

The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: A Brief Revision to an Intricate and Long-Lasting Ethnic Matter

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Abstract

The Kurdish conflict in Turkey relies on several issues that can be traced to ethnic and religious concerns. Turkey is a secular state and also an Islamic nation, and as the principles of Islam are intrinsically linked to politics, it is undeniable the influence it has in a country like Turkey where almost the entirety of its population are Sunni Muslims. As Kurds are considered part of the Muslim community, its treatment as a minority group differs: they are assimilated as Muslims while obviating their ethnic identity. This article aims to give insight into the complex Kurdish conflict in Turkey.

Keywords: Kurdish conflict, Turkey, minority group, ethnic conflict.

El conflicto kurdo en Turquía: Una breve revisión de una compleja y prolongada cuestión étnica

Resumen

El conflicto kurdo en Turquía se basa en varias cuestiones que pueden atribuirse a asuntos étnicos y religiosos. Turquía es un Estado laico y también una nación islámica, y como los principios del Islam están intrínsecamente ligados a la política, es innegable la influencia que tiene en un país como Turquía, donde casi la totalidad de su población son musulmanes suníes. Como los kurdos son considerados parte de la comunidad musulmana, su trato como grupo minoritario difiere: son asimilados como musulmanes a la vez que se elude su identidad étnica. Este artículo pretende ofrecer una mirada al complejo conflicto kurdo en Turquía.

Palabras clave: Conflicto kurdo, Turquía, grupo minoritario, conflicto étnico.

Recibido:15.6.20 / Evaluado: 20.6.20 / Aprobado: 30.6.20

1. Introduction

The Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Middle East with no territory to call their own, they are spread all over Syria, Armenia, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. After World War I, with the treaty of Sèvres, a Kurdish land was expected to be created however it never occurred and they became minority groups. Since then, the Kurds have been forming groups in each country where there is a Kurdish population to advocate their rights in the different spheres of society: politics, economy, and culture, including religion and even language.

This struggle has led to different conflicts in the five countries where the Kurds are located, each particular due to specific conditions. One to point out is the case of Iraq, where after the Gulf War in 1991 and thousands of killings and persecution, the Kurds established the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992 (The Kurdish Project, 2015). This achievement was pivotal for the rest of the Kurds, as it represented an example to follow in each of the countries they inhabit.

In the case of Turkey, the situation is quite different. Going back to 1928, when the Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the settlement was based on the idea of a homogeneous state which shared a single and nationalist identity that sought to assimilate minorities, along with reforms that, different from those of the Ottoman Empire, would separate religion (Islam) from the public life and therefore characterize it as a secular state (Jones, 2010). Moreover, in this period of transformation, minorities were defined by religion so religious groups such as Jews and Christians received protection. Yet, the Kurds did not fit into this categorization as they were mostly Muslims too and therefore they were denied recognition of their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic heritage (Abbas, 2017).

As shown, the Kurdish group represented a challenge for Turkey's plan of a unified state since the creation of the republic. Kurds make around 15% to 20% of the population (BBC, 2017), the largest minority group in Turkey, and they have a strong sense of nationalism towards Kurdistan (the designated name to what they consider their territory), hence this behavior did not align with Turkey's interests. The government applied repressive actions towards Kurdish nationalism such as relocations and the prohibition of the Kurdish language in schools, government offices, and even in public life until 1991, which could be considered as an attempted cultural genocide (Totten, 2015). Glastonbury (2013) emphasizes how language was used as a tool in the national ideology in Turkey for systematically eradicating people,

exemplifying it with campaigns launched in 1928 by the government such as “Citizen, speak Turkish!” which had the aim to allow citizens to surveil themselves and exclude any foreign language as it was Kurdish. Also, during the 1940s and 1950s, there was a policy of systematic denial of the existence of Kurds, using euphemisms such as “Mountain Turks” which not only avoids the use of the word ‘Kurds’ but can also translate into savages, away from civilization, primitive, and not willing to participate in the modernizing project of the republic.

Therefore, the Kurdish conflict in Turkey relies on several issues that can be traced to ethnic and religious concerns. Turkey is a secular state and also an Islamic nation, and as the principles of Islam are intrinsically linked to politics, it is undeniable the influence it has in a country like Turkey where almost the entirety of its population are Sunni Muslims. As Kurds are considered part of the Muslim community, its treatment as a minority group differs, and Kurds are consequently assimilated as Muslims while obviating their ethnic identity. Therefore, this article aims to give insight into the complex Kurdish conflict in Turkey, while doing a brief revision of its history and key elements, as well as offering a look at the current state of the conflict.

