of an optimistic Sisyphus, ceaselessly responding to the dominance of the Turkish right. Unfortunately, most Kurds have internalized the assumption that the armed and civilian organizations acting on their behalf know what is best for them. Even though the Kurds never achieve much, they are told and tend to believe that they are engaged in an endless struggle. As a result, Kurdish politics is characterized by fetishization of slogans, resistance, and protest. For a smaller minority, such a politics might be harmless, but for a party that represents more than 20 million Kurds, a political repertoire of this nature is unfruitful.

Through HDP, Kurds came to constitute the new left of the Turkish political spectrum.⁷ This development represents an unexpected victory for the Turkish state. No longer need the state face the problem of Kurdish separatism or the challenge of independence. The threat of separatism has been replaced by non-ethnic leftist progressive politics. This, however, does not generate in the Turkish state the sense of relief one might expect. It continues to see HDP as an extension of the PKK and prefers at its discretion to treat it as a terrorist entity rather than a legitimate leftist political party. Even if we assume that HDP is making a virtuous sacrifice by transcending Kurdish identity “for the sake of greater humanity”⁸, it gains in exchange nothing that benefits the Kurds or humanity per se. No sacrifice of dignity on the part of HDP seems to release it in the eyes of the majority of Turks from the damning designation of terrorist(-supporter).

One might ask why there are not any significant alternatives to HDP among the Kurds. Such a question assumes that Kurdish politics takes place in a civilian

7 - Gunes, 11.

8 - A staple of HDP campaign literature is the slogan, “bizler, buyuk insanlik” (all of us, the greater humanity), <https://www.hdp.org.tr/buyuk-insanlik-cagrisi/6050>

environment. It does not. Without the blessings of either the Turkish state or the PKK, no Kurdish political party can survive. Kurdish representation is monopolized by PKK-affiliated parties, which in turn have chosen to treat the Kurdish vote as raw material for a progressive Turkish politics. Neither the illiterate Kurdish matrons carrying LGBTQ signs given to them by party operatives, nor the young Kurdish girls carrying Kalashnikovs who so fascinate western observers with the promise of an unlikely feminist utopia are aware of what outsiders assume them to be doing.⁹ There is nothing truly grassroots and/or democratic in either of those pictures. Kurdish bodies are simply carrying political signs and performing military missions that are intellectually alien to them and divorced from their concrete realities. They are following orders from an organization which they assume is serving their interests as Kurdish people.

The Rojava experiment of Kurdish self-rule in Northern Syria which came about as the result of a confluence of events—the Syrian civil war, the unreliable protection of the US, the war on ISIS—is often celebrated by distant observers as a utopian achievement. Take the example of Michael Löwy:

What these revolutionaries in the northern provinces of Syria are trying to do is without precedent. By way of community self-organization from below, they are trying to rally the Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and Yezidi populations in a secular confederation that breaks out of religious sectarianism and nationalist hatred. To put ecology and feminism at the heart of an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-statist project. To drive forward equality between men and women through the co-president of all decision-making bodies, and the creation of an armed force composed of women. To invent a form of decentralized, democratic political power, based on communal assemblies and going beyond the state: democratic confederalism. This unprecedented experience is being built amidst dramatic circumstances, in a constant confrontation with powerful and implacable regressive forces. In a region of the world torn apart by religious intolerance, the exterminatory struggles among nationalisms, blind violence, wars between clans each one more reactionary than the last, the interventions by imperialist powers, and the hegemony of capitalism in its most brutal form, libertarian Kurdistan appears as a little flame of utopia, a light of hope, a haven of democracy.¹⁰

In such admiration one sees how utopian hope often trumps the ability to question the degree to which such dreams are real in practice or even plausible in theory. The PKK's project of creating a democratic society at gunpoint amounts

9 - Wes Enzina, "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard", *The New York Times*, November 24, 2015.

10 - Michael Löwy, "Libertarian Kurdistan: it matters for us, too!", May 4, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3201-libertarian-kurdistan-it-matters-for-us-too> (accessed May 17, 2020).

to a democracy without subjects. The PKK's naïveté lies in the fact that it fails to see that it is, itself, the de facto state of the Kurds even as it proclaims its seemingly anti-statist ideas. Neither the territorial Rojava experiment in Syria nor the political HDP experiment in Turkey are bottom-up projects of civic participation. Rather, in both instances they are imposed from above on a constituency that seems to have no other option but to support "the Kurdish party."

