

## The Determinant Roles of Turkish Identity in Relations with the Kurdistan Region in Iraq after the End of Cold War

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### Abstract

*The developments that started in the Tanzimat Era have profound effects on the formation of the Turkish identity in Turkey. The modern Turkish state structure was highly affected by internal and external developments, which can be identified as great waves such as the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and modernization processes which deeply affected Europe and the countries in its periphery. In the formation of Turkish identity, the state's efforts to keep up with the developments in Western world like nationalism movements have a tremendous impact. In addition, the continuous loss of land from the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 until the Treaty of Sevres on 10 August 1920 is one of the traumatic effects on the formation of this identity. Moreover, the emergence of the separatist PKK terrorist organization after 1980 in Turkey, which also experienced the effects of postimperial traumas, further reactivated the traumas of division, because the Kurdish population in Turkey is remarkably high. The Turkish identity which has been formed under the influence of these traumas has also had significant effects on the relations with the Iraqi Kurdistan region. The nationalist movements that fluctuated depending on the internal developments in Turkey sometimes played more decisive roles in the relations with the Kurdistan region than any other factor. This study investigates the effect of the Turkish identity formed in the process in Turkey on the relations with the Kurdistan region. It is based on a qualitative research design and used document analysis and a review of relevant literature to understand the role of Turkish identity in shaping relations with the Kurdistan Region.*

**Keywords:** *Kurdistan Region; Relations with Kurdistan; Sevres Syndrome; Turkish identity; Westernization*



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## 1. Introduction

Before the Enlightenment, medieval societies were divided on the basis of religion and adopted and developed their identities through it. However, when the modern age came, the adoption of a secular lifestyle and the emergence of nation states closely related to it caused the emergence of a new identity. The nation states of the modern age determined national identities for their citizens and reinforced these in education processes. Although there was a return from religious understanding to a national identity, the basic dynamics that determined this emerged under different conditions and in different ways. As for the identity formation processes in Turkey specifically, Westernization was adopted as a state policy from the beginning of the 19th century and accordingly, the western identity of the state was constantly brought to the forefront. However, this identity also has traumatic dimensions. In Turkey, especially in the process that continued for more than 200 years until the Treaty of Sevres, continuous land losses had traumatic effects on the formation of this identity. Due to these effects, Turkey adopted a worried attitude towards the Kurdish people within itself. Particularly, the separatist Kurdish movements that emerged after the 1980 Coup revived the traumas hidden in the identity of the Turkish state and caused it to make policies in line with this. In relation to it, the situation of its own citizens, the Kurds, has always been the determining premise in its relations with the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq. In this context, this study will examine its relations with the Kurdistan region through the concepts of westernization and Sevres syndrome, which are embedded in the Turkish identity.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

The Republic of Turkey had to face up with many challenges related to its Kurdish population, and these challenges became more outstanding especially after the military coup in 1980. The early Kurdish uprisings in the Republican era were suppressed relatively easily before they became a huge issue for the state, but Kurdish nationalist revival peaked after the coup with the help of the legacy of leftist movements in 1970s and state policies against the Kurds inside the country after 1980. Later, the emergence of the PKK intensified state anxieties about national unity. These internal dynamics were not only limited to domestic policy but also shaped Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

This study seeks to investigate how Turkey's evolving national identity has influenced its foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Region, taking into account that it was shaped by Westernization, the legacy of the Treaty of Sèvres, and security concerns.

The research aims to understand the extent to which different identity narratives (Kemalist, conservative democratic, neo-Ottomanist) have informed Turkey's approach toward the Kurdish issue and regional relations.

Research questions include:

How has Turkish national identity influenced foreign policy decisions toward the Kurdistan Region?

In what ways have domestic Kurdish issues shaped Turkey's external stance on Kurdish autonomy in Iraq?

The study focuses particularly on the post-1980 period, a time of intensified conflict and identity-based realignments within Turkey and explores the reflection of internal identity shifts on external policy towards Kurdistan Region after the end of Cold War.

### ***1.2 Significance of the Study***

In Turkey, the Kurdish issue and Turkey's relations with Kurdistan are generally handled in a biased manner by academic circles. Even more, these circles mostly tend to defend the grand narrative of the Turkish State, which focuses on the unity of the country and the treason of those who have separatist ill-intentions. Therefore, these issues are not evaluated as necessary for various reasons. This study was conducted to fill the gap in this area.

## **2 Related Literature**

### ***2.1 Identity***

Identity is a multi-layered structure shaped by social and cultural meaning-making processes through which an individual defines both himself and others (Hall, 2003). It is also considered as a conceptual framework that gives meaning to the existence of an individual in a social context and assigns him certain roles, rights, and responsibilities (Giddens, 2002). In this context, identity is seen as a continuous process of construction and reconstruction that occurs at both individual and collective levels (Castells, 2010).

It is possible to define the concept of identity from different perspectives because human existence is shaped in different layers of life and develops an identity of its own in each layer. For example, sociologically, it is a sense of belonging that people gain within the framework of social roles, statuses, and norms. According to this identity, the individual determines his/her behavior patterns in society and his/her relationship with people (Giddens, 2002). Psychologically, it is an internal process based on an individual's self-perception shaped by personal experiences (Erikson, 1968). Politically, the concept of identity has been activated, especially with the emergence of the new nation-state model in the modern era (Castells, 2010). In the process of modernization, there is a political identity that the modern state imposes on its citizens in order to determine their duties and responsibilities with their own consent and to raise them as an individual who is devoted to the state (Giddens, 2002). In accordance with this identity, the bond of the citizen with the state and the nation has been kept strong, and formal education processes have been designed appropriately for this purpose (Castells, 2010).

### **2.1.1 Basic components of identity**

In the modern age, identity is perceived as a multi-layered concept. Therefore, there are supporting concepts that will make the definition of identity clearer in terms of content.

**Belonging:** All kinds of human identity are the product of emotional processes. The identity definition specified in any official document has no importance unless the individual has an emotional bond and sincere consent. Belonging is where and in which group the person feels himself. This is achieved through a number of processes and is mostly dynamic (Anthias, 2008; Bauman, 2001). Kurds in Turkey have often been seen as "internal others" due to their linguistic and cultural differences, and the state nationalist policies could not achieve in fully integrating and assimilating Kurds into Turkish nation, which in time caused persistent tensions. The state's difficulty in accommodating Kurdish identity within the framework of Turkish belonging has brought about exclusionary policies and distrust.

