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The Rational Actor Approach in the Kurdish Initiative's Demonstration of Ontological Security in Turkish Foreign Policy

Isa Kasum

Abstract

The Kurdish Initiative, led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), aimed to integrate the Kurds who constitute the majority in many provinces of the Southeast but are considered a minority within the national framework of the Republic of Türkiye into the system and to reduce the influence of organizations like the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which has been a source of conflict in the country for thirty years. However, in later stages, the AKP administration pursued a rational actor approach on behalf of the Republic of Türkiye, ultimately seeking to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state, whether through cross-border operations in Syria or occasional targeted operations against high-ranking PKK leaders in Northern Iraq.

Keywords: Republic of Türkiye, AKP, PKK, rational actor.

Introduction

Initially, our main argument, the Kurdish Initiative, and its internal impact on Turkish Foreign Policy, are largely seen as a product of the structure-agency problem. While structure is primarily seen as a matter of Turkish domestic policy, over time, it can be portrayed as a threat factor employed to eliminate the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to single-handedly resolve the Kurdish issue while fully integrating Kurdish identity into the system, and to separate the PKK, naturally seen as outside the system, from Türkiye's domestic politics and transform it into an external issue. Or, more importantly, to assert its neo-Ottomanist policy as a foreign policy threat, thus resolving the century-long Mosul and Kirkuk situation. Türkiye has also been grappling with the Kurdish issue, which has an ethno-political nature, since the very first day of its organization as a nation-state. Under various guises (such as the Eastern Question, the problem of backwardness, the problem of terrorism, etc.), it has been striving to eliminate this issue or minimize its impact.

The Kurdish issue has many dimensions. The multifaceted nature of the problem inevitably leads to heavy costs. The period of conflict over the last 30 years, in particular, has caused significant social, economic, political, and legal damage. Therefore, the Kurdish issue is one of the greatest obstacles to social peace and stability, economic development, and democracy in Türkiye and must be resolved urgently. Since 1984, when the PKK began its armed struggle, Türkiye has pursued two approaches to resolving the Kurdish issue. The first is security. The Turkish state has perceived this issue primarily as a security issue. It has attempted to resolve the issue by increasing public order measures, restricting freedoms, and, when necessary, resorting to extralegal measures. However, an issue involving ethnic identity demands and a social and political basis cannot be resolved solely by increasing security measures. This has only exacerbated the problem.

History of Kurdish Identity and Population Area

Kurds have a long presence in the region, and their origins are generally traced back to the ancient Medes, who lived in the mountainous region of northwestern Iran and rose to prominence in the 7th century BC. Kurdish nationalists have used the Nowruz festival and the Legend of Kawa the Blacksmith to explain the historical emergence of the Kurds and to construct the Median Empire as the golden age of the Kurdish nation. After the decline and disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 10th century, a number of Kurdish emirates rose to prominence. From the

11th century onward, the Kurdish emirates had to contend with the growing influence of the Seljuk Turks, who had become the dominant power in the region after defeating the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 (Güneş, 2012, p. 33; O'Shea 2004, p. 151).

The rise of the Ottoman Empire from the early 16th century onwards led to military rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, and a large portion of Kurdish-populated lands came under Ottoman rule after the Battle of Chaldiran in August 1514. The Ottoman victory marked a significant shift in the way the Kurdish Emirates negotiated their existence. Ottoman authorities adopted a policy of conciliation and a decentralized political system to gain the support of the Kurdish Emirates and empower them to deal with the threat posed by the Safavid Empire (McDowall, 2004). The Kurdish Emirates provided soldiers to the Ottoman Army when necessary and defended the empire's borders, "developing varying degrees of autonomy". During this period, the Bitlis Emirate established itself as a Kurdish economic and cultural centre, but the Ottoman Empire was keen to avoid any potential challenges to its rule in the region and consequently brought the emirate's territory under its direct rule in 1655 (Bengio & Eppel, 2016, p. 31). A number of other Kurdish emirates managed to maintain their presence within the Ottoman Empire until the first half of the 19th century. Furthermore, the Kurdish emirates of Ardalan and Baban remained loyal to the Safavid and later Qajar rulers of Iran and managed to maintain their presence until the mid-19th century (McDowall, 2004, pp. 32-36).

