

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331073884>

Turkey's Kurdish Question: Discourse and Politics Since 1990

Book · June 2015

CITATIONS

3

READS

182

1 author:



[Hamid Akın Ünver](#)

Özyeğin University

71 PUBLICATIONS 467 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Turkey's Kurdish Question

The Kurdish question is one of the most complicated and protracted conflicts of the Middle East and will never be resolved unless it is finally defined. The majority of the Kurdish people live in Turkey, which gives the country a unique position in the larger Kurdish conundrum.

Society in Turkey is deeply divided over the definition and even existence of the Kurdish question, and this uncertainty has long manifested itself in its complete denial, or in accusations of political rivals of 'separatism' and even 'treason.' *Turkey's Kurdish Question* explores how these denial and acknowledgement dynamics often reveal preexisting political ideology and agenda priorities, themselves becoming political actions. While the very term "Kurdish question" is discussed in the academic literature as a given, a new and systemic study is required to deconstruct and analyze the constitutive parts of this discursive construct. This book provides the first comprehensive study and analysis of the discursive constructions and perceptions of what is broadly defined as the "Kurdish question" in Turkish, European and American political cultures. Furthermore, its new methodological approach to the study of discourse and politics of secessionist conflicts can be applied to many similar intrastate conflict cases.

Turkey's Kurdish Question would suit students and scholars of Middle East studies, Conflict studies and Comparative Politics, as well as Turkish or Kurdish studies.

H. Akin Ünver is an assistant professor of international relations at Kadir Has University. This book is based on his dissertation *Defining Turkey's Kurdish Question*, which has won the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) 2010 Malcolm H. Kerr award for the best dissertation in the field of social sciences.

Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1 Algeria in Transition
<i>Ahmed Aghrout with Redha M. Bougherira</i></p> <p>2 Palestinian Refugee Repatriation
<i>Edited by Michael Dumper</i></p> <p>3 The International Politics of the Persian Gulf
<i>Arshin Adib-Moghaddam</i></p> <p>4 Israeli Politics and the First Palestinian Intifada
<i>Eitan Y. Alimi</i></p> <p>5 Democratization in Morocco
<i>Lise Storm</i></p> <p>6 Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey
<i>Ümit Cizre</i></p> <p>7 The United States and Iran
<i>Sasan Fayazmanesh</i></p> <p>8 Civil Society in Algeria
<i>Andrea Liverani</i></p> <p>9 Jordanian-Israeli Relations
<i>Mutayyam al O'ran</i></p> <p>10 Kemalism in Turkish Politics
<i>Sinan Ciddi</i></p> | <p>11 Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey
<i>William Hale and Ergun Özbudun</i></p> <p>12 Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine
<i>Lev Luis Grinberg</i></p> <p>13 Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel
<i>Sami Shalom Chetrit</i></p> <p>14 Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
<i>Edited by Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter and Leonard Hammer</i></p> <p>15 Plurality and Citizenship in Israel
<i>Edited by Dan Avnon and Yotam Benziman</i></p> <p>16 Ethnic Politics in Israel
<i>As'ad Ghanem</i></p> <p>17 Islamists and Secularists in Egypt
<i>Dina Shehata</i></p> <p>18 Political Succession in the Arab World
<i>Anthony Billingsley</i></p> <p>19 Turkey's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan
<i>Alexander Murinson</i></p> |
|--|---|