**Difference:** In the definition of identity, it is as important for the person to know where he belongs as it is to know where he does not belong. This approach strengthens identity but also shows a feature that leads to conflicts (Bauman, 2001). Turkish national identity has often been constructed in the face of perceived threats of fragmentation. Kurdish identity is often viewed as a difference that challenges the unity of the state when it is expressed through demands for autonomy or recognition. This perception has led to a reciprocal effect: oppression of the state and resistance of the Kurds. However, during periods of rapprochement, especially under the AKP's early years, difference was reframed not as a threat but as an element of democratic pluralism, enabling temporary openings for collaboration between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region. But later policy implementations of AKP governments accentuated national unity, implying the denial of Kurdish rights.

**Performativity:** Judith Butler posits that identity is not a fixed essence but rather a "performance" enacted by individuals within the framework of social norms (Butler, 2004). The Turkish state has historically imposed a performative identity through centralized education, media, and policies, expecting citizens to accept a standardized Turkishness. However, Kurdish people mostly resisted these policies and expressed these through cultural and political assertions. As a repercussion of these attempts, Turkish state has criminalized Kurdish demands at times. As a result, the persistence of Kurdish identity performance has challenged the state's rigid definitions.

**Hybridity:** Especially in the context of globalization, identities are no longer fixed and one-dimensional, but multi-layered and complex (Hall, 2003). Turkish society has begun to adopt more pluralistic and inclusive notions of identity. This has become prominent especially among younger generations and urban populations. Even more, Kurdish-

Turkish hybridity has been more apparent in cultural, economic, and even political arenas. It also positively affected the commercial interactions between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region after 2008. This hybridity challenges the older monolithic national narratives and opens new dimensions to evaluate state-minority relations in the modern world. Yet, such hybridity also creates anxiety within nationalist circles and revive fears of the Sèvres syndrome.

## ***2.2 The Emergence and Development of Nationalism and the Formation of National Identity***

Nationalism became an important social and political movement, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, parallel with the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution in Europe (Anderson, 2006). The development of nationalism was shaped by the emergence of the modern state on the one hand, and the emergence of new ideas on the construction of national identity on the other (Smith, 2009). The new worldview of the Enlightenment thinkers, shaped by principles such as individual freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty, laid the foundation of nationalism and had a significant impact on the formation of national identity (Giddens, 2002).

In the Turkish context, nationalism firstly emerged in the late Ottoman period, particularly after the empire's land losses and the rise of separatist movements among the minority populations inside (Zürcher, 2004). Together with the new Turkish nationalist state after its foundation in 1923, Turkish nationalism emphasized a unified, homogenous identity based on Turkishness and territorial integrity, which directly rejects any other minorities together with Kurdish identity (Yavuz, 2001). This was mostly a defensive nationalism shaped by historical traumas such as the Treaty of Sèvres, which exacerbated the fears of fragmentation and getting smaller and weaker (Bilgin, 2008). As a result, Turkish nationalism developed as both a state ideology and a tool for securing national unity against internal and external threats that they perceived.

This defensive Turkish nationalism has significantly shaped Turkey's foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The emergence of Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq has frequently been interpreted by Turkish policymakers as a national security issue, and it triggered the fear of potential territorial disintegration (Romano, 2006). The possibility of Kurdish independence across the border has been perceived as a direct threat to Turkish sovereignty, especially in the face of Turkey's large Kurdish population (Barkey, 2005). As such, Turkey's policy toward the Kurdistan Region has often been reactive and shaped by nationalist anxieties rooted in its historical background (Gunter, 2011).

In contrast, Kurdish nationalism began to take shape in the early 20th century. It was inspired by the wave of ethnic nationalism in the whole world and the decline of empires (Natali, 2005). For Kurds in Iraq, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and later of Saddam

Hussein's regime opened up new opportunities for nationalist expression (Stansfield, 2003). The Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq has aimed at gaining autonomy or independence, and this goal has increasingly influenced regional politics and Turkey's foreign policy calculations (Park, 2014).

The interaction between Turkish and Kurdish nationalism creates a dynamic identity tension. While Turkish nationalism seeks to keep its integrity and a singular national identity, Kurdish nationalism asks for the recognition of their cultural, linguistic, and political rights. This clash of nationalisms has created a complex and often volatile relationship between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which was mostly determined by the domestic and regional political climate and was expressed as either cooperation or confrontation (Öktem, 2011).

### ***2.3 Enlightenment and Nationalism***

The Enlightenment period played a major role in the emergence of nationalism as an intellectual movement that questioned social and political structures and brought human reason and individual freedom to the forefront (Kohn, 2005). Enlightenment philosophers defended popular sovereignty, criticized monarchical structures, and argued that the state should be shaped by the people (Hobsbawm, 2012). These views paved the way for the development of the understanding of national identity and nationalism. Enlightenment thinkers Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke developed ideas about creating free individuals and equal societies. These ideas, at the core of nationalism, enabled people to come together to establish nation-states and to shape national identities in these states (Kohn, 2005).

These ideas came out in Europe, but their influence affected the Middle East during the late Ottoman period. Namely, Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) directly referred to Enlightenment principles of rational governance and legal equality (Kadioğlu, 1996; Mardin, 1981). Ottoman reformers tried to centralize the authority in the whole country by creating a unique identity of being Ottomans. To achieve this, they introduced modern institutions and legal system. These efforts triggered an identity shift that underlies Turkish nationalism in the Republican era.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Kemalist reforms institutionalized Enlightenment ideals more assertively and promoted secularism, modern education, and a strong state-centric national identity based on Turkishness (Kadioğlu, 2007; Giddens, 2002). While these reforms accelerated modernization, they also excluded non-Turkish ethnic identities, particularly the Kurds, from the dominant national narrative (Yıldız, 2010). This exclusion brought about long-standing tensions between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population.

At the same time, Kurdish nationalism was also affected by Enlightenment concepts such as self-determination and popular sovereignty, especially in the post-imperial era of

Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish movements in Iraq, particularly after the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in 2003, increasingly employed these ideas to justify claims for autonomy and independence (Romano & Gurses, 2014; Kaya, 2012). As such, both Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms reflect divergent legitimization of Enlightenment legacies, which resulted in conflicting identity narratives by Turkish state and Kurdish nation.

### ***2.3.1 Development of nationalism***

Nationalism gained serious momentum with the French Revolution, and modern nationalist movements began with ideologies advocating the sovereignty of the people and national sovereignty (Smith, 2009). The French Revolution indicates a period when national consciousness and national identity came to the fore (Anderson, 2006). After overthrowing the monarchy, the French people entered the process of establishing a new nation-state, and this process triggered nationalist movements in other parts of Europe (Gellner, 2006).