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, "Kurdistan" remained a border region between the Ottoman and Persian empires and the site of long geopolitical rivalries that hindered Kurdish national unity and the consolidation of Kurdish political structures in the region: Kurdish location on the path of many invading armies heading elsewhere guaranteed a turbulent history and hindered its social and economic development (O'Shea, 2004, p. 190).

The expansion of state authority into Kurdish lands in the early 19th century resulted in the elimination of the autonomy enjoyed by the Kurdish Emirates. Changes in the region's external relations (especially the cessation of hostilities and the establishment of a border between the Ottoman and Persian Empires after the signing of the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823, and the growing influence of Russia and Britain ended the favorable conditions that had allowed the Kurdish Emirates to grow (Bengio & Eppel, 2016, p. 46).

A number of Kurdish individuals rose to prominence within the empire's bureaucracy, and attempts were made to establish organizations that campaigned for the development of Kurdish society and the raising of Kurdish national consciousness. The Kurdish Mutual Aid and Progress Society, founded in 1908, and the Kurdistan Teali Society, founded in December 1918, are the main Kurdish nationalist organizations, and these movements emerged and remained active during a period of significant transformation in the Ottoman Empire (Bajalan, 2016). However, efforts to organize a stronger Kurdish movement and begin work towards the establishment of a Kurdish state were interrupted by the First World War. There is a dispute between some of the mandatory authorities regarding the ownership of the Mosul Vilayet. According to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, (Madhar Ahmad, 1994, p. 105), France was granted the Mosul Vilayet, but the discovery of oil in Kirkuk may have been one of the reasons for the change in the original agreement that granted control of Mosul to Britain in 1918. Consequently, the League of Nations granted France mandates over Syria and Lebanon and also granted Britain a right over Iraq and Palestine.

The British were trying to gain Kurdish support to counter Turkish Pan-Islamic propaganda and efforts to turn the Kurds against the British. Britain is supporting the proposed Kurdish autonomy or independence (McDowall, 2004, p. 156; Yassin, 1995, p. 47), It supports the creation of a barrier zone between the Soviet Union and the British sphere of interest, between the Soviet Union and Türkiye, between Türkiye and Iranian Azerbaijan, and between Türkiye and Central Asia to contain the possible expansion of Soviet influence into the Middle East following the October Revolution (Yassin, 1995, p. 49).

What should be noted here is that serious tensions developed between Sheikh Mahmud and the British. The British believed that Sheikh Mahmud planned to expand his authority to include all of Iraq's Kurdish regions, and that he was in a position to achieve his interests in the region by turning against the Turks (Jwaideh, 1999, pp. 193-194) When the British decided to reduce Sheikh Mahmud's power and influence, she responded by staging a rebellion, and on May 22, 1919, the first recorded revolution in Kurdish cities took place (Yassin, 1995, p. 199). This rebellion expanded to Erbil and Mosul. However, in November 1922, Sheikh Mahmud declared himself King of Kurdistan and accepted limited self-government within the new Iraqi state. In July 1924, the British permanently expelled him from modern day Northern Iraq (Pelletiere, 1984, pp. 62-63).

The idea of a Kurdish state encompassing all Kurdish-populated areas in areas so called "Kurdistan" and the Middle East was initially advocated by Xoybûn (Being Oneself) in the late 1920s and 1930s. Xoybûn is a Kurdish nationalist organization founded in Lebanon in 1927 by Kurdish nationalist intellectuals exiled from Türkiye to Syria and Lebanon after the founding of the Republic of Türkiye. It led the Ararat Rebellion in Türkiye between 1928 and 1930. Initial Kurdish attempts to secure their demands through armed rebellion failed to change the course of history. However, the idea of an independent state encompassing all of Kurdish populated areas as a homeland for all Kurds resurfaced in the second half of the 20th century (McDowall, 2004, pp. 203-205).