2. The Kurds and Turkey

Turkey has ever since aimed at the assimilation of those who do not fit into the Turkish mold, in this process, the largest Kurdish group in the territory, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has violently fought against Turkey’s repression and in favor of an independent Kurdish state. The PKK has committed several attacks against Turkey and has resulted in thousands of lives lost from both sides of the conflict. Certainly, the PKK is considered by Turkey and several members of the international community as a terrorist group. Also, another player that the Kurdish community claims that is working in favor of the Turkish government’s interests in regards to the Kurds is the Gulen Movement (Zalewski, 2012). This is a religious group that is actively involved in the education system of Turkey, named after Fethullah Gulen, an Islamic preacher who resides in Pennsylvania. Vahap Coskun, an assistant professor at Diyarbakir’s Dicle University in Turkey explains the following:

...say in the name of Islam, ‘Yes, let us help you improve your belief but forget about your identity (...) Together, the [Gulenists] and the government have been using religion to attain the objective they have in mind — to build the unity of the state. (as cited in Zalewski, 2012, para. 2)

In this sense, it is shown how different groups along with the Turkish government deploy Islam as a political tool to attain the nation's interest in a single identity that has no room for anomalies.

Additionally, one figure to highlight is Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's once Prime Minister and now president who has challenged the secular ideology on which the Republic of Turkey is based on. Jones (2010) argues that Erdogan has been involved in political Islam since his position as Prime Minister. His actions have been considered by many as controversial and too "Islamic", taking for instance when he tried to criminalize adultery in 2004 despite the lack of support from the European Union, or his leanings towards the advice of *ulama* or "Islamic scholars" in regards of some issues like the use of headscarves in Turkish universities.

Moreover, Erdogan's Islamic-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP) has run Turkey since 2002 (Zalewski, 2012) and it has been a target to tackle by secular establishments in Turkey due to its "antiseccular activities" several times. In 2012, Prime Minister Erdogan declared that he advocated the homogeneity of Turkey, referring to it as "one nation, one state, one flag and one religion" (Zalewski, 2012). This kind of comment reflects the intention of the Turkish government to assimilate minorities, such as the Kurds, under the label of being Muslim, leaving behind its ethnic identity. Plus, it is important to point out that "from the foundation of the Turkish Republic to the mid-1980s, official Turkish discourse did not recognize the Kurds as an ethnic group in Turkey" (Çelik, 2011, p. 256), which demonstrates that the denial of the existence of a Kurdish identity within Turkey is a deep and long-rooted position in Turkish politics.

3. A look at the history and background works of the conflict

The Kurdish conflict has a long history in Turkey that traces back to the Ottoman Empire. However, what marked a significant change in this issue was the transition from a multi-ethnic Empire to the nationalistic Turkish Republic, dated in the first quarter of the 20th century (Çelik, 2011), as well as Turkey's process of accession to the European Union (EU) which started in 2005. In addition, there is an array of several other events that shaped the Kurdish identity in face of the growing Turkish nationalism.

To begin with, the Kurdish community has suffered constant repression, forced displacement, and overall violence throughout decades that have led to thousands of lost lives from both Turks and Kurds. In the fight for the defense of their rights, Kurds have embarked on several rebellions

and different forms of political (both legal and illegal) organizations to make their voices heard. For instance, according to Çelik (2011), three rebellions that took place during 1925-1930s are fundamental to the construction of a separate Kurdish identity: first, in 1925, a rebellion led by Sheikh Said had Kurdish nationalism as a driving force in its organization; second, a resurrection led by Ihsan Nuri Pasha in 1930, which fought against the Turkish 'homogenization project' that considered all citizens as Turkish; and third, the 'Dersim rebellion' in late 1930s, which was a reactionary movement against the Resettlement Law imposed by the Turkish parliament in 1934. This law served as a legal tool for the forced displacement of immigrants and the forced assimilation of non-Muslims and non-Turkish speaking citizens into the Turkish rule.

Due to the great number of lives lost during the Dersim Rebellion and the strict state control, there were not many Kurdish mobilizations against the Turkish regime until the late 1950s. Later, the 1960s represented a reenactment of the Kurdish cause in the country. At this time, the 1961 Constitution of Turkey was adopted and offered more protection to the freedom of association and allowed the publication of the first Kurdish journals (Çelik, 2011). However, it was during the 1960s that there were also actions that demonstrated the prevailing Turkish nationalism in state policies, such as the replacement of Kurdish place names with Turkish ones, claiming they were not suitable for national culture, moral values, traditions, and customs (McDowall, 1997, as cited in Çelik, 2011).

