

2013

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Identity and Conflict: PKK vs. Turkey (1984-Present)

by Ross Dayton, Florida International University¹

Abstract:

This paper offers a causal analysis of the conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkey that has been ongoing since 1984. The history of Kurdish politics in Turkey is investigated in order to uncover the conflict's causes. The conflict's origins in the Turkish state's refusal to recognize Kurdish identity and its forced attempts to assimilate Kurds into Turkish society are examined. Other causal factors such as the political turmoil of the decades prior to the conflict's initiation, the involvement of the student youth in politics, the rise of the PKK, and the interrelationships between the causal factors are also analyzed. Further discussion on the conflict's influence on sociopolitical and interstate motivations and how the causes of this conflict compare with other conflicts is provided.

¹ Paper originally prepared to fulfill requirement for INR 3061, Conflict, Security and Peace Studies, taught by Dr. Marcie Washington, Fall 2013

Identity and Conflict: PKK vs. Turkey (1984-Present)

Introduction. Resolving a conflict is difficult if its causes and history are not fully understood. As long as the root causes of a conflict remain unresolved, the possibility of the conflict reemerging will always exist. Studying the causes of intrastate conflicts is especially important as there have been over 150 civil wars since the end of World War II (The Economist, 2013). Intrastate conflicts present several problems for the international system such as refugees, terrorism, and contagion of conflict (Gurr, 2007, p. 135; 149). While the number of intrastate conflicts has decreased since the end of the cold war, several continue to this day (The Economist, 2013). A notable example of such a conflict is the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

Importance. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group without a state and the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East following Arabs, Persians, and Turks (Anderson, 2009; Stansfield, 2010). The region where most Kurds live crosses the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The number of Kurds in Turkey range between 12 and 20 million, although it is difficult to get an exact number (Özcan, 2006; Assessment for Kurds in Turkey). The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or PKK) has been at war with the Turkish state since 1984 (Klein, 2010, pp. 83-84). From its onset, nearly 40,000 people have died, three million Kurds have been displaced, vast human rights violations have been committed by both sides, and neighboring states often involved themselves in the conflict (Anderson, 2009; Marcus, 2007, p. 1).

Primary Parties. The United States, Turkey, and most European nations have classified the PKK as a terrorist group (Marcus, 2007, p. vii). However, the PKK is still arguably the most popular political group among Kurds in Turkey (Özcan, 2006, p. 8). The PKK was initially a Marxist-Leninist organization seeking to establish an independent and unified Kurdish state (Özcan, pp. 86-87). After the fall of the Soviet Union, the PKK moved away from conventional Marxism in favor of “democratic confederalism” (Öcalan, 2011, p. 21; Özcan, 2006, pp. 93-96). Instead of statehood, the PKK now fights for greater Kurdish rights in Turkey and to create a federated communal democracy for Kurds across state borders (Öcalan, p. 7; 21). The PKK has a fighting force of approximately 10,000 fighters; many in its ranks are women (Marcus, 2007, p. 172; Assessment for Kurds in Turkey).

The Turkish state, often controlled by its military, wishes to maintain stability and make Turkey a unified and homogeneous country (Anderson, 2009). The military follows a nationalist ideology based on the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of Turkey (Anderson, 2009). The conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state has mainly taken place in southeastern Turkey, where most of Turkey's Kurdish population is concentrated (Marcus, 2007, p. 4). Fighting has also spilled over the Turkish-Iraqi border where the PKK has bases (Marcus, p. 104).

Causes. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict originates from Turkey's refusal to recognize Kurdish identity. The Turkish state has sought to eliminate Kurdish identity and assimilate Kurds into Turkish society (Klein, 2010, p. 81). Unassimilated Kurds were disenfranchised from politics as even the word “Kurd” was banned from public discourse; opportunities for social and economic advancement were also bleak (Hassanpour, 1992).

