



# ETHNOCENTRIC NATIONALISM: KURDISH NATIONALISM IN TURKEY

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## **Abstract**

*Turkey is often seen as one of the most progressive and secular Muslim majority countries in the world. With the unique advantage of being located on two continents. From the era of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to the era of Erdogan, the country has seen many radical shifts in its body fabric, culture, and way of government. After the Turks, the biggest ethnicity in Turkey is the Kurds. With a rich history and a large population, they often ask for rights of self-governance and more participation. The Kurds have fought for recognition against the Turkish state, both through violent and political means. The future of the Kurdish Turkish problem is still unclear.*

## **1. Introduction**

The term self-determination finds its roots in the French and American revolutions. One of the first legal doctrines to use this term was the Atlantic Charter, written and signed by world leaders after World War II. Initially, the term was synonymous with armed struggles and the violent disintegration of states. However, more recently, the term has been used to describe political representation, autonomy, and participation rights given to ethnic minorities. Mostly minority groups, ethnic or otherwise, seek to self-determine themselves through armed struggle or political campaigns.

### *1.1 Preamble*

Nationalism is primarily viewed as an ethnic uniting tactic, which is used by states and politicians alike. The use of emotional rhetoric helps arouse patriotism in the people. The ultimate goal of nationalism is to move towards self-determination. The term and concept saw a rise in popularity with the rise in nation-states. Similar languages, religion, literature, culture, and regionalism are aspects of nationality.

This paper will discuss and analyze the right of self-determination, specifically the right of self-determination, of the Kurdish people in Turkey.

The Kurds are an ethnic minority group, mostly found in the Middle East. They were



originally situated in regions, now known as Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. The biggest Kurd population is in Turkey, with an estimated 12 to 22 million people. The ethnic group is primarily an amalgamation of different regional cultures, with prominent languages such as Sorani, Karmaji, and Zazaki. Religiously, Yazidism, Sunni Islam, Shia Islam, Assyrian Christianity, and even Judaism are practiced by people belonging to this ethnicity.

In Turkey, the ethnic group has never been welcomed by the people or the state. Primarily because the Kurds are ethnically different than the Turks, and demand political representation that they do not have. Movements for self-determination have been political and peaceful in nature, as well as violent. In the past, many Kurdish factions have opted for warfare and a violent disintegration from Turkiye.

Historically, the Kurds have attempted to create independent states numerous times, not just in Turkey. The Republic of Mahanadi in Iran and the Kingdom of Kurdistan in Iraq are all case examples of Kurdish struggles for self-determination. However, all had a downfall, leaving the Kurds stateless again. In 1930, the Ararat Rebellion took place. This was an armed struggle for self-determination against the Turkish regimes. Ararat and the Zilan massacre are historic events that deepened the Turkish Kurdish divide.

However, in modern-day Turkey, there is a wide number of people and thinkers who want a peaceful solution to this problem. While many Turks argue that they were violently fought against, many Kurds argue that they too had faced numerous violent actions against them, undertaken by the government. We will seek to analyze the modern state of the Kurdish self-determination movement and try to answer some questions regarding the right of self-determination for the Kurdish people, specifically in Turkey.

More recently, the Kurdish movement or cause has been taken up by pro-Kurdish political parties. However, the Turkish constitution does not allow for ethnic based politics, which has led to the courts of Turkiye dissolving many political parties that represented the Kurds. This has been seen internationally and locally as a misguided step that may eventually cause the Kurdish cause to become violent again.

### *1.2 Theories*

The evolutionary theory of nationalism perceives nationalism to be the result of the evolution of human beings into identifying with groups, such as ethnic groups or other groups that form the foundation of a nation.

### *1.3 Historic Development*

Post World War two, the creation of a Kurdish state was intentionally stopped. Historically, Kurdish nationalism saw a rise after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. Fueled later by Kamal Atatürk's extreme patriotic ideals. Ethnic recognition or grouping was made impossible. This might have been done to unite Turkey, but in reality gave rise to feelings of isolation by the state, especially in minority communities such as the Kurds.