Moreover, in 1961, the *Türkiye İşçi Partisi* (the Workers' Party of Turkey) was established and this represented "a milestone in the legal Kurdish mobilization" (Çelik, 2011, p. 247) as they were the first legal political party in addressing the existence of Kurds in Turkey. Additionally, the Kurdish youth actively participated in the cause by founding the first legal Kurdish organization of the Turkish Republic: *Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları* (Revolutionary Cultural Eastern Hearths) in 1969 which promoted a great mobilization of the Kurdish youth. Plus, as stated by Çelik (2011), the most noteworthy event of the 1960s regarding the Kurdish cause was the *Doğu Mitingleri* (The Eastern Meetings), pointing out that,

What was important about the Eastern Meetings is that for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, a legal party was able to mobilize so many Kurds and ask for egalitarian income distribution between the regions. Although the word "Kurd" was not mentioned at the meetings, the problems of Easterners' were emphasized. (Çelik, 2011, p. 248)

As seen, the 1960s were a time for a Kurdish consciousness renewal despite the growing Turkish nationalism, mainly due to the legal reforms in the politics of Turkey. The next decade, the 1970s, was characterized by a series of political decisions that fueled the conflict between Kurds and Turkish armed forces, namely the military memorandum in 1971 that imposed highly strict restrictions on Kurdish rights as “most political parties as well as syndicates, associations, and trade unions were banned from the political scene and their leaders were put in prison” (Çelik, 2011, p. 249). Therefore, Kurdish nationalism was revived as a response to these actions and social injustice. Likewise, this sparked the birth of illegal Kurdish organizations, specifically the most successful one: the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or also known as the PKK.

- *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* – Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)

Founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1974, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) emerged from the constant Kurdish identity denial from the Turkish authorities, surrounded by highly politicized politics in the country, and under the Marxist political spectrum. Since Turkey has aimed at the assimilation of those who do not fit into the Turkish mold, in this process, the largest Kurdish group in the territory, the PKK has violently fought against Turkey’s repression and in favor of an independent Kurdish state. The PKK has committed several attacks against Turkey which has resulted in thousands of lives lost from both sides of the conflict. Therefore, the PKK has been considered by Turkey and several members of the international community as a terrorist group. Even though the PKK’s reputation has not helped in terms of positive reception to the Kurdish community, the organization is regarded as a leading flag of what represents the Kurdish cause and has achieved mass mobilization of Kurds in the country.

Also, it is important to point out that, besides from Turkey, the PKK is officially considered a terrorist group by the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada. The motivation behind the recognition of the PKK as a terrorist organization can be defined in terms of diplomatic relations and common interests in the fight against terrorism. On the one hand, since the PKK represents a national concern for the Turkish government, any sort of support given to the Kurdish organization will result in harsh criticism from the Turkish authorities. For instance, on early 2020, the Court of Cassation of Belgium ruled the PKK was not a terrorist organization, a decision which blocked the prosecution of 36 suspects linked to the PKK (Holroyd, 2020). This event was seen as

an offense by Turkey who expressed their discontent as it represented “an explicit attempt to undermine the law” (Turkish Foreign Ministry, 2020, as cited in Holroyd, 2020). However, former Belgium’s Foreign Minister, Philippe Goffin, explained that “The decision of the Court of Cassation is the expression of the judicial power, rigorously independent of the executive, and must be understood as such by all” (Goffin, 2020, as cited by Holroyd, 2020), and also expressed the firm commitment of Belgium in its relations with Turkey and the joint fight against the PKK as a terrorist group. Indeed, the matter has become a strategic element in terms of diplomacy with Turkey and can deeply influence further relations with the Turkish State.

On the other hand, another reason that can explain such consideration of the PKK as a terrorist group can be based on the interest of the common fight against terrorism, which is the case of the EU, for example. The armed conflict led by the PKK has left thousands of deaths behind and its influence has spread beyond the Middle East, “using European Union’s territory for propaganda, recruitment, fundraising and logistical support activities” (Turan, 2020, para. 1). As the conflict became more than a national concern for Turkey, turning into an international security threat to society, the EU’s position on listing the PKK as a terrorist group follows its concern for fostering security for those living in Europe, including the combat against terrorism.