In addition to the discontinuities imposed by national borders, Kurdish identity functions internally as a source of differentiation within these states and as a linkage beyond state borders. Kurdish-populated areas are becoming peripheral to newly established states in the Middle East, which are highly centralized and authoritarian, adopting policies that leave little room for recognition of Kurdish identity and rights. Throughout the 20th century, Kurdish movements in Iraq, Iran, Türkiye and Syria resisted states and their attempts to control Kurdish-inhabited territories. Kurds were forced to rely on violence to subvert the nationalist movements pursued by states, but this drew them into protracted conflicts and pitted them against vastly superior military forces. One of the most significant developments in Kurdish politics in the mid-20th century was the establishment of a Kurdish Republic in Mahabad, Iran, in 1946. This came as a result of the occupation of Iran by British and Soviet forces following the end of World War II. The withdrawal of Soviet forces enabled the Iranian army to recapture Kurdish-controlled areas, and most of the Kurdish Republic's leaders were executed by Iranian authorities. However, some managed to escape to the Soviet Union (McDowall, 2004).

Kurds in Iraq have always harbored a universal desire for self-determination. The development of ethnic nationalism is largely linked to the existence of a common language, race, and religion. The spread of doctrinal nationalism among Kurds, resulting from the active participation of Kurdish intellectuals, was largely a reaction against Armenian, Turkish, Arab, and Persian nationalism. The explosion of movements during this period accelerated the emergence and growth of doctrinal nationalism among Kurds and encouraged them to demand freedom. The emergence of a Kurdish nationalist press and the establishment of Kurdish associations and communities further fueled Kurdish cultural and political activities. National parties, particularly the Hiwa Party, supported Barzani's use of nationalism, and it has

been argued that the impact of socio-economic changes accelerated Barzani's rapid rise among the Kurds during and after World War II. However, Jabar and Mansour argues that the slogan of an autonomous Kurdistan and the idea of self-determination became the most important demand of the people, especially among the intelligentsia, who were instrumental in encouraging the people to move to a new phase of the liberation struggle. Furthermore, it is also argued that World War I was influential in the emergence of the first Kurdish nationalist movements in Türkiye and Iraq. The spread of the idea of self-determination was supported by two leaders, Soviet leader Lenin and US President Wilson. This encouraged the Kurds to demand an independent state (Jabar & Mansour, 2019, p. 15).

The Concept of Identity - The Origin of the Kurds

It is argued that the ethnic problems that have emerged in modern times are rooted in many factors, such as socioeconomic and cultural inadequacies. While these claims alone are insufficient to explain the emergence of ethnic-based movements, they have significantly contributed to the continuity and reproduction of ethnic reactions. At this point, it is important to note that ethnic groups in many countries, from underdeveloped to highly developed ones, possess their own uniqueness, and that the causes of these problems may also be unique (Kurubaş, 2008, p.12).

Kurds are an indigenous people of the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands of what is now southeastern Türkiye, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq, northwest Iran, and southwest Armenia. Today, while they lack a standard dialect, they form a distinctive community united by race, culture, and language. While the majority are Sunni Muslims, they also adhere to a range of different religions and beliefs. In the early 20th century, many Kurds began to consider the creation of a homeland, commonly referred to as "Kurdistan". After World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the victorious Western Allies made provisions for a Kurdish state in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. However, these hopes were dashed three years later when the Treaty of Lausanne, which defined the borders of modern Türkiye, made no provision for a Kurdish state and left the Kurds with minority status within their own country. After this, any Kurdish attempt to establish an independent state was abandoned. In pursuit of its strategic interests, Britain stripped the former Ottoman Empire of Basra, which was dominated by Shiite Arabs, Baghdad, which was dominated by Sunni Arabs, and Mosul, which was dominated by Kurds, in order to destabilize the Iraqi state. Britain's primary interest lies in protecting

the trade route from India to the Mediterranean basin and Iraq's oil resources, particularly the northern oil fields of Kirkuk (McDowall, 2004, pp. 142-155).

