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ABSTRACT: *In a region undergoing dramatic changes, the Kurds in particular have begun to enjoy a political resurgence. Of those countries where Kurds reside, Turkey is the single most important actor for several reasons: It is a powerful state that is home to more than half of the total Kurdish population; it has been locked in a stalemate with (arguably) the most powerful Kurdish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party [Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK]; this decades-long armed conflict progressively has acquired a trans-border disposition and fomented disagreement between Turkey and the United States in Syria; and lastly, Turkey under the Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP] gradually is distancing itself from the Western bloc and moving away from democratic values and principles. This article examines the evolving Kurdish question in Turkey with an emphasis on how it is interacting with changing domestic, regional, and global dynamics.*

KEY WORDS: *Armed; Conflict; Kurds; Middle East; PKK; Turkey*

There is a consensus among scholars regarding two main aspects of the Kurdish question in Turkey. First, what began as a violent restructuring of the 19th century Ottoman Empire, and which effectively wiped out local administrative structures in Ottoman Kurdistan,[1] turned into a forced assimilation project during the foundation of modern Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s. This forced homogenization and Turkification project targeting the large Kurdish minority[2] created a tumultuous start in Kurdish-state relations, engendering more than two-dozen Kurdish rebellions in the first two decades of the new republic.[3]

The roots of Kurdish nationalism often are traced back to this 'historical disjuncture located at the very *origins* of [modern Turkey]'.[4] Hakan Yavuz, with an emphasis on

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[1] For a detailed account of the transformation of Ottoman Kurdistan see Veli Yadirgi (2017) *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[2] While estimates for the exact size of the Kurdish population in Turkey vary, it is projected that the Kurds constitute about a quarter of the total population. See, for instance, Wadie Jwaideh (2006) *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), pp. 9–10.

[3] Citing a report from a retired Turkish army officer, Mehmet Ali Birand lists at least 25 Kurdish uprisings since 1924. Mehmet A. Birand (2008) *Bugüne kadar kaç Kürt isyanı oldu*? [How Many Kurdish Rebellions Have Occurred?], *Hurriyet*, 3 January. Available at: http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/bugune-kadar-kac-kurt-isyani-oldu-7957402, accessed July 4, 2019. Yadirgi notes 27 revolts during the first two decades of the Republic in *The Political Economy of Kurds*, p. 168.

[4] Sener Akturk (2015) Religion and Nationalism: Contradictions of Islamic Origins and Secular Nation-Building in Turkey, Algeria, and Pakistan, *Social Science Quarterly*, 96(3), p. 803.

the decline of Islam as a key source of legitimacy, points to 'the shift from multi-ethnic, multi-cultural realities of the Ottoman empire to the nation-state model' as a key determinant of 'the politicization of Kurdish cultural identity'.[5] This coercive and nonconsensual ethnic formation[6] in the 1920s separated the Kurds from state identity. Kurds came to represent the most serious hurdle to the ethnic homogenization project that constituted a keystone of the newly minted Turkish ontological reality.

Second, although the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party [*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, PKK] and ensuing armed conflict are not completely dissimilar to many Kurdish revolts, it marks a turning point in the century-long antagonistic relationship that the Kurds have had with the Turkish state. The PKK insurgency displays some key differences from the earlier uprisings during the formative years of the Turkish republic. For example, the PKK has engaged in the longest revolt against the Turkish state and, despite a ferocious response, has sustained its resistance since 1984. It has mobilized the Kurdish masses to an unprecedented degree and emerged as one of the most powerful non-state actors in Turkey and the Middle East. Consequently, the PKK has come to represent the most serious challenge to the Turkish state since the latter's foundation in 1923.[7] One veteran scholar of Kurdish politics describes the PKK-led Kurdish challenge as 'the Achilles heel of the Turkish state' as opposed to the less severe previous uprisings.[8]

Thus, while other rebellions may be significant to the evolution of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, this paper addresses the Kurdish rebellion managed by the PKK, and its evolution over the past four decades. Below I first offer a brief account of the PKK's remarkable transformation and then examine the prospects for what many Kurds call a 'dignified peace' [*onurlu baris*] that goes beyond a negative peace (merely ending the violence), but also brings about a positive peace with an emphasis on 'social justice' and an 'egalitarian distribution of power and resources'.[9]