Furthermore, regarding PKK’s history, after the 1980’s *coup d’état* in Turkey, the political environment in the country reached a high level of tension due to the strict restrictions on the rights of free associations. For the PKK, this represented yet another attempt to silence the Kurdish voices which ignited their cause in promoting greater mobilization of Kurds in Turkey. Thus, as a result of this persistent conflict, “the PKK launched its first open attack on the Turkish authorities with an armed assault on gendarme garrisons in 1984” (Çelik, 2011, p. 250), which marked the beginning of the long-lasting armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state forces.

In the following years, during the 1990s, the conflict reached high levels of confrontation as the attacks by the PKK increased and the response of the government became tougher too. Then in 1999, Öcalan was captured by Turkish authorities and the conflict started to de-escalate (Çelik, 2011, p. 250). This event was followed by the declaration of a ceasefire that lasted until 2004. Since then, the PKK is still considered a terrorist group by the Turkish government and it is treated as such. The ongoing conflict between these two parties has amplified the tensions between Kurds and Turks, both in the political and social spheres. Even though there have been some

initiatives to reach a peaceful solution to the conflict, they usually face legal restrictions and imposed demands that obstruct the peaceful settlement of the dispute. For instance, according to Çelik (2011), in 2004, the PKK sent a “Peace Group” to Turkey which was formed by PKK members that had not been involved in armed confrontations with the Turkish army, as well as some refugees from Northern Iraq in an attempt to embrace a peaceful negotiation. However, this action was not quite welcomed by state officials who “later brought upcases against the members of the Peace Group, which resulted in the return of 20 out of 34 PKK members to Northern Iraq in July 2010” (Çelik, 2011, p. 254). This event was another example of the complexity of the issue, showing that a peaceful settlement is not a simple task to achieve in the country. In fact, it was perceived by many as the end of a positive era in the Kurdish conflict.

As seen, the Kurdish issue has been going on for decades in Turkey and has been studied by several authors and institutions who point out the complex nature of this issue. The following pieces of work help to understand and contextualize it.

Firstly, the thesis *The Conflicts of Secularization and Islam in Turkey* by Jones gives a historical and descriptive aspect by explaining the contradiction of Turkey as “the four major concepts that shape Turkey’s character are Islam, secularism, nationality, and democracy. Islam affects Turkey through people, while the government affects Turkey through secularism, democracy, and nationality” (Jones, 2010, p. 4). The author goes further to explain the importance of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the creation of the Republic of Turkey as a secular one, separating religion from public life despite its past as an Islamic state during the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the author describes the “conflicting identities” that Turkey has: an Islamic identity and a European one. The former was performed by their Muslim citizens and the latter pushed by the Turkish government. This internal conflict in Turkey has been persistent in politics; figures like Abdullah Gul (as Foreign Minister and then President) and Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Prime Minister) have defied the secular basis of the state.

Secondly, in 2006, one year after the negotiations for Turkey’s accession to the European Union, a progress report on Turkey was released by the EU Commission. This document evaluates the country in terms of the Copenhagen criteria fulfillment; hence the protection of minorities within the political criteria is one aspect to consider. In this report, it is highlighted that “according to the Turkish authorities, under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, minorities in Turkey consist exclusively of non-Muslim religious

communities. The minorities associated in practice by the authorities with the Treaty of Lausanne are Jews, Armenians and Greeks” (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 20). Therefore, as most of the Kurds are Muslims, they do not classify as minorities by the Turkish government. Moreover, the report emphasizes the restrictions regarding cultural rights in the country. The use of a language other than Turkish has been restricted, and even prohibited in political life, TV channels and radio stations have been told to limit the time of broadcasts in a foreign language, such as Kurdish, and to subtitle or translate them into Turkish.

Furthermore, 2009 marked the year when “for the first time in the history of the Republic, a government claimed to be initiating an extensive peace process to address the conflict” (Çelik, 2011, p. 252). This process which intended to grant more cultural rights to the Kurds as well as the reincorporation of PKK fighters into society, among other aspects, was initially called the “Kurdish Initiative” and was seen as a direct reference that the initiative was dedicated exclusively to the Kurdish conflict. However, the name was later changed to “Democratic Initiative” and then titled the “National Union and Brotherhood Project”. Hence, it is another demonstration that proves how complex the Kurdish issue is in Turkey, as it could be seen as if the government changed its original discourse to avoid the direct addressing to the Kurdish conflict and turning the initiative into a nationalistic and unifying process of those different from Turkish culture.

