

## An analysis of the roots of the conflict between Kurdish forces in Syria and Turkey

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Doi: 10.23918/ejmss.v1i3p15

### Abstract

This paper analyzes the roots of the conflict between the Kurdish forces and Turkey which started in 2011 with the beginning of the Syrian civil war and discusses the evolution of the conflict. The data which been used in this paper are primary, secondary, and tertiary data. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Kurdish forces in northern Syria controlled the northern part of Syria. Northern Syria borders Turkey, which is one of the strongest and the most influential states in the region. The Kurdish force was the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its armed wings which are the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Women Protection Units (YPJ). These two armed forces became part of a bigger alliance later, under the name of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Since that time, Turkey is claiming that those two forces are the Syrian branch of the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization, according to Turkey, the US, and most of the European states. The conflict started with the first move of Kurdish forces in Syria and has continued until now.

**Key Words:** Kurdish forces, PKK, Political Ideology, Syrian Civil war, Turkey, PYD, Nationalism

### 1. Introduction

As a result of the Arab spring in 2011, the Syrian people started to upraise against the regime of Syria. The aim of the uprising was simply to change the political system, subsequently, however, it evolved into a civil war. After the uprising started at the beginning of the chaos in Syria, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women Protection Units (YPJ) were created by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The two forces were led by the Kurds. They started to fight against the Syrian regime, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and almost all the terrorist armed groups from northern Syria such as ISIS, Ahrar Al-sham Jabha Al- Nusra, the Islamic Front, and so on. (Hussein, 2017). The conflict between the Kurds from northern Syria and Turkey trace back to the beginning of the Syrian civil war. Moreover, the conflict is not only a simple military or security conflict and cannot be examined simply like any other conflict.

The two forces (YPG and YPJ) shared the same ideology as the Kurdistan Workers Party PKK, in that they are socialist, and they have directly adopted Abdullah Ocalan's ideology which is Democratic con-federalism (Hussein, 2017). The PKK was established in 1978 in Turkey and has been fighting for the rights of the Kurds and the other minorities in Turkey since then. At the same time, the PKK is designated as a terrorist organization according to the US and most of the European states (Holland-McCowan, 2017), this is the reason that Turkey engaging the Kurdish armed forces in Syria. Turkey refused to accept them, claiming that they are a branch of the PKK from Syria. The policy of Turkey towards the issue hasn't changed. As a result, it has led to a huge conflict between the Kurdish forces and Turkey.

The expansion of Kurdish forces dragged Turkey to the conflicts in Syria directly. Turkey couldn't accept that Kurdish forces had taken over such a wide area and were recognized by the USA, the international coalition against ISIS, and almost all the states that were fighting ISIS (BBC, 2014). Kurdish forces stand against ISIS, they became an alternative in Syria for the US and the International Coalition against ISIS, especially when the USA and the International Coalition against ISIS started to support them politically and militarily. Turkey kept insisting that the Kurdish forces from northern Syria were a branch of the PKK. (John Holland-McCowan, 2017). The conflict between the two parties reached another level when Turkey started the Olive Branch Operation in Afrin Canton since it was the first practical step by Turkey. To eradicate YPG and YPJ and led to a long-term violent conflict between the two parties.

## 2. Literature review

There are several sources on the conflicts in the north of Syria, the majority have focused on the problem between the Kurds who are represented by the YPG and YPJ forces and Turkey. Each of those sources explains the conflict differently, presenting different arguments the main reason or the root to be a cause of the conflict. Some of them consider it an ideological conflict, whilst others consider it to be a security matter. Additionally, and there is a theory that hypothesis that the conflict between those two forces is an historical national problem that of the ethnic and geopolitical conflict, which erupted after the 1923 treaty of sever, which is the problem between Kurds and Turks as nations.