The Turkish state's attempts to eliminate the Kurdish language have been called a "linguistic genocide," or simply "linguicide" (Hassanpour, 1992). While a national ban on the Kurdish language was not implemented until 1983, speaking Kurdish was prohibited in the southeastern provinces since 1925 (Scalbert-Yucel, 2010, p. 118). The letters Q, W, and X were banned as the letters exist in Kurdish but not in Turkish (Kurdish Language Academy, 2009). Kurdish peasants selling their goods in urban markets were fined for every Kurdish word they spoke (Hassanpour, 1992). Boarding schools were set up to separate Kurdish students from their homes and to force them to stop speaking Kurdish (Hassanpour, 1992). However, forcing Turkish on the Kurdish population proved to be a very slow and unsuccessful process; a survey in 1966 showed that between 66 and 91 percent of Kurds in some provinces could not speak a word in Turkish (Hassanpour, 1992).

The Turkish state also tried to discredit Kurdish identity. Turkish intellectuals regarded the Kurdish language as "broken Persian," a primitive language with no grammatical rules and a limited vocabulary of 400 words (Hassanpour, 1992; Özcan, 2006, pp. 68, 75). Kurds, according to the Turkish version of history, descend from the same tribe as the Turks but were isolated in the mountains and lost their mother tongue; consequently, the Kurds were labeled as "Mountain Turks" (Hassanpour, 1992; Özcan, 2006, p. 68). In the Oxford Turkish-English dictionary, the word "Kurd" translates to "uncivilized person" (Hassanpour, 1992).

Turkish nationalism emerged after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century (Özcan, 2006, p. 70). During the war with Greece in 1919-1923, Mustafa Kemal united the Turks and Kurds on the basis of their shared Islamic identity (Özcan, p. 68). Many Kurds supported the Turkish-Kurdish alliance believing the ethnic plurality that existed under the Ottoman Empire would continue (Klein, 2010, p. 81). Once the Republic of Turkey was established, however, the Turkish elite sought to eliminate all minority identities in favor of secular nationalism (Klein, p. 81).

In response to being denied their own identity, the Kurds turned to Kurdish nationalism. The Kurds rebelled against the Turkish state in 1925, 1930, and 1937, but were brutally suppressed each time (Özcan, 2006, p. 73). The Turkish military used artillery strikes on Kurdish villages, burned their houses, and carried out mass deportations & massacres in order to intimidate the Kurds into submission (Özcan, p. 73). Kurdish activists were forced underground from 1938 to the 1960s due to the state's devastating repression; this era in Kurdish politics became known as the decades of silence (Klein, 2010, p. 82).

The political situation in Turkey from the 1960s to the PKK's insurrection in 1984 was marked by instability, conflict, and repression. The 1961 constitution that followed the 1960 military coup gave more freedoms to left wing parties and trade unions. While the state was still hostile towards the Kurds, Kurds found some support amongst the Turkish left, especially the Turkish Workers' Party (TIP) (Özcan, 2006, p. 75). Another military coup took place in 1971 in response to student-youth groups becoming increasingly radical, increased frequency and scale of trade unions strikes, and the rising number of Marxist organizations (Özcan, pp. 76-77). The TIP and other organizations were banned, the right to strike was suspended, and politicians & activists were arrested en masse with several executed (Özcan, p. 77). Among those arrested was Abdullah Öcalan, who would later become the founder and leader of the PKK (Özcan, p. 78).

After democracy was restored in 1974, the state still had difficulty maintaining order; coalition governments did not last long due to ideological divisions and distrust (Marcus, 2007, p. 49).