Also, the education of a foreign language could only be made in private institutions, and in the case of Kurdish, the EU Commission points out that all Kurdish courses were closed down in 2004 and therefore, “there are no possibilities to learn Kurdish today in the public or private schooling system” (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 21). Moreover, it is important to point out that Turkey’s accession process to the EU marked a significant change in the Kurdish conflict, as the country had to increasingly harmonize its laws with the EU Common Law in order to comply with the Copenhagen criteria, which involved the resolution of domestic conflicts within its territory while preserving human rights, as well as the respect and protection of minorities, including their culture and language.

Lastly, within the legal framework of Turkish law, certain policies have created a restricted context for the inhabitants of the territory. One example is the Turkish Penal Code, notably article 301 which before being amended, it criminalized remarks that could be perceived to insult ‘Turkishness’, Turkey, or its institutions. The article went as follows:

1. Public denigration of Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey shall be punishable by imprisonment of between six months and three years.
2. Public denigration of the Government of the Republic of Turkey, the judicial institutions of the State, the military or security structures shall be punishable by imprisonment of between six months and two years.
3. In cases where denigration of Turkishness is committed by a Turkish citizen in another country the punishment shall be increased by one third.
4. Expressions of thought intended to criticize shall not constitute a crime. (Amnesty International, 2006, p.1)

As the term “Turkishness” was too broad and ambiguous, the article could legitimize arbitrary interpretations by prosecutors which led to the possibility of criminalizing any claim that allegedly went against Turkish authority or the Turkish ideal of a unified nation, like Kurdish-related issues. Moreover, the article was controversial as it was used to justify the limitations of the freedom of expression, and it was criticized by the EU Commission as the legislation was not in line with European standards. The article was later amended in 2008, erasing the term ‘Turkishness’ and paragraph 3, adding more considerations to such as “The expression of an opinion for the purpose of criticism does not constitute an offence” (Penal Code of Turkey, 2016, Art. 301) and the inclusion of the Minister of Justice as the entity to permit an investigation of such offence.

In fact, the article was implemented for the prosecution of some individuals who had spoken in favor of the Kurds, had acknowledged Turkish territory as Kurdish or even used Kurdish in official correspondence with the Turkish authorities, i.e. Orhan Pamuk, Fatih Taş, and Rıdvan Kızgın (Amnesty International, 2006). It is important to point out that these are just the ones related to the Kurdish issue; there have been other people from other backgrounds that have been prosecuted under article 301.

4. Political Islam: An array of elements to consider

In order to explain the role that political Islam has had in the segregation that the Kurds have experienced in Turkey, it is important to take into account several works and concepts that help to frame and explain this issue.

First, as Kurds are an ethnic group and their ethnicity is what differentiates them from the Turks, it is important to define this concept. Jary and Jary (1991) explain that ethnicity is “a shared racial, linguistic,

or national identity of a social group” (as cited in Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Warner, 2010, p. 107). Also, Crossman (2016) states that “ethnicity is a concept referring to a shared culture and way of life. This can be reflected in language, religion, material culture... Ethnicity is often a major source of social cohesion and social conflict” (para.1).

Second, as religion plays a relevant role in the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, the definition of religion is vital for the understanding of its influence in the conflict. According to Van Gaalen (2015), religion can be perceived in two approaches: functional and substantive. On the one hand, the substantive approach of religion defines it in terms of its believed contents based on what the content and essence of religion are. In this approach, religion is “a type of philosophy to live by that exists separately from our social or psychological lives” (Van Gaalen, 2015, p. 3). On the other hand, in a functional approach, religion is defined in “what religion does and how it operates in terms of its place in the social/psychological system” (Van Gaalen, 2015, p. 3). Here, religion influences society, and the mental and emotional lives of its believers. For the Kurdish conflict, the functional definition of religion is the most suitable as religion plays a fundamental role not only in society but in politics too.

Third, it is important to keep in mind the secularization process that the Turkish nation has gone through since its creation in 1928 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Indeed, this secularization phenomenon in Turkey is rare taking into account the geographical area where it is located, as the Middle East does not experience religion in the same way as the West does. According to Casanova (2006), there are three connotations of secularization: the decline of religious beliefs and practices, the privatization of religion, and the differentiation of the secular spheres. In general, the East would not fit in any of these connotations because of the tremendous influence that religion has on their politics and actions in their domestic and international policies. However, Turkey would fit into the third connotation, which explains the emancipation of the state from religious institutions and norms. Yet, since the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdogan appeared in the Turkish government, the nation has gone through a revival of religion, as explained by Casanova (2006). Certainly, Islam is one of the religions that intertwine the most with politics and since the majority of the population in Turkey is Muslim, the nation was likely to experience such religious revival at some point. Erdogan’s actions have been characterized by having a religious discourse behind his words which has been criticized

by several political groups in Turkey. Hence a *deseccularization* thesis helps to understand why religion is now part of the political discourse in Turkey, even though it is a secular state.