The PKK's violence with respect to the Turkish state and its security apparatus is almost categorically excused by otherwise civil and progressive circles, in Turkey and internationally. Moreover, a progressive observer would hardly dare to question the PKK for its violence against civilians, its executions of people within its ranks, and its constant threat of violence against Kurdish civilians who disagree with its dictates. One of the few exceptions is an ex-PKK member and current critic of the party, Aytakin Yılmaz, who in his books criticizes the Turkish left's utter silence on PKK's human rights violations, from extrajudicial killings to its use of child soldiers.¹¹

During his years in prison, Ocalan's political outlook changed dramatically.¹² A leader who thus far had relied on Soviet-style Marxist ideas (via their Turkish translations by the Turkish left), he finally had the opportunity to update his conceptual repertoire. Written in the style of a master's thesis, Ocalan's texts are ordinary from an academic point of view. What appear to be grand discoveries on Ocalan's part (i.e., his belated encounters with Benedict Anderson, Max Weber, Michel Foucault and a whole range of post-structuralist Marxists and theorists of radical democracy) have long been staples of academic literature. On closer scrutiny, even in his decision to update his theoretical framework, Ocalan is less than original, since he seems to be following in the footsteps of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) commander Alfonso Cano, who underwent a similar transition.¹³

Ocalan's new reading of radical theory led him to embrace the anarcho-libertarian ideas of Murray Bookchin. Ocalan's new vision of "democratic autonomy", municipalism, and democratic confederalism or democratic modernity is all more or less a translation and enthusiastic appropriation of Bookchin's ideas. Similarly, Ocalan's newly coined *jineoloji*, his so-called science of women, is good ol' feminism.¹⁴

11 - Aytakin Yılmaz, *Yoldasini Oldurmek* (Iletisim, 2014) and *Onlar Daha Cocuktu* (Iletisim 2019).

12 - Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "Democratic Confederalism as a Kurdish Spring: The PKK and the Quest for Radical Democracy," in M. M. A. Ahmet and M. M. Gunter (eds.), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Bibliotheca Iranica: Kurdish Studies Series, No.12), 163-185.

13 - Gunes, 18.

14 - Abdullah Ocalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative, 2013).

Marxist messianism finds its parochial echo in Ocalan's self-perception. Explicitly calling himself a prophet, Ocalan waxes eloquent as he writes on the liberation of humanity, beginning in antiquity and making frequent references to the transcendence of this or that theorist. Ocalan's savior complex is nonetheless tempered by a desire to prove his competence at theory-building to the (mostly Turkish, but also global) left. This interest can be traced back to his youth, when he was influenced by the student movements of the 1960's and 1970's. His background also explains Ocalan's insistence on trying to engage in a correspondence of ideas with Murray Bookchin from his prison cell. Bookchin, though happy that his ideas had been adopted by the Kurdish movement, ultimately declined to enter into direct correspondence with Ocalan. To his lawyers' persistent entreaties, Bookchin was forced to respond that, as an ailing old man, he was no longer able to read or write back.¹⁵

UMMAH'S SERVANTS:

The Party of God, which Happens to Be Kurdish

When AKP came to power in 2002, it also inherited Turkey's long-standing Kurdish problem. The party's initial vision included a relatively liberal approach to Kurdish rights and symbolic recognition of religious and ethnic minorities. This policy reached its climax with the announcement of a peace process on March 21, 2013, between the AKP government and the jailed PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Although actual progress was scant, the peace process brought Kurdish society an unprecedented optimism about its future. However, the process collapsed on July 22, 2015, when the parties resumed conflict via their proxies. Since then AKP policy towards Kurdish identity has become less accommodating.

The rise to power in Turkey of AKP, a religious-conservative party, came as a shock equally to the secular establishment and to the Kurdish political movement. The Kurdish leadership, steeped in a secular worldview shaped by Marxist-Leninist ideas, had difficulty accepting the new religious government. A lifelong pragmatist and political survivor, Ocalan only grudgingly accepted the AKP government as his interlocutor. Although the PKK's recognition of the need to accommodate Islam as an element of Kurdish culture started at a rudimentary level in the 1990's, more tangible actions were taken during and in response to AKP-era politics.¹⁶

15 - For Ocalan's lawyers' correspondence with Bookchin through his partner, Janet Biehl, see: <https://www.demokrathaber.org/guncel/ocalan-ile-unlu-yazar-murray-bookchin-arasindaki-yazismalar-h62488.html>

16 - For a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the secular Kurdish movement with respect to Islam from an apathetic, if not antagonistic, position to a more Islam-accommodating attitude, see Zeki Sarigil, *Ethnic Boundaries in*