### 2.1 *The roots of the conflict*

The problem between the Kurds and the Turkish state is rooted in the establishment of modern Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (Hemish, 2015). Mohamed Hemish argued that the problem root back to the time when Mustafa Kemal was about to establish the new Turkish state on October 29, 1923. He states that Mustafa Kemal asked for the support of the Kurds who were living in Turkey at that time. According to Mohammed Hemish's statement, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk promised the Kurds that they would have a strong and effective place in the state which he is about to create. But after the establishment of the new state, he ignored the Kurds and all other ethnic minorities. He established the state based on a nationalist ideology. The only ethnicity which he recognized as the official population of the state was Turkish. At the same time, the Turkish language was the only official language of the state. The Kurdish language was not allowed to be used in public even in private places or at none official events. (Hemish, 2015).

"Russia is pushing Turkey to attack Manbij and the east of the Euphrates" (Wilgenburg 2018), this has been stated by Polat Can the senior commander of SDF in a report for the K24 channel website. It shows there is a greater power supporting and helping Turkey to attack SDF-controlled areas. The problems between the USA and Russia are one of the other factors affecting the conflict between Turkey and SDF in northern Syria. In the Astana peace talks in Syria, the USA and Russia agreed to divide the north of Syria into two parts. The western part was under the control of Russia and the eastern part was under the control of the USA. (Priya, 2017)

### 2.2 *Turkey's ambition*

Erdogan is working to restore the Ottoman Empire. He has demonstrated his intention of rebuilding the Ottoman Empire of Turkey by mentioning Turkey's attack on Afrin and its threats of attacking Manbij and other areas under the control of Kurdish forces from northern Syria. There is also a connection between the situations of Iraqi Kurdistan with the ambition of Turkey since the areas in Iraqi Kurdistan were also part of the old Ottoman Empire. Turkey has more than 14 military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in those areas which are under the control of KDP which is known as Turkey's greatest ally in the region, particularly in Iraq (Visser, 2018).

Patrick Martin and Christopher Kozak in their research in 2016 are argued that YPG is an obvious part of the PKK in the north of Syria. As they stated, the YPG was created by the PKK and led by the PKK leaders directly. One of the arguments, which they are focused on is the flags and pictures which YPG and the PKK are using. The PKK and YPG are both use the same colors of their flags and they also use the picture of Abdullah Ocalan who is the founder and the leader of the PKK. (Martin& Kozak 2016).

On the other hand, there is an argument that says the YPG is not the PKK, however, Ocalan is the leader of both, it is the headline of an article by Kemal Chomani which was published on the Jerusalem Post website. Chomani stated that the PKK and YPG are both led by Abdullah Ocalan but they are not the same. As he mentioned, the link between Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurds in Syria is a historical relation. He describes Abdullah Ocalan as the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, he has stayed for a short period in Beqaa valley which is located in Syria. At that time, he met a lot of people, and a lot of Kurdish youth from Syria were affected by him. Several of them joined the PKK at that time. (Chomani, 2018)

### 2.3 *The Nationalist Ideology of Turkey*

The nationalism of the Turkish state reached another level against Kurdish people in the 1980s. Turkey was not satisfied with denying Kurds only within its borders. In 1980, the Turkish Embassy in Denmark commended the Union of Workers from Turkey to stop the Kurdish language course which had been arranged by the Copenhagen Evening School. The language course aimed to add the Kurdish language to the language teaching program in Denmark along with other languages such as Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and West-German schools. The Embassy Councilor asked, "Are you not Turkish citizens? You must not teach Kurdish to Kurdish children." (Dominique, N.D).

By the 1930s the Kurdish language had been banned from public use and the state institutions, the law prohibiting the use of Kurdish, was declared only in 1983 and later canceled in 1991. (Arsalan, 2015)

### 3. Methodology

The study is qualitative, it's a collection of the different points of view to the conflict. The paper focuses on the ideological part of this conflict and the core of the study is analyzing the ideology of both parties in this conflict and links it with the current issues in the best way possible. The data which been used in this paper are primary, secondary, and tertiary data. The paper depends on official webpage documents, personal interviews, textbooks, newspaper articles, and scientific journal articles.