The Rise and Evolution of the 'Last' Kurdish Rebellion

The history of the PKK insurrection lends itself to a number of different interpretations. Cengiz Gunes sheds important light on the rise and growth of the PKK in Turkey's crowded political field during the 1970s.[10] Formed by a few college students in 1978, the group found sanctuary in Syria and Lebanon, launched its armed struggle against Turkey in 1984, and since has been 'the hegemonic force in Kurdish resistance in Turkey'.[11] By the 1990s, the group had turned into 'a mass movement with

[5] M. Hakan Yavuz (2001) Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 7(3), p. 1.

[6] Andreas Wimmer (2013) *Waves of War: Nationalism, State Formation, and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

[7] Henri J. Barkey & Graham E. Fuller (1998) *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield); Robert W. Olson (2001) *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991–2000* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers); Mehmet Gurses (2018) *Anatomy of a Civil War: Sociopolitical Impacts of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press).

[8] Robert Olson (ed.) (1996) *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impacts on Turkey and the Middle East* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky), p. 1.

[9] Johan Galtung (1969) Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), p. 185.

[10] Cengiz Gunes (2012) *The Kurdish National Movement: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge).

[11] Ibid, p. 91.

supporters and sympathizers numbering several million drawn from all parts of Kurdistan and the Kurdish communities in Europe'.[12]

The 1999 capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, marks a critical juncture in the PKK's history. From the Turkish state's perspective, this was a victory that would end the violence, consistent with some studies that have argued for a positive relationship between leadership decapitation and government victory.[13] While the arrest of Ocalan did lead to some fragmentation and a unilateral ceasefire by the group until 2004, it did not result in the group's termination or the end of Turkey's 'terrorism' problem. Jenna Jordan highlights the pivotal roles that high levels of bureaucratization and popular support play in explaining why leadership removal fails to destabilize or terminate some groups.[14] Bureaucratized groups, Jordan argues, tend to be diversified with a clear distribution of responsibilities and are more likely to survive the removal of their leaders due to their decentralized institutions.[15] David Palmer, in his analysis of Peru's Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*), a Marxist insurgent group that sought to overthrow the government in the 1980s, draws attention to the group's fairly narrow public support and the leadership's 'one-dimensional and all-encompassing vision of history' to explain the group's decline following the capture of its leader, Abimael Guzman, in 1992.[16]

Contrary to the commonly cited examples of leadership decapitation as a successful counterinsurgency strategy, the capture of Ocalan did not put an end to the PKK insurrection. Instead, it brought it to a new phase with increased popular support, a more diversified structure, and a fresh political outlook. As one recent study argues, the PKK has become a state-like institution with an intricate set of rules and regulations in its use of violence, as opposed to the Turkish state's portrayal of it as 'a tool of foreign powers' or a group of 'vicious, cold-blooded killers'.[17] The PKK thus not only is characterized by a high level of discipline and control but also has shown its capability to survive the capture of its leader and adapt to the changing sociopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

The PKK in the 21st Century

The PKK's efforts to reflect on the changing regional and global dynamics and reach out to the Turkish state for a negotiated solution preceded the arrest of its leader. As early as its 1995 Fifth Congress, the PKK leadership, responding to wavering global circumstances such as the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the end of the Cold War, made a strong critique of the Soviet approach to socialism. The organization stated that the stagnation and collapse of the Soviet Union was due to its extreme centralism and overall eradication of individual freedoms.[18]

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[12] Ibid, p. 101.
[13] Patrick B. Johnston (2012) Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns, *International Security* 36(4), pp. 47–79.
[14] Jenna Jordan (2014) Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes, *International Security* 38(4), pp. 7–38.
[15] Ibid. p. 11.
[16] David Scott Palmer (2017) Revolutionary leadership as necessary element in people's war: Shining Path of Peru, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28(3), pp. 426–450, at p. 442.
[17] Murat Haner, Michael L. Benson & Francis T. Cullen. (2019) Code of the Terrorists: The PKK and the Social Construction of Violence, *Critical Criminology* 27, 393–419.
[18] Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*, 51–52. Also see Meredith Tax (2016) *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press).