The main regions where Kurds were settled were divided amongst States, mainly Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. In all of these countries, Kurdish nationalist movements have prevailed in



making the Kurdish cause international. In Turkey, Atatürk's revolution was based on the idea of Nationalism, this one Nation Ideal, which made Kurdish separation difficult. The Turkish army brutalized the Kurds, settled in the Dermis region, during the 1930s. Till today, the Kurds have been denied autonomy or cultural security; rather, their language, literature, and history have faced numerous bans and censorships over the years.

Since the 1970s, the Kurdish population has started demanding its rights, not through violent means, but through political struggle. Various pro-Kurdish parties came into existence, the most prominent being the PKK, a leftist Kurdish ethnocentric party. Such ethno parties have turned to violence before, but have always faced a crushing defeat at the hands of the Turkish state and military establishment. These political forces, before being banned, had one goal: to gain provisional autonomy in regions or provinces with a Kurdish majority population. As we will read, in the third chapter, i.e., discussion and analysis, the Turkish courts and legal systems have found a way to dissolve Kurdish political forces, surprisingly on legal grounds.

#### *1.4 Key Terms*

1. Self Determination: the right of a people or group to decide their own future, government, and state. In essence, it means people have the right to self-govern or at least participate in the formation of the government. In many cases, it is only internal and political, i.e., based on ethnic or nationality recognition, bases; however, it can also be used to violently disintegrate states.
1. NaNationalism; a nation is a group of people who share, common heritage, rationality, ethnicity, and language. A nation can have many ethnicities and languages, which is why modern thinkers associate nationalism with race as well. The term got popular, with the rise in the creation of nation-states, throughout Europe.

### **2. Rise of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey**

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey began a movement of nation-building, based on Turkish identity. Originally, the state was able to win over minority groups such as, Balkans and Caucasians; however, this forced idea of one nationality. The years between 1923 and 1980 can be marked as the most important for Kurdish nationalism and self-determination. Around twenty organized revolts took place. Most stopped by the use of violence, by the state. However, the revolts in Dersim proved to be beneficial, as the Kurds were able to challenge the Turkish state. This was followed by an authoritarian enforcement of biased policies. Kurdish names of streets and areas were changed, and the Kurdish languages were banned. And forced internal displacement was done to disperse Kurdish communities, which ultimately made mobilization difficult.

In 1965, the Turkish census, the government, and the administration in Istanbul started a systematic censorship of information that was deemed dangerous to "national unity. This meant that language information, ethnic groups were not collected across the country. Which is why, even till today, there is no official statistic or number given by the government on the country's Kurdish population. Diyarbakir, a regional, mostly populated by Kurds, was ground



zero for Kurdish political mobilization.

Perhaps the final push was the creation of the PKK or Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan.

The strategy of displacing Kurdish people was quickly used by Kurdish nationalists as a rallying cry. This eventually led to the rise in nationalist movements. The Turkish elections were contested by political forces like the PKK, based on autonomy and self-determination. During 1987 and 2002, Istanbul declared a state of emergency, or martial law, in eastern and southeastern Turkish regions, which were populated mostly by Kurdish communities. This state of emergency was eventually lifted. And more political forces came into existence as a result. Political movements like the People's Labor Party and Democracy Party came into being, all explicitly asking for national and ethnic recognition and rights.

## 2. Dissolution of Pro-Kurdish Political Forces

### 3.

#### 3.1 *Dissolution under, 1982 constitution*

The 1982 Turkish constitution has certain laws that cannot be amended. The following is a direct quote from Article 3 of the Constitution: "The State of Turkey shall constitute with its territory and nation an indivisible whole. The official language shall be Turkish." The 82 Constitution was drafted by an outgoing military government. It brought forward the notion of one Turkish state, one language, and one culture. Ethnic and provisional factions are deemed as bad for state unity and security. Meaning political forces that initially started off by campaigning on ethnic or national grounds were outlawed. However, political forces that campaigned on Turkish nationality were seen as a uniting force for the country. This unfair, biased policy made the constitutional courts give anti-Kurd verdicts. Mainly, political forces like the PKK and the united communist party of Turkey were dissolved.