- 20 Europe and Tunisia**
Brieg Powel and Larbi Sadiki
- 21 Turkish Politics and the Rise of the AKP**
Arda Can Kumbaracibasi
- 22 Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World**
Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac
- 23 Politics in Morocco**
Anouar Boukhars
- 24 The Second Palestinian Intifada**
Julie M. Norman
- 25 Democracy in Turkey**
Ali Resul Usul
- 26 Nationalism and Politics in Turkey**
Edited by Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden
- 27 Democracy in the Arab World**
Edited by Samir Makdisi and Ibrahim Elbadawi
- 28 Public Management in Israel**
Itzhak Galnoor
- 29 Israeli Nationalism**
Uri Ram
- 30 NATO and the Middle East**
Mohammed Moustafa Orfy
- 31 The Kurds and US Foreign Policy**
Marianna Charountaki
- 32 The Iran-Iraq War**
Jerome Donovan
- 33 Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine**
Edited by Elia Zureik, David Lyon and Yasmeeen Abu-Laban
- 34 Conflict and Peacemaking in Israel-Palestine**
Sapir Handelman
- 35 Arab Minority Nationalism in Israel**
Amal Jamal
- 36 The Contradictions of Israeli Citizenship**
Edited by Guy Ben-Porat and Bryan S. Turner
- 37 The Arab State and Women's Rights**
Elham Manea
- 38 Saudi Maritime Policy**
Hatim Al-Bisher, Selina Stead and Tim Gray
- 39 The Arab State**
Adham Saouli
- 40 Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia**
Stig Stenslie
- 41 Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine**
Edited by Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter and Leonard Hammer
- 42 The UN and the Arab-Israeli Conflict**
Danilo Di Mauro
- 43 Sectarian Conflict in Egypt**
Elizabeth Iskander

- 44 Contemporary Morocco**
Edited by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine
- 45 Political Regimes in the Arab World**
Edited by Ferran Brichs
- 46 Arms Control and Iranian Foreign Policy**
Bobi Pirseyedi
- 47 Everyday Arab Identity**
Christopher Phillips
- 48 Human Rights in Libya**
Giacomina De Bona
- 49 Negotiating Political Power in Turkey**
Edited by Elise Massicard and Nicole Watts
- 50 Environmental Politics in Egypt**
Jeannie L. Sowers
- 51 EU-Turkey Relations in the 21st Century**
Birol Yesilada
- 52 Patronage Politics in Egypt**
Mohamed Fahmy Menza
- 53 The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy**
Henrietta Wilkins
- 54 The Golan Heights**
Yigal Kipnis
- 55 Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001**
Edited by Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi
- 56 Modern Middle East Authoritarianism**
Edited by Noureddine Jebnoun, Mehrdad Kia and Mimi Kirk
- 57 Mobilizing Religion in Middle East Politics**
Yusuf Sarfati
- 58 Turkey's Democratization Process**
Edited by Carmen Rodríguez, Antonio Avaloz, Hakan Yilmaz and Ana I. Planet
- 59 The Formation of Kurdishness in Turkey**
Ramazan Aras
- 60 Egyptian Foreign Policy From Mubarak to Morsi**
Nael Shama
- 61 The Politics of Truth Management in Saudi Arabia**
Afshin Shahi
- 62 Transitional Justice and Human Rights in Morocco**
Fadoua Loudiy
- 63 Contemporary Kemalism**
Toni Alaranta
- 64 Urbicide in Palestine**
Nurhan Abujidi
- 65 The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey**
Zeynel Abidin Besleney
- 66 Multiculturalism and Democracy in North Africa**
Edited by Moha Ennaji

Proof

**67 Strategic Relations Between
the US and Turkey,
1979–2000**

Ekavi Athanassopoulou

**68 Ethnicity and Elections in
Turkey**

Gül Arıkan Akdağ

**69 The Kurdish Liberation
Movement in Iraq**

Yaniv Voller

70 Arab Regionalism

Silvia Ferabolli

71 The Kurdish Issue in Turkey

*Edited by Zeynep Gambetti and
Joost Jongerden*

72 The Turkish Deep State

Mehtap Söyler

73 Koreans in the Persian Gulf

Shirzad Azad

74 Europeanization of Turkey

Ali Tekin and Aylin Güney

75 Turkey's Kurdish Question

H. Akin Ünver

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Proof

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Proof

Turkey's Kurdish Question

Discourse and politics since 1990

H. Akin Ünver

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Proof

Proof

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

© 2015 Hamid Akin Ünver

The right of Hamid Akin Ünver to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him/her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP data]

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

ISBN: 978-1-138-85856-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-71788-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Proof

Proof

This book is dedicated to the hope that the children and grandchildren of those who died in the war-torn valleys and mountains of Turkey can one day play and thrive in the same valleys and mountains – together.