This stance gained momentum in the 2000s, leading to a wide-ranging organizational and strategic transformation from which a reformed PKK emerged with an emphasis on a new paradigm centered on a 'comprehensive democratic discourse'[19] to end the conflict. The PKK publicly denounced its initial goal of establishing an independent, united, socialist Kurdish state and began emphatically to advance such concepts as 'democratic autonomy' and 'democratic unity' within Turkey.[20] One study goes so far as to argue that the Kurdish movement has 'put forward a meta-political critique of society by going beyond ethnic claims.'[21] Underscoring a pluralist, grass-roots-driven democracy, along with gender-equality and ecological democracy, 'democratic autonomy' has become a cornerstone of the PKK-led movement.

Adopting a multi-pronged approach, the PKK progressed from a militant group into what John McCarthy and Mayer Zald call a 'social movement industry,'[22] giving rise to a number of organizations at local, national, regional, and global levels. Through a number of political parties, most recently the Democratic Regions Party (*Demokratik Bolgeler Partisi*, DBP), the PKK quickly rose to dominance in the Kurdish-majority east. Moreover, since the formation of the Peoples' Democratic Party [*Haklarin Demokratik Partisi*, HDP] in 2012, the Kurds have emerged as a crucial political actor in weakening the ruling Justice and Development Party's [*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, AKP] national hegemony.[23]

The June 7, 2015, elections only cemented the rise of Kurds as a key player in Turkey. The HDP won 80 seats in the National Assembly, making it the first Kurdish-led party that surpassed the 10 percent national electoral threshold; this outcome denied the AKP a chance to form a majority government. After this victory, the HDP was accused of being a political wing of the PKK and faced severe pressure. Aimed at limiting its electoral growth, HDP candidates and supporters were attacked during their election campaign in an unfair and insecure election environment.[24] Despite an uneven playing field, while losing a significant number of seats (down from 80 to 59), it maintained 10 percent of the total votes in the follow-up snap elections of November 1, 2015.

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[19] Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement*, p. 124.

[20] See ibid, pp. 136; and Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*, pp. 7–8.

[21] Simin Fadaee & Camilla Brancolini (2019) From National Liberation to Radical Democracy: Exploring the Shift in the Kurdish Liberation Movement in Turkey, *Ethnicities*, 19(5), p. 858.

[22] John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald (1977) Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory, *American Journal of Sociology* 82(6), p. 1219.

[23] The HDP was a contrivance of the imprisoned PKK leader Ocalan as a new platform with the goal of bringing together pro-democracy forces in Turkey to promote his new paradigm of 'democratic unity'. Ocalan predicted in 2013 from his prison cell that such a new party could win about 15 percent of total votes, five percent of which could come from the Turks. See Abdullah Ocalan (2015), *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa: İmralı Notları* [*Democratic Liberation and the Construction of Free Life: Notes from Imrali*] (Neuss, Germany: Mezopotamya Press). p. 80. Surprisingly, the HDP won 13.1 percent of total votes in the June 7, 2015 elections. According to a detailed report by KONDA, an Istanbul-based public opinion company, although a vast majority of HDP votes (about 87 percent) came from the Kurds, about nine percent of HDP electors identified as 'Turk'. KONDA (2015) *7 Haziran Sandık ve Seçmen Analizi* [An Analysis of the June 7th Elections], June 18, 2015, https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/KONDA_7HaziranSandıkveSeçmenAnaliziRaporu.pdf, accessed July 19, 2019, p. 67. For a lengthy discussion, see Cengiz Gunes (2017) Turkey's New Left, *New Left Review*, Sep-Oct, pp. 9–30.

[24] Francis O'Connor & Bahar Baser (2018) Communal Violence and Ethnic Polarization before and after the 2015 Elections in Turkey: Attacks against the HDP and the Kurdish Population, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18(1), pp. 53–72.