The 19th century was a period when nationalism began to institutionalize, and nation-states began to be established. With the impact of economic and social changes along with the Industrial Revolution, individuals developed a more distinct sense of national identity in society (Giddens, 2002). Nationalism has been an important tool for the construction of national identities not only in Western Europe but also in multinational empires such as the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire (Hobsbawm, 2012).

### ***2.3.2 The process of formation of national identity***

National identity is formed by the combination of historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographical elements (Smith, 2009). The identity of a nation is shaped based on its historical past, cultural heritage, and common experiences (Anderson, 2006). National identity was strengthened by the unification of a people around a common language, culture, values, and traditions under the influence of nationalist movements that emerged in the 19th century. During this period, literature, art, and education were important tools in the reinforcement of national identity (Gellner, 2006).

While nationalism enabled the people to develop a common sense of belonging, it also put forward the idea that this identity should be defended against the outside. In a sense, this led to the "othering" approach advocated by nationalism; in other words, a nation positioned itself as a community different and separate from other nations while defining its identity. This process stood out more, and wars and the collapse of empires took place (Hobsbawm, 2012).

## ***2.4 Tanzimat Era (1839-1976)***

The Tanzimat period was a period during when radical reforms took place in the Ottoman Empire. During this period, the Ottoman Empire turned towards modernization and reforms under the influence of the West, and different ideological movements also

emerged in order to preserve the multinational structure of the empire. These movements took shape in three main ideological orientations: Ottomanism, Islamism, and Nationalism. Each movement was a reflection of the search for solutions to various problems of Ottoman society, and each developed in different ways according to the socio-political conditions of the period (Mardin, 1981; Yıldız, 2010).

This era started with the imperial decree of Tanzimat that was recited all over the country focusing on equal citizenship and rights for the members of all different religions and nationalities inside the empire. It was a necessity of the developments in Europe after the Enlightenment process which triggered nationalistic movements. To keep the unity of the state in the face of these developments, the Ottoman elites developed the strategies of responding to nationalistic movements (Yıldız, 2010).

## **2.5 Ottomanism, Islamism, and Nationalism Movements After Tanzimat**

### **2.5.1 Ottomanism**

Ottomanism formed the basic ideological framework of the Tanzimat reforms and advocated the adoption of an "Ottoman nation" concept regardless of the ethnic, religious, and cultural differences of the Ottoman people. This movement aimed to protect the unity and integrity of the empire and advocated a form of government in which different nations would have equal rights. Ottomanism emerged with the effort to modernize the state structure of the Ottoman Empire during the Westernization process and was adopted especially by the reformists of the ruling class (Mardin, 1981). With the Tanzimat period, the ideology of Ottomanism aimed to create a unifying framework among the various ethnic groups of the empire, especially under the influence of egalitarian and libertarian ideas adopted from the West (Kadioğlu, 1996).

However, Ottomanism was gradually replaced by other ideologies as ethnic identities and national demands strengthened. Especially towards the end of the 19th century, Ottomanism was no longer effective enough, and different movements seeking new solutions to the Ottoman State's struggle for existence came to the fore (Anderson, 2006).

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Kurdish nation was one these groups which Ottomanism failed to integrate into the system. Kurds had historically had a semi-autonomous status under the Ottoman millet system and tribal arrangements. During the Tanzimat and next centralization reforms, the Ottoman state attempted to weaken Kurdish tribal authority and bring these peripheral regions under direct control of the central government, but this attempt disturbed local

governance traditions among the Kurds and brought about more resistance (Yıldız, 2010).

While the ideology of Ottomanism offered equality and shared imperial identity, but in practice many Kurdish elites perceived these reforms as efforts to weaken their autonomy rather than as genuine inclusion. This gap between rhetoric and reality caused growing distrust toward the central government. As Ottomanism failed to accommodate Kurdish cultural and political particularities, it gave way to the formation of a distinct Kurdish identity, especially in the face of growing nationalism throughout the empire (Romano & Gurses, 2014).

As a result, the drawbacks of Ottomanism to integrate minority groups like the Kurds weakened the unity of the state and established a good reason for the revival of Kurdish nationalism.

### **2.5.2 Islamism**

Islamism is an ideology that emerged as a reaction to the increase in nationalist movements in the Ottoman Empire. Islamism argued that in the Ottoman Empire, the unifying power of Islam should be utilized in order for the people and the state to be stronger together. This movement adopted Islam as both a cultural and political identity and emphasized that religion should determine the basic values of society. Islamism, similar to Ottomanism, aimed to preserve the unity of the empire's multinational structure, but unlike it, it highlighted Islam as a unifying force (Kadıoğlu, 1996).

Islamism gained strength especially during and after the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1922), a period in which anti-Western sentiment increased in the Ottoman Empire and religious identities were emphasized. During this period, advocates of Islamism proposed reshaping Islam as the foundation of the state as a reaction to Westernization and secularization in the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, Islamism emphasized the concept of the Ummah in the Islamic world and, unlike the national-based movements of the Ottoman Empire, sought a religious unity (Yıldız, 2010).

For Kurdish communities, especially in the late Ottoman period, Islamism came up with some advantages and provided an opportunity for inclusion. During this time, many Kurdish leaders and religious figures supported the Islamic legitimacy of the Ottoman Caliphate and aligned themselves with the state against nationalist or separatist movements (Romano & Gurses, 2014). This alignment was evidently seen in the Kurdish support against Armenian uprisings and later against British forces in Iraq.

However, this Islamic unity did not remove ethnic distinctions. After Kurdish identity began to express itself culturally and politically in the 20th century, Islamism's universalist discourse began to conflict with emerging Kurdish nationalism. In Turkey, Islamism later became effective during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, particularly through parties like the AKP, which emphasized religious brotherhood to foster unity

with Kurds. This approach helped ease tensions at the beginning, but it was not enough to meet the demands for cultural and linguistic rights. As a result, it led to a complex relationship between religious solidarity and ethnic differentiation (Çiçek, 2016; Yıldız & Muller, 2015).

In Iraq, Kurdish Islamic parties such as the Kurdistan Islamic Union attempted to position themselves between ethnic nationalism and pan-Islamism. These groups promoted Kurdish rights while remaining loyal to broader Islamic ideals, and they highlighted the hybrid nature of Kurdish identity, which is shaped by both religion and ethnicity (Kaya, 2012). Thus, Islamism functioned both as a tool of integration and a source of tension in shaping Kurdish identities across the Ottoman legacy and modern nation-states.