In explaining the concept of identity, the initial stage is for an individual to answer the question "what they are." While each individual has some unique characteristics, they also share many similarities with others. In this respect, identity serves as a tool that sometimes differentiates an individual from others and sometimes emulates them. The sense of identity often oscillates between positive and negative meanings (Smith, 2020).

Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay argues that the concept of identity brings about homogeneity, and that this situation places identity in a state of limbo that both enables and hinders its own existence. Indeed, as used in Turkish identity actually refers to a forced commitment, a homogeneity with the multitude, rather than a conscious choice. In this respect, "homogenization" rather than "separation" comes to the fore (Kılıçbay, 2003, pp. 161-163). The concept of identity, in general terms, refers to the answers that individuals, groups, societies, or communities give to the questions "Who are you?" and "Who were you?" (Güvenç, 1993, p. 3). Bozkurt Güvenç examines identity under three categories:

- "Individual Identity: Identities presented through identity cards such as national identity cards and passports that serve to identify and distinguish individuals from one another."
- "Personal Identity: This type of identity consists of institutional identities such as work and profession, chosen with characteristics such as language, culture and religion inherited from ancestry."
- "National-Cultural Identity: It consists of identities such as religion, language and culture that come from history and lineage in societies" (Güvenç, 1993, p. 23).

There are several reasons for the advancement and spread of Kurdish nationalism; the imposition of Ottoman rule, the negative reactions of feudal and noble Kurdish families to a central authority, and the poor social and economic conditions prevalent in Kurdish regions have led to a society (Inati, 2003, p. 167). During World War I, Kurdish elites and educated urban individuals played a major role in the development of Kurdish nationalism and the politicization of Kurds. This coincided with the rise of the modern state system in the Middle East. The eventual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire was also a significant factor in the advancement of the ethno-national identities of the ethnic minorities under its rule.

The Emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan) and the Internationalization of the Security Problem - Ontological Security - Rational Actor

Ontological security theory, which began to gain popularity in the early 2000s, has gained a significant place in the discipline of International Relations (IR) by offering an alternative approach to understanding states' foreign policy and security behavior. While traditional security approaches attempt to explain state behavior primarily through the concepts of physical security and survival, ontological security studies argue that physical security alone is insufficient to fully understand actor behavior, as actors also take identity-based security into account when making decisions. According to the ontological security approach, actors may adopt behaviors consistent with their identities even when such behaviors conflict with their physical security. This highlights the significance of ontological security: by integrating identity into security analysis, the concept offers an alternative explanatory framework for issues that traditional security theories often fail to adequately address.

The concept of ontological security was introduced into the IR discipline from the fields of psychoanalysis and sociology. In psychoanalysis, Ronald D. Laing used the concept to describe the individual's need for a stable and continuous sense of self (Laing, 1960, pp. 39-42), while Anthony Giddens further developed the concept within sociology to analyze the effects of modernization and globalization on the individual. According to Giddens, ontological security refers to the sense of confidence an individual feels regarding the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their social environment (Giddens, 1991, p. 38). The common point in these two thinkers' definitions of ontological security is the emphasis on the existence of an identity that is stable and persistent over time (Laing, 1960, p. 42; Giddens, 1990, pp. 92-100).