The HDP's strategic decision of not fielding candidates in major Turkish cities in the 2019 local elections proved detrimental to the AKP-MHP electoral alliance. Much to the chagrin of the ruling AKP, the HDP sustained its status as the largest party in the Kurdish east. Furthermore, it mobilized its electorates in the western parts of the country to support the opposition bloc against the AKP-led coalition. This strategy significantly contributed to AKP's electoral defeat in Ankara and several other major cities. The AKP lost Istanbul, Turkey's largest city by population, after 25 years of uninterrupted rule that began with Erdogan's victorious mayoral election of 1994. As such, the Kurds (and by implication the PKK) have demonstrated that they can be a significant political player in Turkey.

Regionally, by means of the groups it has inspired in Iran, Iraq and Syria, the PKK has created a truly trans-national reality. The PKK tacitly has partnered with the United States (US) in their efforts to eliminate the Islamic State (IS) and curb the rising influence of Iran, largely through the Democratic Union Party of Syria [*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*, PYD]. The PYD is a Kurdish group that was inspired by the PKK's ideology and organization.[25] The transnational aspect of the PKK also can be observed in its hegemonic influence among the large Kurdish diaspora in Europe.[26]

Without overlooking the heterogeneous and contested Kurdish sociopolitical scene,[27] it is fair to say that the PKK movement has managed to win the hearts and minds among a majority of Kurds, effectively serving as their voice in the struggle for recognition as a distinct people. These developments, coupled with the dramatic changes Turkey has experienced under the AKP in the past decade as explained below, have contributed to an increasingly refined image of the Kurds.

With the rise of the aforementioned HDP, which has been described as 'pro-women' and is credited for reaching out to a variety of minority groups excluded by other parties,[28] the Kurds often have been portrayed in a positive light in much of Western media. Highlighting the Kurdish groups' effectiveness against radical Islamists coupled with the changes the PKK, Turkey, and the Middle East in general have undergone in the past decade, French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy goes as far as to describe the PKK and its related organizations as 'agents of stability now and, tomorrow, of peace in the Middle East'.[29]

[25] James Jeffrey, US Special Representative for Syria, described the PYD/Kurdish-led-Syrian Democratic Forces as a militia 'led essentially by an offshoot of the PKK'. While the US considers the PKK as a terrorist organization, Jeffrey continued that the US does not see the PYD as a terrorist group. See *Ahvalnews* (2019), July 20. Available at: https://ahvalnews-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/ahvalnews.com/us-turkey/turkey-provides-diverse-support-syrian-opposition-us-syria-envoy-jeffrey?amp&fbclid=IwAR0R6p_3zATWzSgl13KuhPFTLp0ROaFHhzvW5B2dQ_-TCl8-3XC5Avc4MkA, accessed July 21, 2019.

[26] See, for instance, Bahar Baser (2015) *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective* (Surrey, England: Ashgate); Vera Eccarius-Kelly (2011) *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger).

[27] See Cuma Cicek (2017) *The Kurds of Turkey: National, Religious and Economic Identities* (London: I. B. Tauris).

[28] Nick Robins-Early (2015) Meet the HDP, the pro-gay, pro-women Kurdish Party shaking up Turkish politics, *Huffington Post*, June 11. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/turkey-hdp-party_n_7537648, accessed July 8, 2019.

[29] Bernard-Henri Levy (2014) Stop calling our closest allies against ISIS "Terrorists," *The New Republic*, October 22. Available at: https://newrepublic.com/article/119939/pkk-not-terrorist-organization-theyre-fighting-isis-terrorists, accessed July 8, 2019.