### **2.5.3 Nationalism**

Nationalism is another important ideological movement that rapidly gained strength in the Ottoman Empire after the Tanzimat. Nationalism advocated that people should defend their own national identities and establish states based on these identities, especially against the empire's multi-ethnic structure (Anderson, 2006). Under the influence of the nation-state model coming from the West, nationalism caused ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire to increase their demands for independence. With the Tanzimat period, some communities in the Ottoman Empire joined nationalist movements by defending their own cultural and linguistic identities (Oran, 2001).

Nationalism manifested itself in the late Ottoman period, especially with the independence movements of nations such as Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, and Serbs. However, the nationalist movement in the Ottoman Empire developed not only among minorities but also around a broader national identity such as Turkish nationalism. Turkish nationalism took its most prominent shape in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, and this movement continued until the establishment of the Republic (Yıldız, 2010).

When nationalism emerged in the late Ottoman period, many nations within the empire began to struggle for independence. However, these nationalist movements did not only affect minorities. Turkish nationalism also began to grow stronger during this period. It even became the basic ideology in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey (Yıldız, 2011). One of the fundamental problems of the elites who founded the Republic of Turkey was the Sevres syndrome, and they emphasized the nationalist identity quite dominantly in order to prevent the country from being further divided. However, this understanding caused other problems because it only included Turkishness. For example, the banning of the languages of other non-Turkish nations within the country caused serious tensions. The banning of Kurdish in various forms after the 1980 coup is one of the important milestones in the rise of Kurdish nationalism (Bilgin et al., 2022c).

Nationalism, which effectively shaped the state and society, also affected Turkey's relations with its southern neighbors. Especially after the 1980 military coup, the state's nationalist stance and the fear that separatist ideas would spread, especially among the Kurds, also affected Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan region in Iraq. The emergence of the Iraqi Kurdistan region as an autonomous and independent structure had the potential to encourage separatist Kurds in Turkey. Therefore, it reacted to political changes in the Kurdistan region. For example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a situation where Turkey could not determine an effective policy. Initially, the autonomy of the Kurdistan Regional Government led to the development of a policy of non-engagement in Turkey because it was thought that the interest Turkey would show in this region would legitimize the Kurds' desire for independence (Romano & Gurses, 2014). However, the development of economic relations with the AKP administration suppressed nationalist sensitivity. Despite all this, Turkey has tried to develop very careful relations with the Kurdistan region and has closely followed the independence demands that would emerge there. In fact, in the 2017 referendum, Turkey took a very harsh opposition stance against the Kurdistan region (Bilgin, 2019).

### **3. Findings**

#### ***3.1 Formation Process of Turkish National Identity***

To understand the formation of Turkish identity and its reactions, one must trace back to the Treaty of Karlowitz signed in 1699. The Ottoman Empire's period of ascent is generally considered to have ended by the late 16th century, followed by a "stagnation period" lasting over a century. The Treaty of Karlowitz marked the beginning of the empire's decline, as it was the first time the Ottomans lost territory (Bali, 2012). This loss initiated over 200 years of continuous territorial retreat.

After World War I, the Mudros Armistice Treaty, signed on October 30, 1918, opened the way for the occupation of Anatolia, the Ottomans' last stronghold. Article 7 of the treaty allowed the Allied Powers to occupy areas they deemed a threat to their security. This was likely a strategy to ensure the acceptance of terms in the later Treaty of Sèvres (Oran, 2010). Signed in August 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres aimed to carve out concession zones in Anatolia, the final territory under Turkish control.

The 221 years between the Treaty of Karlowitz and the Treaty of Sèvres caused significant traumas within Ottoman administrative structures. These culminated in the Treaty of Sèvres, which resulted in a state with minimal influence and severely limited economic resources, shaped by two centuries of territorial contraction. In the collective memory of the Turks, the empire, once spanning three continents, was reduced to just a few hundred kilometers of land (Oran, 2001; Kösebalaban, 2011).

This final outcome, epitomized by the Treaty of Sèvres, left a deep mark on the founding elite of the republic established after 1923, becoming ingrained in Turkey's

political discourse as the "Sèvres syndrome." Although the Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, secured most of Turkey's present-day borders following the War of Independence, the traumas associated with the Treaty of Sèvres continued to influence the behavior of policymakers. Understanding the policies of modern Turkey's state elite requires acknowledging the impact of this syndrome (Bali, 2012).

### ***3.2 Westernization Journey***

Another perspective shaping the identity behind Turkey's foreign policy is its westernization journey. Although this journey dates back to the 18th century, it gained momentum when Mahmud II ascended the throne in 1808. From this point, the state's systems were restructured in line with developments in the West, initiating a process that culturally separated the state and society (Bilgin, 2023). On one side stood a state westernizing through its institutions, while on the other, a conservative society sought to preserve its traditions and institutional structures rooted in history.

Despite the conflicts this duality created, the state elite consistently turned to the West after Mahmud II, pursuing cultural and political reforms in alignment with Western ideals (Kadioğlu, 2007). Even during Abdulhamid II's reign (1876–1908), when Islamism gained prominence, the westernization goal remained largely intact.

With the republic's establishment in 1923, the western identity grew even stronger among the state elite, and this influence persisted throughout republican history, deeply impacting foreign policy (Kösebalaban, 2011).

### ***3.3 Turkey's Middle East Policy After 1950***

The Republican People's Party (CHP), which ruled Turkey for 27 years prior to 1950, maintained a distant stance toward the Middle East. This was primarily due to its focus on westernization and its desire to avoid association with Middle Eastern countries. Since the Ottoman period, Turkey had considered itself part of the West, often neglecting the Middle East (Oran, 2001).

The rise of the conservative Menderes government in 1950 marked a shift in Turkey's Middle East relations. During the Cold War, domestic political developments and regional dynamics necessitated a new foreign policy approach. Under the Democrat Party, Turkey adopted a more active policy in the Middle East, aligning itself closely with the United States. Joining NATO in 1952 further cemented Turkey's ties to the West and aligned its policies with Cold War requirements (Cakir, 2000).

In 1955, Turkey played a key role in establishing the Baghdad Pact alongside Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and the UK, aiming to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East. However, this initiative created tensions with other Arab countries, straining Turkey's broader relations with the Middle East (Volk, 2013).