This theoretical framework has also been applied to collective actors and movements organized around identity-based claims. One such example is the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which evolved from a small ideological circle that emerged during meetings in Ankara's Dikmen Park in the late 1970s into an organized movement and later initiated armed guerrilla warfare in 1984. The armed struggle launched by the PKK bears similarities to other identity-based insurgent movements, such as the FARC in Latin America. The PKK carried out armed operations not only against military targets but also, at times, against civilians. Although Öcalan is remembered by some Kurds as a folk hero, the large-scale ethnic cleansing campaign

known as the "Operation Anfal," conducted by the Baathist regime of Iraq in the late 1980s and early 1990s, played a significant role in portraying the Kurds as an oppressed nation in the international arena (Glenny, 2012, pp. 334-340). However, what distinguishes the PKK from other terrorist groups is its direct attacks on its own people and its strategic raids, assassinations, and kidnappings. According to some researchers, there is data indicating a loss of forty thousand or more in the Republic of Türkiye. Moreover, when we look at the loss of life alone, the true nature of the toll also indicates a financial and socio-cultural decline. In the political arena, it has engaged in representative democratic participation within the party several times. This has been confirmed in the official addresses of some official Turkish political figures: Ahmet Türk, a member of the Kurdish political movement and former Chairman of the DTP, stated, "The DTP is not an organization of aliens, nor is the PKK an organization of aliens. The PKK and the DTP share a common base. The children of those who vote for me are in the mountains. We must analyze the facts by seeing this" (Habertürk, 2009).

This insurgent group, which reached the peak of its military and political influence by 1993, did not establish an independent Kurdish state but instead consolidated a de facto sphere of influence, primarily in northern Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq), while advancing a political project that envisioned a future "Kurdistan" encompassing southeastern Türkiye, parts of northern Iraq and northern Syria, and areas of the Zagros Mountains (Marcus, 2007, pp. 181-185; Gunter, 1997, pp. 45-47). This consolidation of influence enabled the organization to mobilize support both domestically and among Kurdish diaspora communities, particularly in the European Union, the United States, and Canada, as well as from non-Kurdish sympathizers (Marcus, 2007, pp. 189-193).

The Kurdish Question, however, is not a phenomenon that emerged in 1984 with the onset of the PKK's armed struggle; rather, it represents a much longer historical process dating back to the late Ottoman period, with roots extending to the mid-nineteenth century (van Bruinessen, 1992, pp. 167-170). One of its earliest and most significant manifestations in the Republican era was the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925, which is widely recognized in the literature as a foundational episode of Kurdish resistance (Bozarslan, 2008, pp. 336-338). Within the context of Türkiye's long-standing denial of the Kurdish question, the PKK has consistently been portrayed as an externally supported organization seeking to weaken and divide the Turkish state. This perception is closely linked to the so-called "Sèvres syndrome," a deeply embedded ontological narrative in Türkiye that frames separatist

movements as existential threats orchestrated by foreign powers (Balcı & Yeşiltaş, 2018, pp. 59-61). From an ontological security perspective, the PKK has thus been constructed as a symbol of this syndrome by nationalist, bureaucratic, and military elites, reinforcing anxieties over territorial integrity and state identity (Rumelili, 2015, pp. 14-16).

Northern Iraq consequently became a focal point of Türkiye's security concerns. Following the power vacuum created after the 1991 Gulf War, the PKK established a network of military camps and logistical bases in Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, from which it launched cross-border attacks into Türkiye (Gunter, 1997, pp. 73-76). The intra-Kurdish conflict between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) further facilitated the PKK's entrenchment in the region (McDowall, 2004, pp. 371-374). In response, Türkiye initiated a large-scale military operation in March 1995, deploying approximately 35,000 troops over a six-week period. This operation marked a clear departure from earlier, limited cross-border actions and signaled the adoption of a new security strategy aimed at preventing Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq from becoming a permanent sanctuary for the PKK (Marcus, 2007, pp. 243-246). From Türkiye's ontological security standpoint, this shift reflected not only concerns over physical security but also efforts to restore a sense of control, continuity, and sovereignty perceived to be threatened by the PKK's cross-border presence (Mitzen, 2006, pp. 353-355). Of course, if we consider the national, regional, and international conjuncture that developed after this process, the postponement of the political and customs union, granted by the European Union under the guise of human rights (minorities) and freedoms, pitted the hardcore faction against the more moderate, conciliatory faction in Türkiye. It's worth emphasizing that the US and British-Israeli intelligence played a significant role in the lead-up to the capture of Öcalan in Nairobi, Kenya, during August 1999; however, it was ultimately the exceptional operational success of Türkiye's National Intelligence Organization (MİT) that secured Öcalan's apprehension and return to Türkiye, demonstrating Türkiye's capacity for effective high-level intelligence and covert operations. Indeed, whether it was a European Union that justified the Copenhagen criteria, or an Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema who sympathized with the Kurds and their cause, there was ultimately a US President Bill Clinton who could not condone the Republic of Türkiye's separation from the West, and at the same time, Hungary and many other countries with which there were disagreements within the EU called for the territorial integrity of the Republic of Türkiye to be respected and its sovereignty not to be violated. Türkiye survived a war with Syria before capturing