### 4. Analysis

#### 4.1 Kurds from northern Syria (Rojava)

The population of the Kurds in Syria is 1, 5 million; most of whom live in the north of Syria. After WWI, Kurdish territory was divided into 4 parts, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Syria contained western Kurdish lands located in the north of Syria. The Kurds in Syria were under the pressure of Arab Nationalism, and they were treated as second-class citizens. Moreover, in 1968 when the Ba'ath party took power and ruled the government the situation of Kurds became worse. (Yildiz, 2018). The consequence of the nationalism policy against Kurds in Syria was that the Kurds never felt safe and home in Syria. Since, they had to abandon their actual identity and nationality, and adopt Arab nationality in order to be considered as a Syrian citizen. Moreover, the citizenship right is a must for anyone in Syria in order to be able to enjoy all the other human and citizenship rights.

#### 4.2 The establishment and the ideology of the Turkish state

The nationalist Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. After WWI which Ottomans Empire was defeated. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was the first president of the new Turkey. The new government was formed in the Ankara-based revolutionary group, which was led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his group. The second constitution of Turkey was confirmed by the Grand National Assembly on April 20th, 1924 (Abdulhakim, 2010). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk has some fundamentals which they called "six arrows" (Republicanism, Populism, Secularism, Reformism, Nationalism, and Statism). (Katalin, 2016). During the time of the revolution of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's revolution started, they were asking for independence. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his group promised Kurdish leaders if they stop their revolution until the revolution of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's success, they will help Kurds to be independent, after the succession of the Revolution of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk their policy has been changed. They refused to give Kurdish any kind of independence. They forced the Kurdish to live inside Turkey and they also forced them to be Turkish through the Turkified process by making the Turkish language the official language and the only legal language to use of the state. (Dakuki, 2102). This nationalism policy in Turkey led to a long and huge national and ideological conflict between Kurds and Turks or in other words between Kurds and the Turkish state!

Turkey is a nationalist state and never accepts other nations inside Turkey especially Kurdish. Even the creation of the Turkish state was based on refusing the existence of Kurdish people. This has been stated by Mr. Abid, the representative of HDP in Iraqi Kurdistan. Today in Iraqi Kurdistan or anywhere around the world if any Kurdish community starts to advance, the Turkish state will try to resist it and make barriers for them. Turkey never accepts Kurdish even if they are inside Turkey or outside of Turkey. Turkey's policy is based on one nation, one country, and one flag for about 100 years they used this kind of policy.

#### 4.3 Creation of Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the link with the PKK

PYD was established in 2003 in Syria. The establishment of PYD was by those who were inspired by the PKK and ideologically close to the PKK. YPG&YPJ were established later by PYD. Moreover, this was a reason for Turkey to encounter these forces at the beginning and they claimed that the PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK. The leaders of the party stayed in Syria for years. However, they decided to leave Syria in 2010 because they couldn't handle the pressure and threats made by the Syrian Government anymore. Nevertheless, in 2011 they returned to Syria to start a revolution against the Syrian government since the Syrian civil war was about to start (Erkemin, Caves& Spyer, 2017). The revolution was leading by the PYD leaders and its two military wings, in northern Syria from the beginning.

In 2012 Syrian government withdrew from northern Syria, tearing the PYD's armed wings (YPG and YPJ) to take over. Moreover, it was a great shock for Turkey. Recep Tayyip Erdogan offended the Syrian government, by stating that Syria was threatening Turkey's security since they left this wide land to Kurdish terrorists and they are part of the

PKK. At that time Turkey started threatening Kurdish forces that they are going to attack them and take them out in northern Syria (Erkemin, Caves& Spyer, 2017).