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Proof

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Contents

AuQ1	<i>List of illustrations</i>	xiii
	<i>List of acronyms</i>	xv
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
	Introduction	1
	<i>Why study discourse on the Kurdish question?</i>	3
	<i>Political language and the study of the Kurdish question</i>	5
	<i>Why post–Cold War conflicts aren't 'internal' anymore: State sovereignty, parliaments and secession</i>	10
	<i>Organization of the book</i>	17
1	The transnational Kant and the search for a Diyarbakır social contract: Emancipation discourses in the European Parliament and US Congress	23
	<i>Human rights: Or, how to shoot yourself in the head with an infantry rifle</i>	26
	<i>Was 'Turkish democracy' an oxymoron in the 1990s?</i>	37
	<i>Scorched earth: Excessive force and security misconduct criticisms</i>	45
	<i>Conclusion</i>	53
	<i>Notes</i>	60
2	Hobbes in Washington and Brussels: Defining Kurdish chaos and Turkish order	63
	<i>How power thinks: Deconstructing the logic of states in conflict</i>	64
	<i>European priorities of Turkish statecraft: Strategic utility and secularism</i>	67
	<i>US Congress: Betwixt selling cluster bombs and filing war crimes case against Turkey</i>	78

xii *Contents*

*Transnational Locke meets transnational Hobbes: Self-critique
in the European Parliament and US Congress* 83

Conclusion 92

Notes 93

3 Schrödinger's Kurd: Can the Kurdish question both exist and not exist in Turkey?

97

Defining the Kurdish question in Turkish political discourse 100

Human rights 100

Democracy and democratization 106

Excessive force and disproportionate use of weaponry 110

Security and terrorism 114

Economic–developmental discourses 116

Legalistic discourses 118

Autonomy–ethnicity–culturalism 121

Self-criticism in the TGNA 123

*Foreign Dark Powers: How Turkey understood the international
relations of the Kurdish question* 127

Conclusion 131

Notes 136

4 Concluding comparative analysis

140

Notes 151

Epilogue: Justice and Development Party (AKP) discourse on the Kurdish question

152

*Welfare Party and Erdoğan's political formation
on the Kurdish question* 153

Erdoğan in power: AKP's Kurdish discourse, 2002–2009 156

*After 2009: Kurdish opening, Arab spring and the Syrian
civil war* 159

Notes 166

Index

171

Illustrations

Figures

4.1	Overall discursive preferences in the TGNA, European Parliament and US Congress	141
4.2	Radar graph comparing discursive priorities of emancipatory parties	147
4.3	Radar graph showing statist parties' discursive focus	148

Tables

1.1	European Parliament national breakdown of discursive preferences (emancipatory consciousness)	54
1.2	Both Houses of the US Congress in their discursive trends on the Kurdish question	56
1.3	Three most active senators on the Kurdish question and their supportive/critical record towards Turkey	57
1.4	Top four most active House Representatives on the Kurdish question and their supportive/critical record towards Turkey	58
2.1	Comparing EP political groups' discourse preferences with Council–Commission	77
2.2	US executive branch discursive preferences on the Kurdish question	83
2.3	Intra-EU criticism on the Kurdish question – sorted by countries and political party groups	88
2.4	Both houses in the Congress and both parties' criticism record	92
3.1	Turkish governments: 1989–2002 and corresponding ideology designations	99
3.2	Aggregate discursive output in the TGNA: January 1990–December 1999	132
3.3	Discursive choices of emergency-region MPs and other MPs	132
3.4	Percentage of education–developmental discourses within parties' aggregate discourses	134
3.5	Percentage of security discourses within parties' aggregate discourses	136

xiv *Illustrations*

3.6	Percentage of ‘foreign powers’ discourse within parties’ aggregate discourses	136
4.1	Consciousness of the state versus emancipation across three legislatures	146
4.2	Parties with the highest percentage of emancipatory discourses	146
4.3	Parties with higher percentage of statist discourses	148

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Acronyms

TK

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Proof

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Acknowledgements

This book is a product of my doctoral studies at the University of Essex, Department of Government. I would like to thank the anonymous committee, which awarded my dissertation Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) 2010 Malcolm H. Kerr Best Dissertation in the field of Social Sciences. This award was the main encouragement that convinced me to convert the study into this book.