the PKK leader. The diplomacy of the Republic of Türkiye, led by İsmail Cem, saved the country from major conflicts both in Syria and during the "Kardak Crisis" with Greece as a result of very successful diplomatic efforts. The PKK's activities were halted in 2000, when a ceasefire order was issued following the arrest of Öcalan and the high-level meeting, cementing the strategic impact of MİT's operation on regional stability. (Anadolu Ajansı, 2021; Yeni Şafak, 2024).

In the literature, we often see the Kurdish initiative or the Kurdish issue raised during Mesut Yılmaz's prime ministry. The MHP and others, particularly Devlet Bahçeli, made exclusionary remarks with political messages, such as "the PKK's spokesperson." The natural disaster that affected Turkish politics, the August 17, 1999 earthquake, and the 2001 crisis that affected domestic political and economic life, made the country excessively dependent on the West. This period, during which the military gradually transferred its former authority to the Istanbul-Cihangir elite and right-wing conservatives gained power, led to the US's declaration of war against global terrorism following the September 11 attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon. This, in turn, raised the suspicion that Türkiye would experience PKK terrorism again within the country, replacing the peaceful atmosphere it had found in the region. In domestic politics, the AKP, which won the November 2002 elections, won the government alone without a coalition government. The main opposition party, the CHP, and the MHP, not only lost their coalition government without passing the threshold but also failed to enter parliament (Akarca & Tansel, 2015). In foreign policy, in the context of the war on terror launched by the Bush administration after the September 11, 2001 attacks, Türkiye's concerns about developments in northern Iraq and the prospects for the establishment of a Kurdish state became a contentious issue between the US and Türkiye. Türkiye cooperated extensively with the US against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Türkiye contributed to the International Stabilization Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) and also assumed its command for six months in June 2002. However, Türkiye expressed significant differences with the US regarding its policy toward Saddam Hussein and Iraq. In this context, Türkiye's primary concern was that a US military intervention could hasten the disintegration of Iraq and the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in the north. Turkish officials have repeatedly stated that they would intervene militarily if a Kurdish state were established (The Washington Post, 2002).

If Türkiye were to do so and intervene militarily in northern Iraq, it would clearly undo many of the gains made through recent political reforms and rekindle the Kurdish issue in Türkiye. In contrast, following the conclusion of the Öcalan case

and the new government's pronounced commitment to political reforms and improving Türkiye's human rights record, US-Türkiye relations experienced a marked warming. This was reflected in President Clinton's keen interest in Türkiye's relations with the EU and Türkiye's acceptance as a candidate. More importantly, the US administration played a vital role in securing the OSCE summit in Istanbul. In Congress, the Committee on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) had long opposed the summit, arguing that Türkiye's poor human rights record made it undeserving of such prestige. The CSCE also requested that the US administration do its utmost to relocate the summit. The Kurdish issue was minimized in US-Türkiye relations. The September 11, 2001 attacks reinforced Türkiye's strategic importance to the US in the war on terror. US officials frequently cited Türkiye as a model for the Islamic world (Kirişci, 2004).