The Battle of Kobani in Syria, during which Kurdish forces aligned with the PYD displayed a heroic resistance against IS in late 2014 and early 2015, prompted a number of important outcomes. In addition to dealing a blow to IS's aura of invincibility, it helped carry the Kurds to the forefront of global attention and marked the beginning of a partnership between the US and the PYD that has deepened over time. Although the US relationship with the PYD is marred by the Trump administration's vacillation over the US foreign policy toward the Middle East, the rare bipartisan opposition to President Trump's Syria withdrawal declaration of October 2019 not only led to a partial retraction of the announcement, as the US ultimately decided to keep a residual force in eastern Syria, but also confirmed the extent of and potential for US-Kurdish relations. Finally, the determination and competence of Kurdish female fighters known as the Women's Defense Units [*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ] in the war against IS earned them considerable international media attention,[30] reinforcing the pro-women image the PKK had long been building.[31]

While the PYD may not be merely an extension of the PKK, it considers Ocalan a spiritual leader and takes its cues and inspiration from the 'democratic autonomy' model that the PKK developed. Turkey deems the PYD and the PKK as one and has developed a foreign policy toward Syria mainly centered on preventing the PYD from consolidating its rule in northern Syria, demonstrated by Turkey's invasion of the area including Jarablus and its environs in 2016, Afrin in 2018, and Tel Abyad (Gri Sepi) and Ras Al Ayn (Seri Kani) in late 2019. Thus, while the PYD may not be the same as the PKK, their gains can be accredited to the PKK given their historical and ideological connections.[32] The well-earned positive image of the Kurds in Syria is likely to weaken the negative image of the PKK that Turkey has been promoting internationally for a long time.

Turkey in the New Century

Just as the advent of the 21st century has witnessed key developments for the PKK, Turkey too has experienced some notable changes. Particularly, the rise of the AKP in 2002 and its subsequent electoral victories ushered in a new epoch. The AKP government, advocating human rights and democracy, introduced a series of social and political reforms that helped Turkey become an official candidate state for European Union membership in 2005. Turkey in the 2000s seemed on course to becoming a model Muslim democracy. Moreover, between 2009 and 2012, as part of democratization reforms, the government initiated what optimistically was dubbed as the 'Kurdish Opening' but later changed to the 'National Unity and Brotherhood' project and aimed at easing restrictions on the expression of Kurdish language and culture.[33] This

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[30] Mari Toivanen & Bahar Baser (2016) Gender in the Representations of an Armed Conflict: Female Kurdish Combatants in French and British Media, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9(3), pp. 294–314.

[31] See Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*.

[32] For a detailed account of the PYD-PKK links, see Zeynep Kaya & Robert Lowe (2017) The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship, in Gareth Stanfield & Mohammed Shareef (eds) (2017) *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, pp. 275–287 (London, UK: C. Hurst & Co.).

[33] Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*, p. 129.

phenomenon reached a peak with a mutually observed ceasefire in early 2013 between Turkey and the PKK.[34]

The fragile ceasefire came to an end in the summer of 2015, dashing hopes for substantive negotiations. A new phase in the conflict showcases several key developments. The confrontations in Sur (Diyarbakir), Cizre (Sirnak), Nusaybin (Mardin) and other Kurdish cities that started in the summer of 2015 and continued until early 2016 represented a more direct challenge to state authority in the Kurdish region. The war no longer was confined to the Kurdish countryside.

The state has pursued new levels of violence and tactics to remove the PKK from urban centers that has left several Kurdish cities and towns completely destroyed. Although from a purely military perspective the state has defeated the militants, the state's indiscriminate and brutal tactics have added to the emotional chasm between the Kurds and the Turkish state. The images of thousands of Turkish soldiers armed with heavy artillery, tanks, and attack helicopters razing Kurdish towns to the ground are burned into the Kurdish public consciousness. These tactics also have been extended to neighboring states such as Iraq and Syria in order to deny the PKK sources of support.

Shortly after this escalation of violence in September 2016, the AKP government began removing democratically elected Kurdish mayors. In November 2016, the HDP's co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, along with nine other HDP parliamentarians were arrested on terror charges.[35] Despite Turkey's significant advantage in terms of military and economic power, this attempted eradication overall has failed to inflict lasting damage to the PKK's ability to retain and, in time, increase its war-making capacity in Turkey and beyond. Nor has it diminished the support the PKK receives from the Kurds. In the March 31, 2019 local elections, the HDP's mayoral candidate for Diyarbakir, a province that serves as a barometer of support for the Kurdish movement, received 63 percent of the votes, up from 55 percent in 2014.