The 1960s saw the rise of Arab nationalism, which viewed Turkey's close ties with the Western alliance as problematic, further weakening bilateral relations. Additionally, the military administration that came to power after the 1960 coup, committed to the westernization ideal, maintained a distant approach toward the Middle East (Oran, 2010).

The 1970s brought new challenges with the global oil crisis, which deeply impacted Turkey and prompted it to reassess its Middle Eastern ties. While preserving its Western orientation, Turkey sought to strengthen commercial relations with the region. The 1974 Cyprus Operation and the subsequent diplomatic isolation by Western states pushed Turkey to seek support from Arab countries (Ronen & Yanarocak, 2013).

These developments highlight the fluctuating nature of Turkey's Middle East relations, largely shaped by Cold War dynamics and shifting domestic and regional priorities.

### ***3.4 The 1980 Military Coup and Political Relations with Iraqi Kurdistan***

Turkey's engagement with the Kurdistan region in Northern Iraq gained momentum following the 1980 military coup, with domestic developments playing a key role in shaping these relations.

After the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, a large portion of the Kurdish population remained within Turkey's borders. Today, Kurds are spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, with Turkey hosting the largest Kurdish population. This demographic reality often triggered the Sevres syndrome among Turkey's state elite, who perceived it as a threat to national unity. While local Kurdish uprisings occurred during the single-party era of the early Republic, no significant movement emerged until the 1980 coup (Bali, 2012).

By the late 1960s, global student movements inspired leftist ideologies, influencing Turkey and giving rise to socialist thought. Throughout the 1970s, separatist Kurdish movements attempted to align with leftist currents but began distinguishing themselves after the 1980 coup, initiating an independence struggle. This separatist Kurdish movement, which deeply alarmed the state elite and reignited Sevres-related fears, became a central issue for the state (Ersan, 2014).

The Kurdish issue during this period significantly influenced Turkey's foreign policy, shaping its relations with both Western and Middle Eastern countries. The state's approach to this challenge reflected its dual concerns of maintaining territorial integrity and navigating complex regional dynamics.

#### ***3.4.1 The 1980 coup and its impact on Kurdish policy***

The military government that ruled Turkey from the 1980 coup until the elections of late 1983 implemented harsh policies targeting the Kurdish population, particularly evident in the infamous repression associated with Diyarbakır prison. This period marked the beginning of militaristic activities by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). The state's

oppression of Kurds during this time primarily involved banning the Kurdish language and suppressing separatist movements. In 1983, the military government enacted Law No. 2932, which prohibited broadcasting in languages other than Turkish, citing the need to protect social order, national security, the Republic, and the indivisible unity of the state. This law also declared that Turkey would not recognize a second official language in the constitution of any country whose independence it acknowledged. This policy specifically targeted Iraq, which had recognized Kurdish as a second official language in its constitution (Bilgin et al., 2022c).

These measures reflected the state elite's strict stance on the Kurdish issue within Turkey. The policies and perspectives developed during this period also significantly influenced Turkey's relations with the Kurdish population domestically and its approach to the Kurdistan region in Iraq. The developments of this era provided critical insights into the state's overall strategy toward Kurdish-related issues in both internal and regional contexts.

Culturally, Kurdish music, literature, and folklore were suppressed. Moreover, publications and artistic works in Kurdish were banned. All of these developments led to the criminalization of cultural identity. Celebrations of Newroz, the Kurdish new year, were prohibited and often met with violent crackdowns. This harsh interference of the police reinforced alienation among Kurds (Çiçek, 2016).

The Kurdish population was predominantly situated in the southeastern regions of Turkey, and this region was socio-economically subjected to underinvestment, limited access to education and healthcare, and military intervention. Kurdish people were also victims of employment discrimination, especially in public sector jobs (Romano & Gurses, 2014). The denial of cultural rights and systemic exclusion contributed to the radicalization of many of Kurdish people, and they started to see the state as inherently hostile to their existence.

These policies also hardened Turkey's stance toward Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. The fear that granting any space for Kurdish identity—even abroad—might encourage domestic Kurdish claims led to a rigid foreign policy approach toward the Kurdistan Region based on security concerns inside.

### ***3.5 The PKK Conflict and Turkey's Approach to the Kurdistan Region***

Following the military government's repressive policies, the PKK initiated armed activities in 1984, which escalated throughout the 1990s, leading to severe instability in Turkey's southeastern region, where Kurds are densely populated. By the late 1990s, Turkey's intensified operations against the PKK yielded significant results, including the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, after he was expelled from Syria and apprehended in Kenya (Özcan, 2012).

These prolonged conflicts reignited the Sevres syndrome among Turkey's state elite, heightening fears of territorial division. This anxiety shaped Turkey's policy toward the Kurdistan region. Two primary concerns emerged for Turkey: the separatist aspirations of its Kurdish population and the possibility of an independent Kurdistan arising from Iraq's instability following the Gulf War. Although the independence of Kurdistan was technically Iraq's internal matter, Turkey feared it could embolden its Kurdish population to pursue a similar path and unite with an independent Kurdistan (Romano & Gurses, 2014).

Consequently, Turkey pursued a dual strategy during this period: combating the PKK militarily while fostering closer ties with the Kurdistan region. By engaging with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Turkey sought to limit the PKK's presence and activities in the area and to prevent the KRG from forming alliances with Turkey's Kurdish population. One key motivation for this relationship was the presence of PKK camps in the Kurdistan region, which Turkey aimed to neutralize by leveraging its ties with local authorities. This approach reflected Turkey's efforts to address security concerns while managing the complex dynamics of its relations with the Kurdish population and the broader region (Kaya, 2012).

### ***3.6 Justice and Development Party Era: A Shift in Kurdish Policies***

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power at the end of 2002 marked a significant turning point in Turkey's approach to Kurdish policies. Since Mahmud II's westernization efforts began in 1808, the state elites who governed Turkey had consistently championed westernization, deeply influenced by the Sevres syndrome. Even when figures like Necmettin Erbakan held power for a short time, their impact to amend these entrenched policies was minimal. However, the AKP, led by a cadre shaped by religious values rather than westernization ideals, fundamentally altered this trajectory (Toktaş & Aras, 2012).

The AKP leadership viewed Kurds not as separatists but as integral to Turkey's foundation, emphasizing shared Islamic values and historical unity with Turks. This perspective represented a stark departure from previous state policies rooted in fear of division and distrust of Kurdish identity (Çiçek, 2016).