Fourth, following the idea of the religious revival in Turkey, this has brought the presence of Political Islam in the state. Zerpa (2011) argues that political Islam comes along with a fundamentalist movement that impels Islamic values and the need to stop the rising westernization of the Islamic world. Moreover, she emphasizes that political Islam is an ideology whose aim is to reform society and politics according to guidelines found in the Quran along with the legal and cultural Islamic traditions. As for the case of Turkey, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Erdogan denied for years that it was an Islamist party “but as political Islam began to triumph in the Arab World, AKP leadership began to openly show their affinity to political Islam and even presented themselves as a model for Islamism in the post Arab Spring Middle East” (Khan, 2014, Political Islam and the Arab Spring, para. 1). Therefore, Erdogan’s political actions are driven by religious forces which are seen in his efforts for unifying the country under a single religion. Turkish Kurds are directly affected by this as most of them identify themselves as Muslims; however, their ethnic identity is an element that cannot be easily erased by their religion.

Indeed, the Kurdish identity represents a difficult challenge when it comes to present a single definition of their ethnicity since it is entangled with different geographic locations (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Azerbaijan, and more), diverse dialects (Zaza and Kirmanji specifically in the case of Turkish Kurds), and even different branches within a same religion (Islam) such as Sunni, Alevi, and Yezidi (Çelik, 2011). Therefore, when talking about Kurds one must ask about their location in the first place, since their situation varies from one country to the other. In the case of Kurds in Turkey, around 70% of the Kurds are Sunni and the remaining 30% are Alevis and Yezidis (Andrews, 1992, as cited in Çelik, 2011), and the majority of the population in Turkey, around 80%, is Sunni. Hence, for Kurds in Turkey, religion has not played as a divisive element in Turkish society. On the contrary, it has been used as a tool for assimilation into Turkish identity. As for their language, Kurdish “belongs to the northwestern group of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. It is a close relative of Persian” (Çelik, 2011, p. 243), whereas Turkish language is the principal one among the Turkic language family, within the Altaic language group (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2020). Therefore, it is fair to say that the most distinguishable element in Kurdish ethnicity is their language, which does not align with

the unification project that the Turkish government has promoted in the country over decades, consequently turning Kurdish language into the main subject of constant remarks and actions against Kurdish culture throughout Turkish history.

Finally, as the religious element has been excluded in the theories of International Relations, it is important to find a space where the theories can provide an explanation of the theoretical nature of religious conflicts in the international arena. Therefore, among Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, the latter is the theory that can do so. Constructivists state that “systems of shared ideas, beliefs and values also have structural characteristics, and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political actions” (Reus-Smit, n.d., p. 220). Here, as religion is indeed a set of beliefs, it can fit into what constructivists consider important for the behavior of states. Moreover, there are three types of constructivism: systemic, unit-level, and holistic. The first of them, which is the most suitable for the analysis of the Kurdish conflict, offers a distinction between the social and corporate identities of the state; on the one hand, the social identity refers to “the status, role or personality that international society ascribes to a state” (Reus-Smit, n.d., p. 223), on the other hand, the corporate identity is “the internal human, material, ideological, or cultural factors that make a state what it is” (Reus-Smit, n.d., p. 223). It is in this distinction within the theory that religion could be considered for the analysis of religious conflicts. As seen, the corporate identity of a state is a key factor in the configuration of a state, and therefore, as religions can be considered ideologies, they influence the corporate identity of a state.

As seen, religion and ethnicity are fundamental elements when considering Turkish politics and identity which is in contradiction of the secular belief that made the basis of Turkey as a republic; religion has taken now a leading role in the political scene of the country and even the world. Some of the most violent and controversial conflicts in today’s world have religious and ethnic differences as main characteristics, the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is one remarkable example that is not very known, hence the importance of unveiling the nature of this conflict.