When the US military intervention began without Türkiye's involvement, fears intensified, particularly among extremists, that the US would now assist in the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. There was significant agitation in Türkiye supporting a Turkish military intervention in northern Iraq. Will the US be able to persuade the Kurds in northern Iraq to be sensitive to Türkiye's interests? Will they be able to prevent the resurgence of the PKK, now KADEK? The answers to these questions will always have significant implications for US-Türkiye relations, as well as for the implementation of political reforms regarding the Kurds in Türkiye (The Washington Post, 2002).

The Kurdish Initiative Policy of the Justice and Development Party

In 2005, a group of Turkish intellectuals publicly called on the PKK to lay down its arms following Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Diyarbakır, a moment widely interpreted as a symbolic opening toward addressing the Kurdish Question. However, the intense power struggle among state elites that emerged immediately after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power significantly constrained any substantive attempt to resolve what remained the most persistent source of political violence in Türkiye. This struggle intensified during the 2007 presidential election crisis, which culminated in early general elections. Following its decisive electoral victory, the AKP succeeded in securing the presidency for Abdullah Gül. The subsequent Ergenekon investigations substantially weakened the operational and discursive capacity of a bureaucratic-military elite faction that had long dominated security policy through extra-legal means. Although the

Constitutional Court case seeking the closure of the AKP posed a serious threat to the government, its eventual outcome—limited to the suspension of state funding ultimately strengthened the AKP's political position and expanded its room for maneuver in addressing the Kurdish Question (Leezenberg, 2008, pp. 67-68).

From a peace studies perspective, a genuine peace process cannot be reduced to the mere cessation of armed conflict or the absence of direct violence. As Johan Galtung argues, ending direct violence represents only a minimal condition for peace and does not, by itself, address the structural and cultural dimensions of conflict (Galtung, 1969, pp. 183-184). A comprehensive peace process requires long-term engagement with the social, economic, psychological, and security-related roots of violence. In many protracted conflicts, such an ideal outcome is never fully realized, as negotiated settlements often prioritize immediate stability over deeper transformation. Nevertheless, as long as direct violence persists, meaningful progress in other areas remains severely constrained. In this study, the term "peace process" refers to the totality of political, legal, and social initiatives undertaken after a ceasefire with the aim of reaching a sustainable political solution to a deeply entrenched conflict such as the Kurdish Question (Kaplan, 2019, pp. 34-36) .

In comparative perspective, the Kurdish experience in Iraq offers an important point of reference. The Kurds in Iraq have been constitutionally recognized as a distinct national group since the 1958 Interim Constitution, which defined Kurds and Arabs as co-founders of the Iraqi state and acknowledged their respective national rights (McDowall, 2004, pp. 309-311). A second major step occurred with the adoption of the 1970 Interim Constitution following the Baʿath Party's consolidation of power, which formally recognized Kurdish autonomy, albeit in a limited and contested manner (McDowall, 2004, pp. 317-320). After 2003, the Kurds participated for the first time in the drafting of a permanent Iraqi constitution, marking a significant strategic shift in their political position. However, this period also introduced new challenges, particularly concerning power-sharing arrangements, federal authority, and the consolidation of democratic governance in post-Saddam Iraq (Natali, 2010, pp. 91-94).

The central issue in post-2003 Iraq has been how its constituent groups can share power and govern the state either democratically or through durable political consensus. For the Kurds, the democratization of Iraq has been a critical condition for the realization and protection of their political demands. At the same time, Kurdish political actors have consistently insisted on safeguarding their autonomous status, at minimum preserving the level of self-rule achieved during the

1990s. From Türkiye's ontological security perspective, developments in Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq have been closely monitored not only as matters of regional security but also as challenges to deeply rooted narratives concerning territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national identity. Consequently, the AKP's Kurdish Initiative must be understood not merely as a policy shift driven by domestic democratization, but also as an attempt to recalibrate Türkiye's ontological insecurities in a rapidly changing regional geo-framework.