The representative of HDP in the KRI Mr. Abid stated that “There is no doubt that there is ideologically connection between the PKK and PYD but there is not any other direct connection between the PKK and PYD, the Turkish state even claim that we belong to the PKK not only PYD.” According to what he stated it is only a weak claim by Turkey to tell the international community that they are fighting the PKK in northern Syria, that’s why no one is listening to them and the support for Kurdish forces in northern Syria continues.

#### *4.4 The expansion of Kurdish Forces and creation of SDF dragged Turkey into the conflict*

“We will never allow a terrorist group to establish camps in northern Syria and threaten Turkey” this has been stated by Recep Tayyip Erdogan after the Kurdish forces took over northern Syria. He also stated that “there will undoubtedly be a response on our part to this attitude.” (Israeli, 2013). In 2014, the YPG led the creation of a huge alliance supported by the United States. They created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which was an alliance of Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Assyrians and most of the ethnicities living in northern Syria and SDF controlled areas (Barfi, 2016). The expansion of the SDF dragged Turkey to the conflict of Syria politically, and militarily.

For the first time on February 20th, 2018, Turkey attacked Afrin canton with its ground forces and the support of some armed forces such as the Free Syrian Ahrar al-Sham, Amshad brigade, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Nukhba, Jaish al Sharqiya, Jabhat al-Shamiya, Nur al-Din al-Zanki, and Sumina Shah brigade, and some other small groups. After two months and four days on 24th March 2018, Turkey was able to invade Afrin and push SDF forces out of Afrin. During this attack, about 400 to 500 civilians were killed by Turkish forces. Killing civilians was one of the reasons that pushed the SDF to decide to leave and cease fighting inside the city. As the pieces of evidence show, Turkish air forces were bombing the city and the civilians (Wilgenburg, 2018). By March 2018, during the operation of Olive Branch, the United Nations declared that there were about 167,000 refugees in the camps (UNHCR, 2018).

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights later declared that the number of refugees is 300,000, and most of them are Kurdish. After the conflict, when the battle ended, Turkish forces implemented a resettlement policy by relocating refugees who were of Arab nationality from Eastern Ghouta to the empty houses which have been left by Kurdish people or in other words, by the original people of Afrin. (Wilgenburg& Holmes, 2019). The nationalism conflict between Kurds and Turkish was reflected in Afrin more than ever, due to the replacement and relocating policy by Turkey. The consequence of the operation was that Kurds left Afrin and other nations especially Arabs replaced them.

## **5. Conclusion**

The conflict between Kurdish forces in northern Syria and Turkey is not as new as it seems, at the same time it is not only a simple security or terrorism issue as Turkey claims. The conflict is related to the ideology of the Turkish state at the way Turkey was established. The current conflict is an extension of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK.

The PKK is one of the main actors and the main reasons for the conflict between Kurdish forces and Turkey. PYD and the PKK are sharing the same ideology; because of that reason, Turkey claims that the PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK. Moreover, they define the whole conflict as a security issue of the state. The security issue of Turkey is under the threat of the PKK “as Turkey claims”. On the other hand, since the day when the Syrian civil war started the Kurdish forces never threatened Turkey and they never made any security problems for Turkey, since they are sharing a wide border with Turkey.

Turkish internal problem with its Kurdish citizen is another issue since they are sharing the same language, culture, history, literature, etc.... as the Kurds from Syria and the three other states. Turkey is a nationalist state, since the establishment of Turkey until nowadays the Turkish language is the only official language of the state. The Kurdish language had been banned from public use and the state institutions by the 1930s, the law prohibiting the Kurdish to use, was declared only in 1983 (and was later canceled in 1991). Thus, the problem of Turkey with Kurdish people has a long history and it is more than only a security issue. Since Turkey has this long and historical conflict with the Kurdish internally, Turkey can’t accept a Kurdish territory to be expanded and supported by all those superpowers in the world.

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