I am also grateful to Dr. Soner Cagaptay (Washington Institute for Near Eastern Studies), Associate Professor Muge Gocek (University of Michigan, Sociology), Professor Sukru Hanioglu, Professor Michael Cook and Associate Professor Michael Reynolds (Princeton University, Near Eastern Studies), for their valuable comments and directions that helped me re-think my dissertation into manuscript form. I am also thankful to Kadir Has University, Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, for providing me with a great work environment that helped me complete this manuscript on time. I am forever thankful to Professor Hasan Bulent Kahraman for his guidance, mentoring and vision that has set the tone of my intellectual life.

Proof

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof

Introduction

Early September 2012 – right before noon. As I rush through the lobby of Istanbul's famous Conrad Hotel, my eyes scan through the brunch crowd to locate my interviewee. At a time when new Turkish foreign policy was witnessing the epitome of its 'soft power' prestige, I am about to speak to a high-level foreign policy maker about some questions related to this book. Perhaps the most highly in demand interviewee for many foreign policy and political science analysts – not to mention journalists or foreign politicians – he is unexpectedly calm and low key for one of the central figures of new Turkish foreign policy's golden age.

Sitting down at his brunch table, I notice how the hotel's restaurant is, in fact, a hub of diplomacy; Egyptian opposition, Syrian resistance, Libyan notables all sit scattered in the hall, discussing their countries' politics and future in Istanbul, orbiting my interviewee's table. Turkey's reach for its Ottoman legacy seemed complete and justified from where I was sitting; foreign dignitaries scrambling to sit closer to an influential modern-day *Re'is ül-Küttab*, diligently refining their cases, prepared for weeks in advance, before trying to get Turkey's support for their country's future within a brief allocated time. But now it was my turn; I was going to ask him about the regional implications of the new 'Kurdish initiative' – a peace plan refined after the failure of its 2009 predecessor. After making a brief introduction of my book and its main arguments, he speaks with an uncommonly low volume, forcing the listener to move in closer to be able to hear his reply. "So you are writing a book on the Kurdish question?" After several seconds' pause, he adds "It may be too late to write such a thing. There won't be [a Kurdish question] soon."

Nine months later – mid-May 2013. After months of shuttle diplomacy between the Turkish government and the long-imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, the latter agrees to order his organization to move out of Turkish soil and retreat back into northern Iraq. This would be the second 'Kurdish initiative,' an attempt at the resolution of the Kurdish question after the failed first attempt in 2009. The overall spirit in Turkey was one of cautious optimism; would the PKK also disarm? Would Öcalan be put on house arrest, improving his captivity conditions? Would the PKK evolve into a political party and enter the Turkish Parliament?

Amidst such debate and PKK's unilateral decision to withdraw, Turkey's prominent journalist Hasan Cemal embeds himself into the retreating PKK ranks and

2 Introduction

writes a series of columns titled “Withdrawal Diaries,” charting the PKK’s withdrawal journey from the southeastern Turkish mountains to northern Iraqi hills. One PKK member interviewed by Hasan Cemal, called Fuat, says the 2013 withdrawal is different than the group’s major withdrawal in 1999, which was caused by the arrest of the group’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan: “We were new, we didn’t know [and caused the Turkish military many casualties during the withdrawal]. This time the withdrawal is led directly by [Öcalan].” Yet, he adds cautiously: “But this is the Middle East. Balances may change at anytime; anything can happen. Why did we go up in the mountains in the first place? Why are we coming down now?”

Fourteen years earlier – late May 1999. After Turkey’s then President Süleyman Demirel’s ultimatum to Syria, in which PKK leader Öcalan was provided shelter, Turkish tanks breach the border and begin rolling into Syrian territory. After several hours of simultaneous diplomacy, Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad agrees to oust Öcalan from Syrian territory. Öcalan then travels to Russia, and the Russians forward him to Italy, and finally he goes to the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. With significant American intel aid, Turkish special ops capture Öcalan, dealing a major blow to a top-down organization. Weeks after the capture of their founder/leader, PKK enters a period of interregnum and leadership crisis, withdrawing from Turkish territory into northern Iraq to regroup and settle succession issues. In a documentary of the withdrawal aired in 2013 on the Kurdish Nûçe TV, an unidentified PKK militant recalls the spirit of the retreat. Under heavy Turkish fire, militants pass through a rugged terrain, falling into ambush repeatedly. “We were uncertain; the leadership was gone. But we believed we would ultimately prevail.” As his group left their mountain defenses, the same militant recalls:

A comrade told us: “Be not afraid. We will one day return back to these mountains, for these mountains are ours.” He was right; that was the spirit that kept us all alive: [A situation] that separates the Kurd from his mountain can not be permanent. Then we understood we would some day return back.