The youth fueled much of the political instability and conflict in the 1970s. Youths who could not find employment due to economic recession and inflation joined militant groups on both the left and the right; these groups often fought each other in the streets and universities (Marcus, p. 50). The attempts made by the Turkish state to assimilate Kurdish students later came back to haunt it; many remained loyal to their roots, constituting an educated Kurdish youth seeking to change the status quo (Marcus, p. 36). The Kurdish youth of the 1970s also did not have the traumatic memories of the state's violent suppression of Kurdish rebellions, allowing them to move past the decades of silence (Marcus, p. 19). Several Kurdish nationalist organizations were formed by the youth at the time as the state was too weak to stop them; the most notable among them was the PKK (Marcus, p. 36).

From the organization's inception, Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK's founding membership believed that armed struggle would be necessary to achieve their goals (Marcus, 2007, p. 36). Öcalan's charisma and emphasis on armed revolution helped the PKK gain support early on (Marcus, p. 38). In order to solidify its leadership over the Kurdish movement, the PKK verbally and physically assaulted rival Kurdish and leftist groups (Marcus, pp. 40-41). The PKK then made assassination attempts on Kurdish tribal leaders and landlords who had ties with right-wing groups and the state; these attacks made the group popular as they demonstrated its willingness to fight oppression (Marcus, pp. 45-46).

The military seized control of the state again in 1980 in order to end the political instability and eradicate all of its sources (Marcus, pp. 50-51). Six hundred thousand leftist, rightist, and Kurdish activists were arrested (BBC News, 2012). Fifty people were executed, many prisoners were tortured, and hundreds died in prison (BBC News, 2012). Freedom of expression was heavily restricted and university students & faculty were banned from joining political parties (Marcus, 2007, pp. 83-84). The military regime cracked down on all expressions of Kurdish identity and culture, no matter how minor (Marcus, p. 85). Öcalan and many other PKK members managed to flee from Turkey to Syria just before the 1980 coup (Marcus, pp. 52-53).

In Syria, the PKK came in contact with militant Palestinian groups for military training for PKK forces (Marcus, 2007, pp. 56-57). The PKK also made alliances with leftist Kurdish and Turkish groups that were previously rivals and sought financial and political support from Kurdish Diasporas in Europe (Marcus, pp. 54-57). With the help of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the PKK built bases near the Turkish border to attack and retreat more easily (Marcus, pp. 68-71).

The PKK came back to Turkey in 1984 to start its insurrection (Marcus, pp. 79-80). Years of military rule made the state confident that all threats to stability had been wiped out (Marcus, pp. 83-85). A new constitution was established in 1983, and the military began lifting martial law (Marcus, pp. 83-85). The PKK seized the opportunity to strike.

Relationships. The causes of the PKK-Turkey conflict are all heavily interrelated. The primary cause of the conflict is the struggle for Kurdish identity. The major secondary causes include

political & cultural repression by the state, the political instability that preceded the conflict, and the involvement of the student youth. The state used repression to eradicate Kurdish identity. State repression was also used to deal with the political instability, but it also served as a catalyst for it. The student youth responded to the grievances made by the repression, instability, and Kurdish struggle by mobilizing for political action, which caused all three factors to intensify. The interpenetration of all these factors led to the rise of the PKK and its conflict with the Turkish state.

Discussion. The causes of the conflict had a great deal of influence on the interstate and socio-political motivations and behaviors of the actors involved. According to Ted Robert Gurr (2007), salience in identity is essential to ethnic conflict because it allows leaders to frame a communal group's interests in ethno-cultural terms and makes it easier to unite them for collective action (p. 137). Differences in how certain groups are treated compared to others will increase the salience of their identity and the likelihood of conflict (Gurr, p. 138). The PKK's experience shows that it is not enough for rebel leaders to just give a conflict a framing (a theoretical and ideological orientation such as nationalism or Marxism) (Gurr, p. 140). It is also necessary to take action in accordance to the framing. While the Kurdish left framed the Turkish-Kurdish conflict with ethno-nationalist identity and Marxist ideology, the PKK's willingness to take violent action gave it legitimacy among Kurds (Marcus, 2007, pp. 45-46).

