

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.

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Discourse and politics since 1990

H. Akin Ünver

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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.

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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 Iraq 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.