Notwithstanding their inadequacies, AKP policies towards the Kurds were distinct from the secular Kemalist policies that had dominated Turkish bureaucracy for most of the republican era. While the Turkish secular establishment saw no room for Kurdish identity in their project of a secular Turkish nation, and thus tended to deny the existence of the Kurds as a people with a distinct language, AKP as the culmination of the religious-conservative opposition to that secular establishment allowed some room for Kurdish identity. Some have called the AKP era a second or religious republic. In this new iteration of the Turkish state, of the two main conditions of citizenship, it was Muslimness rather than Turkishness which gained prominence.¹⁷ In this period, stronger interest in Islam gave rise to a greater emphasis on the notion of *ummah*. As part of the *ummah*, Turks accorded some fraternal space to non-Turkish Muslims—at least so long as they accepted Turkish leadership of the Muslim world. The collapse of the Turkish nation and the Muslim *ummah* into a single amalgam has long been a trap for Kurds, whose right to Kurdishness is thereby effaced.

Turkish Islamists always saw the Kurdish question as an epiphenomenon and counseled patience to their Kurdish brethren until the moment of revolution.¹⁸ The homology between left discourse of an ultimate revolution and Islamist discourse of ummatic liberation is not a coincidence: the former significantly influenced the latter.

A significant player that came to prominence in the 1990's was the Kurdish Islamist social movement and political party that is currently known as HUDA-PAR (Hur Dava Partisi) or Free Cause Party. Its acronym, invoking the word *huda*, which in Turkish means "God," signifies "the party of God," which is to say, Hizbullah. The former Hizbullah, current HUDA-PAR, has been able to carve out its own space despite the near-total domination of PKK-affiliated organizations in the Kurdish lands. Before its founding in 2012 as a legal political party, HUDA-PAR had a life as a charitable civil society organization under the name Mustazaf-Der (Association for Solidarity with the Oppressed) in the 2000's. Before this, the group had gained notoriety in the 1990's as a paramilitary associated with execution-style killings and retaliations against PKK members in major Kurdish cities such as Diyarbakir and Batman.¹⁹

Turkish Politics: The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam (NYU Press, 2018).

17 - Mucahit Bilici, *Hamal Kurt: Türk İslami ve Kurt Sorunu* [Kurd the Porter: Turkish Islam and the Kurdish Question], (Avesta, 2017), 77. Baris Unlu, *Turkluk Sozlesmesi: Olusumu, Isleyisi ve Krizi* (Dipnot Yayinlari, 2018).

18 - For an ethnographic taste of the Islamist perception of the Kurdish question, see Christopher Houston, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation State* (Berg, 2001).

19 - The two most notable cases of Hizbullah's assassinating non-PKK community leaders are the torture and killing of İzzettin Yıldırım (the head of Zehra Vakfı) and the kidnapping and murder of Konca Kuris (a Muslim feminist known for her outspoken views on women's rights in Islam).

In addition to its considerable success in terrorizing the PKK in urban areas, Hizbullah targeted other Kurdish religious organizations in an effort to consolidate its dominance as the sole Kurdish Islamic entity contending with the PKK.²⁰ Its gruesome tortures and executions ultimately reached a point where the Turkish state decided to crack down on the group. In January 17, 2000, its leader, Huseyin Velioglu, was killed in a police raid in Istanbul. After a brief confusion, the group reinvented itself as a civic charity with a focus on social services and community organization. In 2012 it became a political party.

In an effort to position itself in contradistinction to the secular Kurdish movement (to PKK and HDP), HUDA-PAR has embraced a greater degree of cultural Kurdishness. Even though it perpetuates the conventional Islamist emphasis on the ummah and Islamization of the state, today Kurdish identity is more clearly asserted in HUDA-PAR than in HDP. When compared with AKP's generic Muslim brotherhood discourse, however, HUDA-PAR represents a more local and thus more Kurdish line. Nonetheless, in matters of Turkish politics it has not been able to break free of its dependence on AKP.

After decades of secular Kemalist denial, Islamist politics promised an alternative. In place of a secular Turkishness which aimed to suppress the Kurds via "Turkification," religious Turkishness appeared to pious Kurds to offer relief. They soon realized that Turkish Islam was equally intent on assimilation, this time by "Muslimization." This discovery led some Kurdish Muslim critics of Turkish nationalism to conclude that "Turkish Islamists are not Muslim on the Kurdish issue and the Kurds should not trust them in this regard."²¹

Under AKP rule in the 2000's, references to Kurdishness became possible and legitimate so long as they were confined to spaces in which citizens and politicians could brag about intra-Muslim diversity. But practically speaking, such diversity was always deployed to silence Kurdish ethnic difference. The Kurds were given the ability to be Kurds only if they promised to turn around and renounce it on behalf of a greater Muslim identity. The problems of Muslims thousands of miles away were held to be of greater importance than immediate Kurdish suffering, by Turkish Islamists and even by Kurds themselves. Kurdish misery is never as weighty as that of other Muslims, such as those in Palestine, Myanmar or Kashmir.