Despite having idealistic goals, the PKK acts in a realpolitik manner. It often used violent and illegal means to strengthen its position and attack its enemies and rivals. The PKK also got indirect support from Syria while it was in exile (Marcus, p. 58). Having several disputes with Turkey while being a significantly weaker state, Syria wanted to use the PKK as a proxy (Marcus, pp. 59-61). However, this support was limited as Syria has its own Kurdish population and did not want it to rebel (Marcus, p. 61). Iraq, Iran, Greece, and Israel have also supported the PKK for their own political ends (Marcus, pp. 98-99; BBC News, 1999; Ravid, 2013; Ali, 2011).

The conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state often spilled over into Northern Iraq (Marcus, p. 104). The Turkish military conducted raids across the Iraqi-Turkish border to destroy PKK strongholds (Marcus, p. 104). However, Turkey's ability to deal with perceived Kurdish threats outside its borders has always been limited by external factors. In the 1920s, the United Kingdom gave autonomy to the Kurds in northern Iraq, which Turkey saw as a threat to assimilating Kurds within its own borders (Olson, 2010, pp. 29-30). Turkey could not invade and control Northern Iraq as it was preoccupied with putting down its own Kurdish rebellions (Olson, p. 30). In addition, Turkey wanted to join the League of Nations to form alliances against the Soviet Union and get financial aid from its members (Olson, p. 30). Turkey faced a similar situation in 2003 when the United States invaded Iraq; it did not participate to not jeopardize its chances of joining NATO and the European Union (Olson, p. 30).

Turkey's relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan has recently improved dramatically. The autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) built an oil pipeline to Turkey without the Iraqi central government's consent, and Turkey and Kurdistan recently signed a 50 year energy deal (Inskeep, 2014; Jones & Grimm, 2014). In an unprecedented move, a spokesperson for Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), recently claimed it will support Iraqi Kurdistan's right to self-determination and independence (Jones & Grimm, 2014).

Turkey's recent support for Iraqi Kurdistan may result from the security threat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) poses. ISIS has taken control of towns near the Turkish border and seized a Turkish embassy in Mosul (Tahiroglu, 2014). After the Iraqi army fled from ISIS, Kurdish "Peshmerga" forces took control of Kirkuk, a disputed oil-rich city which the Kurds claim is the "Kurdish Jerusalem" (Jones & Grimm, 2014). Throughout the crisis, the KRG continues to export oil to Turkey and deter ISIS' expansion (Jones & Grimm, 2014).