5. Assimilation of Kurds under a Turkish identity

Even though the Kurdish community is the largest minority group in Turkey, the nationalistic feeling that is rooted in Turkish thought has been an obstacle in the successful acceptance of different and varied minorities that live in the country. Certainly, the Treaty of Lausanne, which recognized

as minorities those who were non-Muslims, was crucial in the way Kurds were treated as it meant that they were not actually a minority group and took for granted that they came from Turkish descendants. This is the beginning of a long assimilation process advocated by Turkey's government to the detriment of the Kurdish ethnic culture.

As stated by Çelik (2011), the Turkish suffer from the “Sèvres Paranoia”, which is explained as “fears that there are external powers who are trying to challenge the territorial integrity of the Turkish state and implement the provisions of the Sevres Treaty by establishing local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas” (p. 244). Likewise, the PKK has deeply influenced the way the Kurds are perceived in Turkey since they are considered a terrorist group. Altogether, there is a feeling of fear in Turkish consciousness that fuels the *otherization* of the Kurds, meaning that their overall perception as a ‘foreign other’ is reduced to less than what they really are (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004). Thus, Kurds are mostly perceived as a threat to the Turkish unification project.

Furthermore, it is argued that the social polarization dimension of the conflict is one side that needs more attention since it is often overlooked, emphasizing that “whereas most Kurds feel a lack of justice, humiliation, and silencing, many Turks feel afraid (that “their land” will be taken away), angry (that “terrorism” took away their sons), and proud (to be a “Turk” for centuries)” (Çelik, 2011, p. 256). Clearly, there is a lack of dialogue between the two parties which has prevented a full comprehension of the other, maintaining an *essentialist* view of the other, based on the belief “that there is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture” (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 2). Thus, in order to overcome this view, it is necessary to go further and create *thick descriptions* of the foreign other, which involves “deriving meaning from a broad view of social phenomena which pieces together different, interconnected perspectives” (Holliday et al., 2004, p. 8). Certainly, this process is not quite simple and needs constancy as well as motivation to succeed. However, its realization could symbolize the first step towards a deep change in both Kurdish and Turkish mindset by establishing open dialogues between the two parties and more interethnic/cultural encounters that can promote the mutual understanding of the other.

Additionally, some options have been provided by several scholars on this topic. One of them is “the promotion of the compatible definition” by Murat Somer (2004). He argues that, in opposition to a rival definition of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, a compatible definition would represent the best scenario for a resolution in the conflict. On the one hand, by doing

this, the Turkish population would be unified and at the same time diverse but not in an exclusive way. In other words, Kurds could identify themselves as Turkish while maintaining their Kurdish ethnicity. Yet, this solution could only be effective as long as the Turkish government acknowledges their Kurdish ethnicity without covering it up with the Turkish identity. On the other hand, implementing the rival definition promotes the “us vs. them” mentality which results in a constant conflictive reaction towards the “foreign other”. When this is incorporated into society’s collective thought, there is a tendency to base the other’s identity on stereotypes, relying on *essentialist views* of the other.

6. The Kurdish Conflict: The Current Events

As seen, the Kurdish conflict has an intricate history that conveys an array of cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, social, and political elements that prevent the situation from achieving a simple and peaceful settlement. Unfortunately, it seems that a solution to the conflict is still far from coming to fruition. On the one hand, the teaching of languages other than Turkish as a mother tongue is still prohibited by Turkish law, signaling that Kurdish rights keep being violated and their voices keep being silenced. On the other hand, Turkish perception towards Kurds keeps being severe mostly due to the belief that any Kurdish cause has a connection with Kurdish nationalism and the PKK.

For instance, the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul as well as other 94 associations were shut down on December 31, 2016, for having alleged connections with terrorist organizations. Moreover, it was reported that Turkish authorities also took down the institute’s website, and confiscated all kinds of course materials, including documents, furniture, and technological equipment (Letsch, 2017). The institute was later reopened under the name of ‘Kurdish Research Institute’ but it is reported that its conditions are now precarious and attendance of students is praised as ‘courageous’. The closure of the institute was the result of a series of emergency decrees passed since July 2015 that shut down “Kurdish media organizations, associations, language schools, and cultural institutions [...] Even a children’s TV channel that translated cartoons such as *Sponge Bob Square Pants* and *The Smurfs* into Kurdish was taken off air temporarily” (Letsch, 2017, para. 9). Similarly, following Letsch’s report (2017), Erdoğan’s party, the AKP, has replaced the elected mayors of more than 90 Kurdish-led municipalities with so-called “trustees” and dozens of pro-Kurdish politicians have been arrested under alleged terrorism charges.