The European Union membership process, initiated under the Ecevit government in 1999, further empowered the AKP to challenge the Kemalist state's approach. By implementing EU harmonization packages, Turkey committed to expanding rights for ethnic minorities. This reform-oriented stance led to democratic initiatives that addressed Kurdish grievances and fostered improved relations with the Kurdistan region in Iraq (Yildiz & Muller, 2015).

Under the AKP, two long-dominant identity elements—cultural westernization and the Sevres syndrome—lost their prominence. As a conservative democrat party, the AKP

simultaneously pursued EU-driven reforms and sought closer ties with the Kurds. This dual approach signaled a clear departure from the rigid policies of the Kemalist secular elite, opening a new chapter in Turkey's domestic and regional relations with the Kurds (Özpek & Demirağ, 2014).

### ***3.6.1 Post-2003: Turkey's evolving relations with the Kurdistan region***

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein's regime led to significant changes in Iraq's political structure. The autonomy of the Kurdistan region was solidified with the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which formally recognized its status. While this development initially alarmed Turkey, longstanding fears of Kurdish independence were gradually tempered by shifting dynamics under the AKP government (Özpek & Demirağ, 2014).

Turkey's concerns about an independent Kurdistan persisted, but the AKP's internal Kurdish resolution efforts, particularly after the EU harmonization process, paved the way for improved relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Starting in 2008, Turkey initiated direct diplomatic engagements with the KRG, led by Masoud Barzani. This marked a turning point, reflecting Turkey's willingness to approach the Kurdish issue more comprehensively. Barzani's visit to Turkey in 2009 symbolized this shift, fostering cooperation against the PKK and bolstering commercial ties between the two sides (Çiçek, 2016).

This rapprochement was rooted in a profound identity transformation within Turkey (Bilgin et al., 2022a). The AKP abandoned the Sevres syndrome and the rigid cultural westernization of the Kemalist era, instead adopting a conservative democratic identity that emphasized shared religious and historical bonds with the Kurds. This reframing allowed the Kurds, once seen as potential agents of division, to be embraced as religious kin (Yildiz & Muller, 2015).

However, this growing closeness between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) triggered unease and opposition from the Iraqi central government in Baghdad. Baghdad viewed Turkey's direct diplomatic and economic relations with the KRG as a challenge to Iraq's sovereignty and internal unity, especially since Turkey often bypassed the central government in oil trade and border agreements (Kirk, 2014).

One of the major concerns was Turkey's decision to import oil directly from the KRG via the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline without Baghdad's approval, and it caused legal and diplomatic disputes between Iraq and Turkey (Öniş, 2017). The central government accused Turkey of undermining federal authority and encouraging KRG for more autonomy.

Despite these tensions, Turkey continued to hold a pragmatic stance: while it deepened commercial and security ties with Erbil, it also continued to engage with Baghdad

diplomatically to avoid a complete rupture. This dual-track policy demonstrated how Turkey balanced its economic and security interests in Iraq.

External actors like the EU and the U.S. also played a role in encouraging this transformation. The period stands out as a clear example of how identity shifts within Turkey's ruling elite shaped its foreign policy, resulting in closer and more cooperative relations with the Kurdistan region (Toktaş & Aras, 2012).

### ***3.6.2 Post-2009: The shift to strategic depth and neo-ottomanism***

Until 2009, AKP governments relied on external support to legitimize their policies, constrained by pressure from the Kemalist elite and military. However, growing public backing and the diminishing influence of military tutelage after 2009 allowed the AKP to redefine its foreign policy. A pivotal moment in this transformation was Ahmet Davutoğlu's appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs, which marked a significant departure from Turkey's long-standing foreign policy principles (Bilgin et al, 2022b).

Davutoğlu's "strategic depth" doctrine emphasized leveraging Turkey's unique geopolitical and geocultural position, as well as its historical heritage, to enhance regional influence. He argued for Turkey's active engagement in the Middle East, signaling a shift from its traditionally western-focused identity. Central to this era was the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, which prioritized resolving conflicts with neighboring states, particularly Iraq and Syria, through dialogue and diplomacy, rejecting militaristic approaches inherited from earlier periods (Karol, 2011). Turkey aimed to transition from a reactive stance on regional crises to a proactive role, anticipating and addressing potential challenges (Çelik, 2012).

This period marked a radical shift in Turkey's identity. The AKP, no longer bound by the constraints of Kemalist westernization or reliance on U.S. and EU support, began implementing its vision of active foreign policy. However, while this approach initially appeared peaceful and cooperative, it later evolved in unexpected ways (Aydın, 2014).

By the end of this period, the rejection of the Kemalist western identity became evident, and the AKP transitioned from embracing EU-inspired democratic reforms to pursuing a neo-Ottomanist vision. This shift represented a complete overhaul of Turkey's foreign policy and identity, highlighting the AKP's move from western democratic values to a focus on historical and regional aspirations. Ultimately, the period encapsulates the profound and transformative changes in Turkey's domestic and international positioning (Kirişci, 2013).

The democratic initiative process launched by Turkey in 2009 aimed to address the Kurdish issue internally by granting democratic rights to the Kurds while simultaneously working to disarm and neutralize the PKK. A significant milestone in this process was the 2013 visit of Masoud Barzani to Turkey, during which he expressed support for Turkey's initiative. This visit marked a turning point in Turkey's relations with the

Kurdistan region, fostering closer ties. Concurrently, economic relations flourished, with increased collaboration between Turkey and the Kurdistan region, a development that unsettled the central Iraqi government (Kirk, 2014).

The AKP administration's rejection of the Kemalist identity, which had shaped Turkey's policies for decades, was evident in these positive steps toward both the Kurdish population within Turkey and the Kurdistan region. These actions reflected the administration's changing identity and approach to regional issues (Yılmaz, 2016).

However, the Arab Spring in 2011 led to a significant recalibration of Turkey's regional policies. The AKP's increasingly prominent neo-Ottoman agenda brought new tensions to its previously improving relations with the Kurdistan region. As neo-Ottoman policies gained momentum, the cooperative spirit between Turkey and the Kurdistan region began to erode, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of Turkey's foreign policy during this period (Zarif, 2016).

### ***3.6.3 Revisiting Kemalist security-oriented state***

After 2014, the AKP government began to visibly embrace neo-Ottoman and oppressive policies, shaped by internal and external pressures. The democratic initiatives and rhetoric of prior years were abandoned, replaced by highly nationalist and authoritarian policies (Öniş, 2016). Concepts such as democracy, human rights, and brotherhood, once central to the government's discourse, were sidelined. Instead, the government adopted a security-oriented narrative, similar to the language historically used by the Kemalist elite (Tugal, 2016).