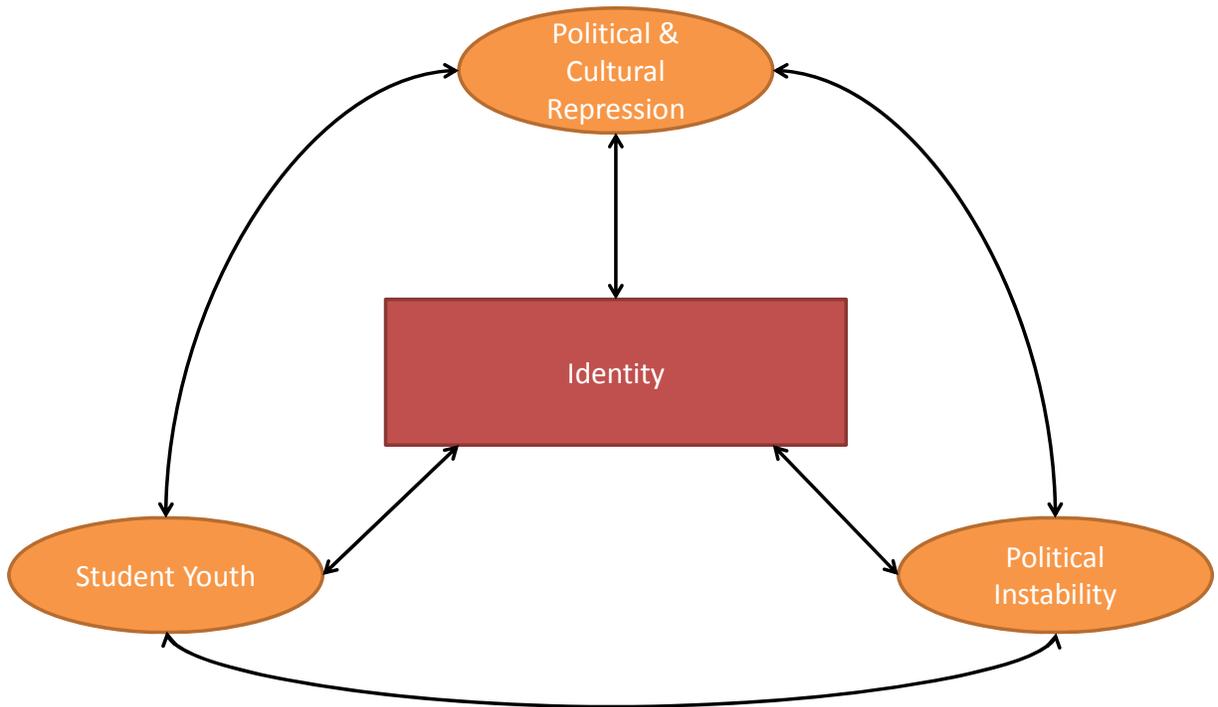
However, Turkey's relationship with Syrian Kurds has not been as positive. The Syrian Kurdish region governed by the People's Protection Units (YPG) has close ties with the PKK, and consequently cold relations with Turkey (Zaman, 2014). The YPG claims that Turkey supported Syrian Jihadist groups, including ISIS, to fight against them (Zaman, 2014). The YPG is also not in good terms with the KRG's ruling party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which claims the YPG sidelined other political parties by force (Zaman, 2014). The PKK also has uneasy relations with the KDP due to armed conflict between the two groups in the 1990s (Marcus, 2007, p. 247).

Relationship to Other Wars. The causes of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict share similarities with the causes of other conflicts. Conflicts based on ethnic and nationalist identities have been widespread in recent history; between 1945 and 2003, 121 civil wars were fought by national and minority groups, 60 being ethno-nationalist conflicts that have lasted over a decade (Gurr, 2007, p. 133). Political & cultural discrimination and state repression are common factors in ethno-nationalist conflicts (Gurr, pp. 139-140). Youth involvement has been a significant influence in conflicts (Beehner, 2007). Countries with large youthful populations and high unemployment are more prone towards civil conflict; a phenomenon referred to by demographers as "youth bulges" (Beehner, 2007).

Conclusion. The conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state is the latest chapter of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey. Its root cause lies in the Turkish state denying the Kurds their own identity. Even if the PKK is defeated militarily, Turkey's Kurdish problem will not go away without resolving its underlying cause. Minor progress has been made in recent years; in the 1990s public debate on the Kurdish question was no longer prohibited (Klein, 2010, p. 84). Since his capture in 1999, Abdullah Öcalan has been trying to negotiate an end to the conflict (Al Jazeera, 2013). Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is pushing for reforms that would allow pro-Kurdish parties to participate in government and private schools to teach Kurdish (Al Jazeera, 2013). The PKK agreed to a ceasefire and withdrawal into northern Iraq, but threatens to re-enter Turkey and continue fighting if the state stalls on implementing reforms (Al Jazeera, 2013; Al Jazeera, 2013). Many Kurds do not believe the reforms are enough, and clashes between Kurdish protesters and Turkish police continue (Bektas, 2013; Al Jazeera, 2013). Good relations with Iraqi Kurdistan may be a key factor in the peace process, but how the possibility of a Kurdish state across the border will affect the conflict is still unclear. Thus, a definitive end to the war remains unforeseen.

Appendix.

Turkish-Kurdish Conflict Model



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