20 - The competition for Kurdish hearts and minds between PKK and various Islamist groups active in the region also explains the transformation of these groups in matters of religion and ethnicity. See Mustafa Gurbuz, *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

21 - Ahmet Yildiz, "Mystifying Nationalism: Kurdish Islamists and the Kurdish Question" in Umit Cizre (ed), *The Turkish AK Party and Its Leader: Criticism, Opposition and Dissent* (Routledge, 2016), 210.

In short, the problem of Kurdish suffering was rewritten as a generic problem of Muslim suffering. It was the lack of an Islamic state (or Muslim power) that was responsible for the deprivations of the Kurds.²² In the pre-AKP era, the Islamists always consoled the Kurds by saying that when Islam came to power, all the problems of nationalism and discrimination would be resolved. In other words, the problems the Kurds were facing were not seen as specifically Kurdish problems, but as problems emanating from the secular character of the state. With Islamization of state and society, the argument went, the Kurdish question would evaporate. Yet once the AKP's hegemony in Turkish politics was established and its grip over society became tighter, apart from a short-lived peace process, it became clear that Islamism was not going to remedy the Kurdish problem. Still, many Kurdish people and organizations remain allied with AKP and hold on to the promise of an Islamic solution.

Given AKP's prodigious capacity to vacuum up Kurdish votes with its religious sensibility, Kurdish religious parties can maintain only a thin autonomy with respect to AKP. The Turkish state addresses Kurds not only with social assistance programs but also with a religious discourse of ummah and brotherhood. This policy finds its continuation in an unofficial alliance between AKP and HUDA-PAR. As the Turkish state becomes more Islamic, its assimilationist policy acquires a more religious tone.

Kurdish Islam as a traditional religious culture has a distinguished history that is not relevant here, but Kurdish Islamism as a modern phenomenon is of quite recent vintage. It is a direct product of Turkish Islamism. Kurdish Islamist movements grew out of Turkish Islamist movements except that they were inclined to be more radical. It is an interesting fact that most of the militants and disposable foot soldiers of Turkish Islamism happen to be of Kurdish origin. A result, no doubt, of their subaltern mentality, many of the fighters and so-called martyrs of the Turkish Islamists, who fought or died in various contemporary "jihad"s, from Afghanistan to Bosnia (and even Mavi Marmara), turn out to have been Kurdish. Kurdish Islamists' naïve readiness to sacrifice themselves has always been a resource for their Turkish Islamist superiors. The same seems to be true with respect to Kurdish readiness to sacrifice for causes sacred to the transnational radical left at the expense of their own self-interest.²³

Intellectually speaking, Kurdish Islamism is a vernacularized version of global Muslim radicalism, mediated by Turkish Islamism. At a more practical level, Kurdish Islamism took its shape in a state-sponsored mobilization

22 - Houston, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation State*.

23 - Mucahit Bilici, "How the global left hinders Kurdish liberation: a reply to Zizek", *Duvar English*, October 26, 2019.

of Kurdish religiosity against PKK's secular domination over Kurdish populations. Activated and promoted as an armed counterforce against the PKK, Hizbullah became the second and one of the only two political groups with a capacity for armed violence. It is no coincidence that HDP and HUDA-PAR, the legal-political wings of the two armed groups, are the only viable political formations in Kurdish lands. The blood feud and the ensuing balance of terror that emerged between PKK and Hizbullah after the 1990's explains the absence of any significant third Kurdish party in the region and the relative autonomy of HUDA-PAR today. The only political entity that PKK grudgingly respects is HUDA-PAR, because the group never entirely gave up its arms but simply buried them, reserving the right to resort to them in the future.

Characterized by religious bigotry and strong cultural conservatism in its violent phase, Hizbullah underwent a certain degree of urbanization and "civilization" in its political phase under HUDA-PAR. Neither HUDA-PAR nor the PKK or HDP seek a separate state or ethnic independence for the Kurds. Rather, both movements are seeking some form of cultural autonomy that can presumably be secured only with an overall transformation of the country. Whether this transformation will take the shape of "Islamization" or "democratization" is what draws the line between the two movements.