During this period, nationalism, previously utilized by the Kemalist regime as a tool of legitimacy, became a central element in the AKP's policy framework. This shift marked a return to the state's traditional security-focused identity. The AKP government effectively mirrored the security-first principles of the Kemalist era, prioritizing state stability and control over individual freedoms and democratic values (Sakallıoğlu, 2017).

These developments indicated a significant shift in Turkey's identity and governance approach, signaling a reversion to older, entrenched state paradigms. The policies and decisions of subsequent years would continue to reflect the influence of this restored identity (Kirisci, 2018).

### ***3.6.4 The 2017 independence referendum: reviving the Sevres syndrome in Turkey's Kurdistan policy***

The clearest indication of Turkey's reversion to a security-focused state and the resurgence of the Sevres syndrome emerged during the 2017 independence referendum in the Kurdistan region. Mesut Barzani's declaration that the referendum was a step toward independence from Iraq, along with the 92% approval for independence, triggered significant regional and international backlash (Bilgin, 2019). Turkey, emphasizing its support for Iraq's territorial integrity, openly rejected the legitimacy of the referendum,

reflecting its fear that such a move could inspire a similar independence movement among Kurds within Turkey (Gürpınar, 2018).

In response, Turkey conducted military exercises near its border with the Kurdistan region, signaling its readiness to intervene militarily if necessary (Kirişci, 2018). The government also warned of potential economic sanctions against Kurdistan in the event of a unilateral declaration of independence. However, these threats were not fully realized. Instead, Turkey moved closer to Baghdad, supporting its efforts to assert greater control over the Kurdish administration in Northern Iraq (Öniş, 2017).

These actions highlight how the Sevres syndrome, deeply rooted in Turkey's state identity and revived by the AKP government, continues to shape its policies. The ruling elite's stance during this period underscores the significant role that identity plays in determining the course of Turkey-Kurdistan relations (Tugal, 2016).

The United States and the European Union were very cautious about this independence referendum, so they played a key role in discouraging the KRG from this attempt. Both actors criticized that the timing of the referendum was not correct and posited that it would destabilize Iraq and distract from the joint struggle against ISIS. The U.S. did not support Turkey's harsh rhetoric or potential military intervention, but it did not oppose Turkey's alignment with Baghdad. As a result, the U.S. partially supported Ankara's stance without fully endorsing it (Romano & Gurses, 2014). The EU, especially Germany and France, called for dialogue and territorial unity, implicitly supporting Iraq's central authority and warning KRG for further action.

These responses by global powers provided legitimacy to Turkey's position, even if they did not agree with its nationalistic position. As a result, the Sèvres syndrome-driven policy gained broader diplomatic space and pushed forth identity-based concerns in Turkey's approach to the Kurdish issue.

#### **4 Discussion: The Role of Turkish Identity in Shaping Turkey-Kurdistan Relations**

In Turkey's relations with Kurdistan, it is possible to see the deep effects of the Turkish national identity, which has been structured and changed under the influence of different dynamics, especially in the last 200 years. The Treaty of Sevres, signed in 1920, constitutes a turning point in terms of revealing the traumatic components of this identity. While on the one hand, the effort to acquire a Western-oriented identity with which it is in constant relations and defines itself there is a continuity, on the other hand, the fact that the same West is the main cause of territorial losses against the Turks reveals the conflicts and contradictions that identity brings out. These two conflicting elements of the Turkish identity played quite effective roles in the establishment of the Republic in 1923. So much so that Westernization and national security emerged as the most fundamental concerns of the Kemalist Republic elite. These two identity components

have been the fundamental determining elements of Turkey's relations with both the West and the Middle East. Of course, the economic dimension has mostly not been included in these relations, and this dimension of the relations has been shaped by the influence of completely different dynamics. With the AKP government coming to power in 2002, a more religiously-centered conservative democratic identity began to be effective. Therefore, this new identity caused the relations with the Kurds and the Kurdistan region to shift to a different channel. Different dynamics of the national Turkish identity were effective in determining the relations with Kurdistan. We can list them as follows:

#### ***4.1 The Persistence of the Sevres Syndrome***

The fundamental dynamic determining Turkey's relations with Kurdistan after the Republic was the Sevres syndrome. Turkey is the country with the largest Kurdish population, which is spread across four countries in the geography they are located in. This led to the relapse of the Sevres syndrome, which emerged with the fear of division in cases where the Kurds demanded their basic rights or engaged in separatist movements. The movements that emerged in the early years of the Republic were suppressed and the Kurdish issue did not become a disturbing problem until the military coup of 1980. However, the oppressive attitude of the military administration after the coup, attempts to ban the Kurdish language and human rights violations in prisons gave new momentum to the Kurdish movement and turned into the PKK's first armed struggle in 1984. While separatist movements were taking place on the one hand, on the other hand, an environment of instability emerged in the region with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 and the intervention of the USA. Under these conditions, the possibility that the Kurdistan region, which strengthened its position, would secede from Iraq caused Turkey to feel the Sevres syndrome even more strongly. The possibility of the Kurdistan region gaining independence was in a position to force the Kurds in Turkey to secede and unite with Kurdistan. Therefore, the possibility of Kurdistan's independence has always worried Turkey and directed mutual relations.

#### ***4.2 Kemalist Legacy vs. AKP's Transformative Approach***

The Sevres syndrome and the idea of westernization, which were effective in the identity of the Kemalist state, frequently emphasized national unity. What was generally meant at this point was the fear of the Kurds entering into separatist thoughts. In this case, policies concerning the Kurds emerged from each of the two active elements in the identity of the state, and the Kurds were generally alienated from the system. On the contrary, the path followed by the AKP in its early years completely changed in a different direction and saw the Kurds as equal citizens and religious brothers. The European Union harmonization packages supporting these policies and the need to grant rights to minorities as a requirement of this required opening a new page with the Kurds. Turkey's relations with the Kurds within itself have mostly paralleled its relations with

the Kurdistan region. For this reason, the AKP has had close relations with the Kurds within itself and the Kurdistan region for many years.