Four years earlier – mid-March 1995. Operation Steel, the second major cross-border operation carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces against PKK camps in northern Iraqi is going at full speed. The Gulf War of 1990–1991 and Operation Provide Comfort – the no-fly zone imposed by NATO – had unintentionally but significantly strengthened PKK activities in northern Iraq. Without Saddam’s troops or jets, all Kurdish factions in the north went through a fundamental reorganization and rearmament period. PKK specifically had confiscated arms and ammunition caches left by Saddam’s retreating army, stepping up the pressure on Turkish military targets and intensifying attacks against Turkish military outposts on the border. An earlier 1992 cross-border operation had resulted in military victory, but the PKK could regroup quickly with its supply and recruitment base in Iraq. This time, in 1995, with around thirty-five thousand troops and ten thousand village guard irregulars, Turkey was trying to destroy PKK’s recruitment, training and base operations in Iraqi territory. Hasan Kundakçı, lieutenant-general in

command of the operation conducted a successful sweep of the camps in about a month and a half. Upon meeting the operational objectives, he speaks to an army cameraman for the military's archival records: "Mehmetçik is in full command of almost all operational areas and [PKK camps]. I believe in the next 24 hours all camps will be neutralized. They will either surrender, or die. The PKK is no more. Terrorism is no more."

Why study discourse on the Kurdish question?

The Kurdish question, without doubt, is one of the most complicated and protracted issues affecting the Middle East and the Caucasus. Although Kurdish people span across three other neighboring countries – Iran, Syria and Iraq – the great majority of the Kurds live in Turkey,¹ which gives the country a unique position in the larger Kurdish conundrum. The real difficulty in Turkey in addressing this question comes from the existence of competing and mutually exclusive definitions of this problem, each associated with a corresponding belief on how this issue can be solved. Ironically, however, even calling the Kurdish question the "Kurdish question" is regarded as an ideological position by the Turkish state.² For example, if a person says that there is a "Kurdish problem" in Turkey, it is – often inaccurately – inferred that the speaker believes in the cultural and ethnic separateness of the Kurds which is – mostly misleadingly – inferred to be 'supporting' Kurdish separatism. On the other hand, saying "there is no Kurdish problem" is regarded as an ultra-nationalist, aiming to oppress the cultural identity of the Kurds. Predictably, this sensitivity surrounding the very definition of the Kurdish question has made it a taboo topic in Turkey for many years, often with a governmental check on the terms and words used to discuss this topic. This uncertainty and vagueness surrounding the definition (not to mention the perspectives on the very existence) of the Kurdish issue has been manifesting itself either as the complete denial of the Kurdish question, or 'separatism' and even 'treason.' Even today, an opinion survey in Turkey as to 'what the Kurdish question is' would reveal many different interpretations and definitions of the issue, ranging from 'a problem of democracy'³ to 'a threat to territorial integrity.'⁴ Society in Turkey is deeply divided over what the Kurdish question means, and even over whether such a question exists in the first place. Denial and acknowledgement dynamics often reveal political ideology and agenda and therefore are political actions in and of themselves. While the very term 'Kurdish question' is discussed in the academic literature as a given, a new and systemic study is required to deconstruct and analyze the constitutive parts of this discursive construct.

This book, therefore, is the first comprehensive study and analysis of the discursive constructions and perceptions of what is broadly defined as the 'Kurdish question'; more importantly, it presents a study of the political motives and factors behind differing interpretations of the problem. Using the Kurdish conundrum in Turkey as a case, this study also seeks to provide an analytical framework for the analysis of the factors behind domestic and foreign discursive constructions of other intrastate conflicts.