Likewise, the social polarization in Turkey towards Kurds is still present as traces of discrimination are allegedly still found in Turkey as Barış Çakan, a Kurdish man, was killed in June 2020. Meral Daniş Beştaş, a pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP) official stated that this event was the result of the “seed of hatred” that had been planted in the public (McKernan, 2020) which demonstrates how deep the stigma against Kurds is still in the collective thought of Turkey. However, government officials stated that there was not a racial factor in the crime, pointing out that doing so is “the work of provocateurs” (McKernan, 2020).

Plus, public Kurdish demonstrations are not quite welcome by Turkish authorities. For instance, in October 2020, the Kurdish play “*Beru*” (which translates to ‘Faceless’ in English) was banned from performing at Istanbul’s municipal theater under the claim of “disturbing public order” (Karakas, 2020). According to the report, the play had been performed in the country for three years, but once it got the opportunity to be performed at the capital’s theater, where it would have been the first time a Kurdish play was showcased, Turkish authorities proceeded to ban the performance and forced everyone to leave. Additionally, what brings attention to this event is that after it was banned, a pro-government newspaper released an article to address this event, calling it “From Istanbul city stage to PKK theater group” (Karakas, 2020). Once again, it is seen that the PKK’s reputation reaches not only the political sphere where they are usually located but any event related to Kurdish culture in general. This is also an example of how the Turkish government politicizes the Kurdish language, making any display of Kurdish such as language learning institutions or theater plays, a matter of national security in a political context.

7. Conclusions

Certainly, since its foundation as a republic, Turkey has experienced a dual sentiment at its core since the secularism that the government supports does not align with the Islamic culture among its population. As such, the government has always sought the unification of the country which has led them to the use of ideologies, such as religion, for this purpose. Therefore, the implementation of Political Islam resulted as the tool for achieving it, holding Islamic principles for the policy and decision making in the country despite the secular façade that covers the Turkish state. However, such a purpose is not simple to achieve when there exists a plurality of ethnicities within the territory and even more complicated if the largest minority represents a risk for the national unification project due to their

cultural characteristics which make them technically not a minority group in Turkish authorities' eyes.

Moreover, it is perceived that the Kurdish cause in Turkey is influenced by an array of elements that may even go further political Islam-related issues. One example is patriotism and the role that language plays in it. As language can be an intrinsic part of the composition of a nation, it is expected that the official language will prevail over minority languages. However, the decision to either eradicate or protect such languages will symbolize the path of how the administration will manage minorities. Thus, in the case of Turkey, the use of other languages different from Turkish, namely Kurdish, has been a reason for the prosecution of people, the limitation of free speech in the Kurdish language on public life, and ultimately, the discrimination –and even attempted cultural eradication– of its largest minority group.

Indeed, the history of the conflict proves that sincere changes must be made from both sides if a peaceful settlement wants to be achieved. Since the conflict has escalated from the political sphere to the social one and has grown in the collective mindset of Turkish society, the promotion of dialogues is necessary to create a mutual understanding from both sides of the conflict. In other words, it is crucial to encourage a shift in both the Turkish and Kurdish attitudes towards the conflict, to pass from an *essentialist view* to a *thick description* understanding of the other. While this step might be often overlooked due to the weight that the political side has in the conflict, it can actually be traced to the core of the Kurdish dispute in Turkey, and its implementation could benefit the goal of a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

It is understandable that for Turkish authorities, the unification and preservation of the territory is a national concern, and it is also true that the PKK has represented a threat to not only this concern but to society's security too. However, there has been a constant lack of understanding from both sides. On the one hand, Kurdish identity and voice have been silenced continually which only resulted in nationalistic and independent rebellions, and on the other hand, the Turkish government has not succeeded in its efforts for putting an end to the conflict, imposing actions, laws, and decrees that cause a detriment effect in the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict in the country. Unfortunately, both events have brought violence not only to the other party but to all civil society in Turkey, leaving thousands of lives lost behind. Thus, it is crucial to start untying the intricate and varied elements that compose the conflict for finding a trace to follow which could consequently lead to a peaceful closure for the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Lastly, it is important to point out that despite the lack of room within the classical thoughts on international relations theories, religion along with culture and ethnicity are elements that have gained an inevitable presence in the international arena and as such, they must be now included in the discussion, acknowledging the pivotal role they can play in foreign policy and even the domestic one, as the Kurdish conflict in Turkey exemplifies.

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