The intensification of the war against the PKK coincided with an attempted military coup on July 15, 2016 to overthrow the AKP government, which was followed by a state of emergency that lasted two years and dealt a final blow to Turkey's already weakened democratic institutions. According to the Polity IV Project, which measures the level of democracy on a scale ranging from -10 (institutionalized autocracy) to +10 (fully institutionalized democracy), Turkey had a score of '3′ in 2014 (down from '9′), plummeting to a '-4′ in 2016 and onwards.[36] This decline is similar to the demise of Turkish democracy in 1980 after the military coup of September 12, which resulted in a military dictatorship for the next several years.[37]

Several observers have drawn attention to this shift. Soner Cagaptay, a veteran analyst of Turkish politics, warns of 'a perfect storm' brewing between the US and Turkey and concludes that "with the exception of a small group of officers at the Department of State and elsewhere, the Pentagon's view of Turkey as an 'obstructionist power' has spread across all branches of the U.S.

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[34] Unlike several unilateral ceasefires declared by the PKK in previous years, the 2013 ceasefire was the first, and to date, the only bilateral ceasefire that was largely observed by both the PKK and the state for about two years.

[35] Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*, p. 85.

[36] See http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html, accessed July 10, 2019.

[37] Turkey's polity score went down from '9' in 1979 to '-5' in 1980 as a result of the military's takeover of the government.

government."[38] Another analyst, Steven Cook[39] concludes that Turkey is 'not the partner it used to be' and hence should be treated accordingly. Adam Schiff, a US Congressional representative from California and chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, lists Turkey in the same category as Russia, Hungary, and Venezuela and describes the rising authoritarianism in these countries as a 'thereat to liberal democracy' that must be countered.[40]

Thus, as Turkey under the AKP moves away from democratic values and principles,[41] its ability to garner the support of the international community in the war against the PKK is fading. In his examination of different aspects of power, Joseph Nye underlines a key distinction between 'hard power' and 'soft power;' referring to actors' ability to 'affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than through the hard power of coercion and payment'. In other words, power not only rests on 'whose army wins, but it also depends on whose story wins'.[42] Turkey's fall from grace with the West is likely to enhance the Kurdish position as a potential future political and military ally in a transforming Middle East.

The 2016 coup attempt has provided Erdogan with the fuel to replace military and civilian elites known for their disdain for Islamic practices with a new group of people who describe the Republic as nothing short of betrayal to Turkey's long Islamic heritage. While AKP circles, including President Erdogan, show restraint in not directly criticizing Kemal Ataturk (the founding father of the Republic), they have offered harsh criticism of Ataturk's loyal supporter Ismet Inonu, who became the country's second president upon Ataturk's death in 1938. One pro-AKP columnist, drawing attention to the dangers of both rigid and soft secularization, concludes that 'we lost our direction' with the *Tanzimat* (the Westernization reforms in the Ottoman Empire) and 'with the Republic,' we lost our 'soul' and 'compass'.[43] Another influential pro-AKP writer describes Turkey's foundational period as a 'catastrophe' that led to a 'forced cultural/civilizational change'.[44] The ruling AKP portrays reforms that symbolized progress and enlightenment for the founding secular elites as misguided deviation

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[38] Soner Cagaptay (2019) The Turkish rupture could cause a fissure in NATO, *The Hill*, April 16, available online at: https://thehill.com/opinion/international/438868-the-turkish-rupture-could-cause-a-fissure-in-nato, accessed July 10, 2019.

[39] Steven A. Cook (2018) The case for reshaping US-Turkey relations, *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 15. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/blog/case-reshaping-us-turkey-relations, accessed July 14, 2019.

[40] Adam Schiff (2019) America must stand as a bulwark against autocracy, *The Atlantic*, February 16. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/adam-schiff-authoritarianism-threat-democracy/583609/?utm_source=facebook&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_medium=social&utm_term=2019-02-26T10%3A00%3A11&utm_campaign=the-atlantic, accessed July 10, 2019.