XANÎ'S ADMONITION

In his *Dîwan*, one of the fathers of Kurdish classical literature and the author of the Kurdish epic, *Mem û Zîn*, Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707) makes an unusually modern and inspiring move. Let us look first at some lines from the original poem, followed by my own prose translation:

*Zahidê xelwetnuşîn pabendê kirdarê xwe ye
Tacirê rîhletguzîn dilnarê dînarê xwe ye
Aşîqe dîlberhebîn dildarê dîdarê xwe ye
Da bizanî her kesek bê şubhe xemxwarê xwe ye*

*Bê amel tu j'kes meke hêvî ata û himmetê
Bê xerez nakêşitin qet kes ji bo kes zehmetê
Kes nehin qet hilgiritin barê te ew bê ucretê
Gerçi Îsa bit ewî xêk rakirê barê xwe ye*

*Hoşîyar bî, da nekî umrê xwe bê hasil telef
Ku nedaye faîde mal, genc û ewlad û xelef*

*Macerayê Xidr-î dîwarê yetîmî bû selef
Vî zemanî her kesek mî'marê dîwarê xwe ye²⁴*

As an early modern Kurdish thinker and poet, Xanî, in this poem, makes the case for the necessity of a “selfhood” for the Kurds:

From the ascetic hermit who focuses on his prayers, to the travelling merchant who pursues his profits, to the lover eager to see the face of his beloved, everyone is worried about themselves and busy with their own affairs. Those who do not work hard have no right to expect help from others. No one helps anybody for no reason. Nobody carries another’s burden for nothing. Even if you were Jesus, all you could do would be to carry your own burden. Wake up, O Xanî, so that you do not waste your time in this world. Know that family, children, and posterity are of no use unless you work. The wall of the orphans mentioned in the story of Khidr now belongs to the past. *In this age, everyone is the architect of their own wall.*

Alluding to an incipient modernity where the Kurds, too, would have to build their own subjectivity, Xanî employs the metaphor of the brickmason. One sees in his lines the first stirrings of Kurdish political subjectivity. His particularistic emphasis (“one’s own wall”) prefigures the future Kurdish predicament in which the self-determination of the Kurds will be set against the universalizing impulses promoted by larger Muslim neighbors.

Writing in response to one of the recent Turkish interventions against Kurds in Rojava (Northern Syria), one observer provides a list of reasons for the Kurdish plight for which Kurds themselves should be blamed. The last item on the list, though it sounds innocuous, is interesting: “And finally, and possibly most importantly, the Kurds should stop trusting others more than they trust themselves.”²⁵

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing discussion, I have tried to underline the impossibility of being Kurdish, politically. The political assertion of Kurdish identity without the mediation of Islam or socialism is nearly impossible, as it immediately attracts state aggression and Turkish accusations of racism, nationalism, separatism, etc. Under this overwhelming pressure, Kurdish political actors invariably end up seeking legitimacy outside and beyond Kurdishness. Faced with Turkish

24 - Ehmedê Xanî, *Dîwan*, [Hemû Berhem] (Wesanen Lîs, 2019), 237.

25 - Latif Tas, “Regimes of evil: Colonization continues,” *OpenDemocracy*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/regimes-evil-colonization-continues/>

rejection and repression, Kurds for years have taken refuge in Islamist or radical leftist movements. Both of these supra-Kurdish outlets have allowed the Kurds to avoid the humiliation of Turkification while giving them the dignity of being part of a universal good. But these supra-Kurdish movements always fall short of a proper recognition of Kurdish identity and its priorities. In the absence of Kurds speaking for themselves, no one else is speaking for them.

In sum, in their efforts to avoid marginalization in Turkish politics, Kurdish political actors often make choices that dilute their rights-claims. As a consequence, there is no sense of urgency associated with things Kurdish because they are invariably overshadowed by more generic issues of Turkish politics or global ideologies.

Kurdish parties that can and should have become major players in Turkish politics on behalf of the Kurds have become no more than platforms of progressive activism, where the valorization and fetishization of resistance defines and exhausts the political horizon. What they offer Kurds is a call for overcoming the Kurdish identity and a celebration of resistance at the expense of the ideals of freedom and independence. Kurds no longer fight for their own rights, but against capitalism, patriarchy, and the nation-state. Kurdish desperation to achieve either nationhood or statehood seems to have resulted in a sublimated rejection of both the ideas of the nation and the state. Whether this is a virtue is open for more serious debate.

It is important to recognize that there are times when efforts towards transcendence of ethnic identity can go wrong and result in an altruistic self-abnegation. The naïve celebration of the sacrificial figure of the Kurd by progressive Western intellectuals seems only to further preclude the Kurds' obtaining real insight into their own plight. The Kurdish selflessness demanded by universalist ideologies, Islamist or socialist, is harmful to the Kurds and of no benefit to humanity.