#### ***4.3 The Role of External Influences***

The US and the European Union have active roles in regulating Turkey's relations with Kurdistan. In addition, developments in the Middle East have actively shaped Turkey-Kurdistan relations. After the US invaded Iraq in 2003, the Kurdistan region gained a more autonomous structure, and this situation caused Turkey to reconsider its relations with Kurdistan. Although the AKP emerged with a different mentality at that time, the Kemalist elite and the army had a dominant influence within the state. Therefore, Kurdistan's gains were rekindling Turkey's concerns. During the same period, the AKP was implementing its own agenda, albeit slowly, and continued its search for rapprochement with both the Kurds within itself and the Kurdistan region. However, developments after 2009 required these relations to be reconsidered on the basis of identity. During this period, a neo-Ottomanist understanding was adopted with Ahmet Davutoğlu, and it was reiterated that Turkey should establish closer relations with its neighbors due to its geopolitical location and historical past. Although these policies were initially presented with a positive approach, later on, Turkey's efforts to create a different area of activity for itself were noticeable. This understanding, in time, caused tensions in Turkey's relations with its neighbors and many other states that had separated from the Ottoman Empire. The Arab Spring that began in 2011 changed the dynamics in the region and also caused Turkey to take new positions. During this period, it is seen that neo-Ottomanist ideas determined Turkish foreign policy to a great extent. All these developments were signs that Turkey was returning to its old oppressive codes.

#### ***4.4 The Reversion to Security-Oriented Policies***

The year 2014 marked a turning point and a major transformation for the AKP government. Domestic political developments and allegations of corruption against the government forced the government to take a rather rigid position. In addition, the effects of the Arab Spring on Syria and the instability and migration that began in Syria forced the AKP to adopt nationalist and security-focused policies again. During the period, democratization efforts came to a sharp end and Kemalist rhetoric was revived. Thus, the AKP government realized a radical transformation and started to operate the old codes of the state again. In this context, the independence referendum held in the Kurdistan region in 2017 was tried to be understood from Turkey's traditional security-oriented perspective and this situation was perceived as a threat in Turkey as before. It even openly declared that the independence of Kurdistan would disrupt regional integrity and that it would use military and economic means to prevent this from happening. The independence referendum, which emerged at the exact midpoint of the AKP government's identity transformations that began in 2009 and continued until 2014 and beyond, was met from the perspective of the old Kemalist understanding.

#### ***4.5 Identity as a Continuum in Foreign Policy***

Turkey's fluctuating policies toward the Kurdistan region reveal that its identity is not static but operates along a continuum influenced by historical legacies and contemporary pressures. The oscillation between Kemalist and neo-Ottoman frameworks highlights the complexity of Turkish identity in shaping foreign policy. The periodic revival of the Sevres syndrome underscores how deeply embedded historical traumas continue to influence decision-making, while moments of reform and rapprochement reflect attempts to redefine this identity within a modern context.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan region serve as a microcosm for understanding the broader interplay between national identity and foreign policy. The tension between historical fears of division and modern aspirations for regional leadership reveals the challenges of navigating a complex and evolving identity. As Turkey continues to grapple with these dualities, the course of its relations with the Kurdistan region will remain a critical test of how its identity adapts to changing domestic and international landscapes.

There is a complex array of reasons shaping Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Region: historical legacies, identity narratives, domestic dynamics, and regional transformations. From the early Republican era to the present day, Turkish national identity has functioned as both a driver and a constraint in shaping foreign policy decisions. This identity of Turkishness ranged between Kemalist secular nationalism and conservative democratic or neo-Ottoman tendencies. The long-lasting influence of the Sèvres syndrome became one of the driving factors adding up to this identity. It also sees Kurdish autonomy beyond Turkey's borders as a potential existential threat to national unity.

The historical trajectory of these relations can be defined with four key turning points in the modern era:

- the post-1980 coup period, which saw the Kurdish issue as a problem of securitization;
- the post-2003 era, when AKP-led transformation created opportunities for cooperation;
- the post-2014 turn, which indicates a return to nationalism and authoritarianism within Turkey;
- the 2017 referendum, which revived old fears and reoriented Turkey toward a more rigid stance towards Kurdistan region.

These shifts show that Turkish foreign policy is both a reaction to external events and a reflection of internal identity struggles and ideological shifts and paradigmatic changes

within the state. The Kurdish issue serves as a litmus test for how Turkey can adapt and include its Turkish identity to the changing regional and global context.

As for a future projection, Turkey is at a crossroads. The Kurdish issue will continue to challenge its stance, and evolving geopolitical realities, domestic pluralism, and the aspirations of its Kurdish population will force it to amend the identity policies. Turkey has two options in front of it: it will whether accept inclusion of Kurdish people with their demands or it will pursue security policies. These choices will affect its relations with Kurdistan Region and the other countries around.

Therefore, a comprehensive re-evaluation of the role of identity in Turkey's foreign policy is essential. A flexible and inclusive understanding of national identity may offer the most sustainable path forward in bringing about constructive relations with the Kurdistan Region and resolving the long-standing tensions. The future will show if Turkey will accept ethnic, cultural, and political diversity inside and outside.

## **6. Recommendations**

### ***Institutionalize Bilateral Dialogue Channels***

Turkey should put aside ad hoc diplomacy which changes according to new governments and paradigm shifts. It would be better for Turkey to establish permanent institutional mechanisms with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to manage political, economic, and security cooperation. This would reduce reactionary policy shifts and build mutual trust over time.

### ***Balance National Security with Inclusivity***

National security concerns are legitimate for any country, and they urge them to act accordingly. As for Kurdish issue in Turkey, it must develop a more inclusive approach that asks for legitimate Kurdish basic rights and violent separatism. Recognizing the cultural and political identity of Kurds at home and in the region can mitigate tensions and foster regional stability.

### ***Reframe Identity Discourse in Foreign Policy***

Turkey should adopt a forward-looking, pluralistic national identity narrative in its foreign policy. The Sèvres syndrome should be forgotten because Turkey is not that weak country anymore to divide and lose territory. If Turkey accepts the legitimate demands of the Kurds inside, it may bring more opportunities for future for itself and the whole region. Taking into account shared interests and historical ties with Kurdish people can help reorganize the relationship from one of suspicion to cooperation.

### ***Re-engage with Multilateral Actors***

Turkey should improve its relations with the EU, U.S., and international organizations to facilitate constructive engagement with the KRG. These actors can serve as mediators

or guarantors in sensitive issues such as resource sharing, border security, and minority rights.

#### ***Enhance Socioeconomic Integration***

Expanding trade, infrastructure, and energy cooperation with the Kurdistan Region can serve for stability. Such ties can also reduce the influence of security issues in reciprocal relations and increase economic activity.

#### ***Foster Academic and Cultural Exchanges***

People-to-people relations through academic, cultural, and civil society exchanges should be promoted to challenge stereotypes and promote mutual understanding between Turkish and Kurdish societies, both within Turkey and across borders.

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