[41] See, for instance, Ahmet E. Ozturk (2019) An Alternative Reading of Religion and Authoritarianism: The New Logic between Religion and State in the AKP's New Turkey, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 19(1), pp. 79–98.

[42] Joseph S. Nye (2018) How sharp power threatens soft power: The right and wrong ways to respond to authoritarian influence, *Foreign Affairs*, January 24. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power, accessed July 10, 2019.

[43] Yusuf Kaplan (2019) *Toplumun ruhunu yok olmaktan Kurtarabilecek miyiz?* [Can we save the soul of people?], *Yeni Safak*, April 7. Available at: https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/yusufkaplan/toplumun-ruhunu-yok-olmaktan-kurtarabilecek-miyiz-2049928, accessed July 10, 2019.

[44] Hayrettin Karaman (2019) *Imam Hatip Okullari dert midir?* [Are Imam Hatip Schools a Problem?], *Yeni Safak*, July 21. Available at: https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hayrettinkaraman/imam-hatip-okullari-dert-midir-2052119, accessed July 21, 2019.

or disaster. This gulf has undermined the secular nature of modern Turkey, resulting in an impaired and weakened state that is likely to continue in the post-AKP era.

Finally, the protracted conflict with the PKK-led insurgency has put economic strains on Turkey. In the 1990s, 'the yearly direct cost of the insurrection' was estimated to be at around 2-3 percent of GDP,' excluding such indirect costs as the loss in tourism revenues or the opportunity cost of the war.[45] Another study notes that Turkey 'spent an estimated $8 billion fighting the war in 1995'.[46] The ferocious repression campaign of these past several years that has been extended to Syria and Iraq has contributed to a spiraling economic crisis. In a recent statement, President Erdogan lashed out at those who complained about high produce prices. At a rally for local elections in early 2019, Erdogan warned: 'Do you have any idea how much a bullet costs? Think about the cost of getting our soldiers ready to fight terrorists'[47] as the war against the PKK in Turkey and beyond continues.

Conclusion

While the Kurdish question is multi-dimensional, the core of the matter is the rigid foundation upon which modern Turkey was built. Despite some key ideological differences with the founding secular elite, the AKP effectively has endorsed the century-long state policy toward the Kurds. Instead of holding a nuanced debate about the root causes of the Kurdish question, Islamist elites have embraced the very same discourse and tactics employed by their predecessors. Anti-Kurdish repression has become where such groups as diverse as ultra-nationalists, Islamists, and secularists concur.[48]

Since the collapse of the ceasefire, concrete cement walls, barbed wires, and armed soldiers protect local symbols of the state, such as police stations, military bases, and governors' compounds. As the state presence in the Kurdish regions is reduced to 'armored vehicles, military helicopters, and the sounds of warplanes,'[49] Turkey is facing a severe legitimacy crisis among the vast majority of Kurds. The ethnic rift between Kurds and Turks has widened as the Islamist AKP proved to be no different than its secular-nationalist predecessors.

The seemingly unbridgeable gap between the PKK demands during its formative years and the Turkish state's intransigence regarding its undisputed sovereignty speaks to what some scholars call ontological security.[50] This is in line with the vast literature

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[45] Henri J. Barkey & Graham E. Fuller (1997) Turkey's Kurdish Question: Critical Turning Points and Missed Opportunities, *Middle East Journal*, 51(1), p. 60.

[46] Aram Nigogosian (1996) Turkey's Kurdish Problem: Recent Trends, in Robert Olson (ed) *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impacts on Turkey and the Middle East*, pp. 38–49, at p. 44. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky).

[47] 'Do you know how much a bullet costs?' Erdoğan says in response to high food prices, *Turkish Minute*, February 8, 2019. Available at: https://www.turkishminute.com/2019/02/08/do-you-know-how-much-a-bullet-costs-erdogan-says-in-response-to-high-food-prices/, accessed July 10, 2019.

[48] As one study argues, even 'the secular liberal educated Turks' seem to have a tendency of what can be described as a willful ignorance toward the Kurdish issue; in Beja Protner (2018) "The Limits of an 'Open Mind': State Violence, Turkification, and Complicity in the Turkish–Kurdish Conflict," *Turkish Studies* 19(5), p. 688.