Conclusion

Since Öcalan's capture in February 1999 and his subsequent call to end the PKK's armed struggle, Türkiye has entered a new phase in its approach to the Kurdish Question. Öcalan's capture is widely regarded as the culmination of a process that began in the early 1990s, a period during which security-oriented narratives dominated state policy and the Kurdish issue was framed primarily as an existential threat to Türkiye's territorial integrity and national unity (Marcus, 2007, pp. 273-276). This period was marked by the predominance of military solutions and the marginalization of political alternatives. Former President Süleyman Demirel's characterization of Öcalan's capture as one of the most significant events in the history of the Republic reflects the extent to which the issue was perceived through an ontological security lens, linking state survival, identity, and continuity (Barkey & Fuller, 1998, pp. 31-33).

Nevertheless, it would be analytically inaccurate to argue that Kurdish nationalism or the prospect of an independent Kurdish state constitutes the sole or even primary challenge Türkiye has faced since its founding. Rather, the central concern from the state's perspective has been the precedent-setting effect that such a development could generate for other identity-based claims, raising fears of fragmentation and systemic transformation. Within this context, anxieties over "Balkanization" function not merely as strategic concerns but as deeply embedded ontological insecurities tied to the Republic's foundational narratives and self-understanding (Rumelili, 2015, pp. 12-14).

Developments in Iraq have further intensified these concerns. The gradual institutionalization of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq since the 1990s, and particularly after 2003, has reinforced Turkish fears regarding the potential spillover effects of Kurdish self-rule across borders (McDowall, 2004, pp. 383-386). At the same time, Türkiye has remained attentive to the broader regional consequences

of instability in Iraq, including the economic disruption of trade routes and the humanitarian devastation experienced during the Iran-Iraq War and the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. Notably, during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq remained comparatively more stable than much of the rest of the country, with the only major confrontation occurring near Khurmal on the Iran-Iraq border, where US air strikes facilitated a Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) ground offensive against Ansar al-Islam (Natali, 2010, pp. 102-104). These dynamics complicated Türkiye's security calculus, blending pragmatic cooperation with persistent ontological anxieties.

In more recent years, the rise of DEASH (as referred to in Turkish literature) or ISIS (as referred to in Western literature), and the subsequent coordination between Türkiye, the United States, and Kurdish actors in Iraq, have further transformed regional relationships. Despite deep-rooted suspicions driven by Kurdish nationalism, counterterrorism cooperation compelled Ankara and the Erbil-based Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq to engage in unprecedented levels of coordination (Gunter, 2013, pp. 87-89). This cooperation illustrates how immediate physical security threats can, at times, override but not eliminate ontological insecurities related to identity and sovereignty.

Despite these developments, the conflict associated with the PKK has not been fully resolved. The November 13, 2022, terrorist attack on Istanbul's Taksim Square, which Turkish authorities attributed to the PKK despite the organization's denial, underscores the persistence of violent dimensions of the conflict. The continued existence of PKK-affiliated structures in Syria, particularly the PYD, and the activities of legal political actors perceived by the state as linked to the organization, such as the HDP, remain central to Türkiye's security discourse. From an ontological security perspective, these actors are often framed not merely as security threats but as challenges to the coherence of the Turkish national identity and political order.

Ultimately, the trajectory of the Kurdish Question will depend largely on domestic developments within Türkiye. The success of political reform initiatives, particularly those aimed at democratization, rule of law, and cultural rights, will play a decisive role in shaping future outcomes. Progress in EU-Türkiye relations could provide an external anchor for reforms and contribute positively to both economic stability and the expansion of Kurdish cultural rights (Keyman & Öniş, 2007, pp. 217-219). Conversely, a failure of reform, deterioration in relations with the European Union, or renewed instability in Iraq could reinforce hardline positions and exacerbate ontological insecurities, increasing the risk of renewed polarization

between Turkish nationalist and Kurdish separatist actors. Such an outcome would have destabilizing consequences not only for Türkiye but also for the broader region, the European Union, and transatlantic partners.

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