«TURKISH-KURDISH CONFLICT»

Umurbaev Rustam Shakirjanovich
4th-year student of Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies
Tashkent city

Abstract: *This article develops new analytical categories that are necessary to analyze Turkey's Kurdish conflict in its changed domestic and international environments and to evaluate the policy options. If Turkish state policies and discourse, and that of the other regional and international actors, signal to Kurds that the Turkish and Kurdish identities are mutually exclusive categories with rival interests, radical shifts may occur in Turkish Kurds' social and political identities and preferences. If state policies promote these identities as complements with compatible interests, radical shifts are unlikely and Turkey can play a more constructive regional role.*

Key words: *Democratization, security environment, identity formation, description, practitioners.*

INTRODUCTION

Turkey witnessed the rising consciousness and politicization of the Kurdish identity, the surging visibility of the Kurdish category within the main- stream public-political discourse, and the ascent of Turkish nationalism that viewed the Kurdish rebel movement, the Kurdistan Worker's Party, and Kurdish nationalism in general, as the major antagonists. After Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's leader, was captured in 1999, the diminishing threat to state security by Kurdish separatism and the pull of the EU in a context of democratization further changed the domestic environment of Turkey's Kurdish conflict. The PKK renamed itself the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress, and armed clashes between the state forces and Kurdish rebels, which had continued since 1984 except for brief intervals, practically ceased.

From 1998 to 2002, the percentage of Turkish citizens who viewed «terror and security» as the greatest threats to the country dropped from 39.3 to 5.5%. For the first time since the PKK revolt began in 1984, dynamics other than violence and considerations other than state security got a chance to play a significant role in determining the parameters of the conflict. The Parliament passed a series of laws granting significant cultural-linguistic rights to ethnic Kurds, such as broadcasting in and teaching Kurdish. These rights, whose implementation has so far been slow, were modest by world standards and fell short of politically conscious ethnic Kurds' expectations for change. Nevertheless, they were unprecedented steps

forward for Turkey in the direction of the normalization of the Kurdish conflict via demilitarization and liberal democracy.

In 2003, the U.S.-led war in Iraq and the ensuing uncertainties in that country drastically altered the external environment of the conflict. Iraqi Kurds represented by the KDP emerged as major U.S.-allies and actors, while groups such as the PKK and Ansar al-Islam, which the U.S. government viewed as terrorists, remained active in the region. Northern Iraq borders Turkey's predominantly ethnic Kurdish Southeast. The possibilities of anti-Turkish or irredentist statehood for Kurds and of rising PKK activity in Northern Iraq refueled Turkish policy-makers' security concerns. New clashes occurred between the PKK fighters and the Turkish security forces inside Turkey; DEHAP, the Turkish-Kurdish party widely seen to be the PKK's political arm, organized mass protests that demanded, among other things, Öcalan's release. These circumstances increase the risk of renewed armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish nationalists. Such a conflict would strain Turkey's efforts to resolve its domestic Kurdish conflict through democratization and to build cooperative relations with Iraqi Kurds.

These political and security risks have long been understood and expressed. Less understood are the ramifications for, first, the self-conceptions and political beliefs of large portions of Turkish Kurds, and, second, the mainstream Turkish society's perception of Kurds. These are certainly being affected, and will continue to be reshaped, by the developments in this new era, and will bear important implications for Turkey's domestic and external politics. As the sections ahead will show, the first Gulf crisis (1990-91), and the Turkish state leaders' response to this changing security environment within a context of rising Kurdish nationalism at home and in Iraq, contributed to far-reaching shifts in the mainstream Turkish discourse regarding the Kurdish identity.

The current period is similarly marked by rising Kurdish nationalism and uncertainty at Turkey's southern border, and may affect the mainstream Turkish discourse and beliefs regarding the Kurds. Simultaneously, the current period features high expectations for change on the part of ethnic Kurds throughout the region. Combined with uncertainties about the future of Iraq and the Iraqi Kurds' status in it, and Turkey's democratization and prospects for joining the European Union, these circumstances impose various influences and constraints on the self-perceptions of Turkish Kurds. They fit the characteristics of periods of flux in David Laitin's analysis of ethnic and national group identity formation. In such periods of uncertain change, he argues, people's self-identities become prone to shift: they become especially responsive to state policy and discourse, to the «identity strategies» or projects offered by competing social-political leaders, to political-economic advantages of different identity strategies, and to ingroup and outgroup

social pressures. Such shifts in particular may occur in Turkey between binary and conglomerate understandings of Turkish and Kurdish identities.

One cannot predict with certainty the timing and direction of such shifts, but one can examine the potential shifts under different scenarios. Then, one can ask how policies of state and non-state actors would affect the way the Kurdish identity or identities in Turkey may evolve under these scenarios, and analyze the implications for Turkish Kurdish relations, and for Turkey's internal and external politics. To do this requires new practical and analytical categories. In spite of the changed domestic and external contexts of Turkey's Kurdish conflict, practitioners as well as researchers continue to use the same analytical categories and explanations as before.

In particular, three changes in the analysts' as well as practitioners' mental and discursive approaches to the Kurdish conflict would help to achieve an analytically more correct description and to generate more constructive policy implications.

First, because Turks and Kurds do not constitute monolithic group categories with historically fixed identities, it is more appropriate to describe the political actors involved in the conflict as the representatives of various and changing visions of these identities, rather than as simply Turks and Kurds.

Second, the discursive-analytical distinction between ethnic and civic national-isms, which is often used to explain the causes of the Kurdish conflict and to prescribe how to resolve it, needs to be replaced or complemented with new concepts. This distinction fails to describe which formulations of the Turkish and Kurdish identities would make them harmonious and inclusive, rather than conflicting and exclusive, in the new period. For example, it does not provide much insight into questions such as which policies would help to prevent Turkish-Kurdish polarization in Northern Iraq.

Conclusion. The timing of any state-led reforms affecting ethnic Kurds is also critical. If the reforms are interpreted as opportunistic or reluctant moves in response to developments in Iraq, they may actually reduce ethnic Kurds' trust in the government's good will and promote the rival definition. To be successful, policies promoting the com patible definition should be interpreted as such, and thus should precede political expediency and reflect a long-term strategy and intentions.

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