[49] Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*, p. 128.

[50] Bahar Rumelili & Ayse Betul Çelik (2017) Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts: Reflections on Agonistic Peace in Turkey's Kurdish Issue, *Security Dialogue*, 48(4), pp. 279–296; see also Umut Can Adisonmez & Recep Onursal, 'Governing Anxiety, Trauma and Crisis: The Political Discourse of Ontological (In) Security after the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey,' in this special issue.

on differences between ideological and ethnic armed conflicts. While the latter is found to be particularly intractable,[51] peace is possible provided that the state seeks reconciliation and respects the rights of the aggrieved minority.[52]

As noted above, the PKK-led Kurdish movement increasingly has turned into a movement with a list of democratic demands rather than forming an independent state. Following Ocalan's suggestion,[53] the HDP was designed to be a party of Turkey, advocating 'democracy for all' while focusing on the need for recognizing Kurdish identity.[54] In a July 2019 op-ed article published in the *Washington Post*, Cemil Bayik, a prominent PKK leader, reiterates the PKK's desire for a political solution and portrays the PKK as a party that demands 'freedom for ethnicities and all faiths'.[55] As the founding members of the Kurdish insurgency are getting old or passing from the scene, it is imperative to reach a mutually agreeable solution to this costly and atrocious war.

The struggle for Turkey's identity and future between secular and religious Turks has worsened, as the country increasingly is becoming a stultifying autocracy. Although the AKP appears to be in firm control of the country, in the long-run this struggle is likely to weaken the organizational capacity of the state and strain its power and energy. Paradoxically, this intra-elite competition potentially can serve as an opportune moment for reaching a new social contract, which could lay the groundwork for a democratic coexistence between all competing forces, provided that political actors learn to make compromises.[56]

Turkey has shown that it is capable of fending off any military threat posed by the PKK. With its immense military might it may even achieve a military victory. Yet such a victory is likely to be a pyrrhic one. Whether Turkey will escape the 'cage of its own making'[57] is yet to be seen; absent a radical transformation of the Turkish state and national identity, the Kurdish question will continue to be Turkey's 'greatest vulnerability'[58] or 'the Achilles heel of the Turkish state'[59] with potential to deteriorate even further in the coming years.

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[51] Chaim Kaufmann (1996) Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars, *International Security*, 20(4), pp. 136–175.

[52] Mehmet Gurses & Nicolas Rost (2013) Sustaining the Peace after Ethnic Civil Wars, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 30(5), pp. 469–491.

[53] Abdullah Ocalan (2015) *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa: İmralı Notları* [Democratic Liberation and the Construction of Free Life: Notes from Imrali] (Neuss, Germany: Mezopotamya Press], p. 80.

[54] Serhun Al (2015) Elite Discourses, Nationalism, and Moderation: A Dialectical Analysis of Turkish and Kurdish Nationalisms, *Ethnopolitics*, 14(1), pp. 94–112.

[55] Cemil Bayik (2019) Now is the moment for peace between Kurds and the Turkish state. Let's not waste it, *Washington Post*, July 3. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/03/now-is-moment-peace-between-kurds-turkish-state-lets-not-waste-it/?fbclid=IwAR1BqfBEEr5hkFS56l05ynTBZMUKBjln6CtTiftGBtGwXcuTB6RWtMiaTIU&utm_term=.9383f515dcf3, accessed July 8, 2019.

[56] This is similar to Huntington's classification of *transplacement* as a form of democratization where the elites in both government and opposition prefer negotiations and dialogue to confrontation after testing each other's power. Samuel P. Huntington (2009) How Countries Democratize, *Political Science Quarterly*, 124(1), pp. 31–69.

[57] Henri Barkey (1996) Under the Gun: Turkish Foreign Policy and the Kurdish Question, in Robert Olson (ed) *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impacts on Turkey and the Middle East*, pp. 65–83, at p. 81 (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky).

[58] Ibid.

[59] Olson, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*, p. 1.

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Disclosure Statement

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