This dissolution of political parties was mainly done to target the voice of the Kurdish people. Any political manifesto of any party that mentioned nationalism and rights or recognition for ethnic minorities was deemed a threat to national unity. The major verdict of the courts was based on the use of the word nation, in party manifestos, which talked about two nations, i.e., the Kurdish and Turkish nations. Such wording or phrasing was seen as an open threat to not only the Turkish state but to the Turkish ethnic majority, who openly supported the dissolution of these parties. Similarly, the socialist party, founded in 88, was banned by the constitutional court, as it campaigned on self-determination and demanded the right of self-government for the Kurdish people. It asked for the creation of a federal republic, and in accordance with the government structure of a federation, regions would have autonomy and certain decision-making powers. This, too, was seen by the courts as a plan to disintegrate Turkey; hence, it led to the dissolution of another Kurdish party, and this time, the socialist party.

Following the ban of the socialist party in 93, the People's Labor Party was banned as well. Slowly, we see that the courts took even the most trivial of statements made by Kurdish parties and accused them of being anti-state, to ban them. The People's Labor Party, for example, stated that their languages and culture should be seen as independent and given equal



importance. This party demanded provisional autonomy within the Turkish state. Meaning they did not demand self-determination or separation, they, too, however, were banned.

### *3.2 Article 57, under the 1982 constitution*

Under Article 57, any activity or mobilization that harms the nation's unity or sovereignty would be outlawed. However, this article was specifically and almost exclusively used but Turkish lawmakers to accuse Kurdish party workers of being violent and anti-state. It is true that many parties, like the PKK, were violent and fought a guerrilla-style war with the Turkish state. However, that was not the case with most pro-Kurdish political forces. Those who were under the provisions of this constitutional policy were imprisoned and stopped from carrying out any political speeches, campaigns, or rallies.

### *3.3 1972 Law of Association*

This law made it even more difficult to mobilize peacefully. Under this law, a group of people discussing or rallying any banned topics would be found guilty. I.e., languages, literature, or parties that were banned could not be openly discussed. The law explicitly states "Any person convicted of incitement to enmity and hatred on grounds of differences of class, race, language, religion, or region under paragraph two of Article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code." This specific clause was used to demonize and ban Kurdish speeches or campaigns undertaken by pro-Kurdish political forces.

## **4. Violence against Nationalists and the State**

### *4.1 Left-wing politics and the PKK*

Founded by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK is one of the most violent Kurdish political forces in Turkey. This has, arguably, been used as a case example to demonize and ban other peaceful pro-Kurdish political parties. It is connected with Syria, as most of its fighters got funding and training from Syria. This party asked for the creation of a separate Kurdish state. It originally started as a violent movement against the Turkish state, and also against the feudalists who oppressed Kurdish communities. The movement gained support from the poor, working-class people of the Kurdish regions. In the 970s, political suppression became a state policy, especially against the Kurds. Death or firing squads were used by military personnel to instill terror. Turkey itself has faced military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980, and a failed coup attempt, more recently, in 2014. In southeast Turkey, which is a majority Kurdish region, Istanbul sent in 250,000 military personnel in 2009.

The PKK has been involved in an all-out war with the Turkish state. Using guerrilla tactics, they attacked Turkish government buildings and state media channel outlets, along with skirmishes with the Turkish military

### *4.2 State terror on Kurdish communities*

The Turkish military, as discussed earlier, had imposed a state of emergency in Kurdish regions. They used brutal terror tactics to intimidate the people. Firing squads, burning down



of houses and crops, were common tactics used by the state soldiers. Such actions caused or pushed the PKK towards more violent tactics. The violent tactics used against the PKK caused Turkey to lose its place in the European Union.

#### *4.3 censorship and state propaganda*

As of September 2016, Istanbul and state authorities banned the transmission of many Kurdish television channels. Added to this, a new wave of accusations of being anti-state started. Two mayors, with alleged links to Kurdish political parties like the PKK, were sacked. Diyarbakir and Gultans' mayors were jailed for supporting Kurdish rights to speak in their native languages. As of November 2016, the death toll due to the PKK Turkish conflict has gone up to 2360 deaths

### **5. Discussion and Analysis**

The constitution of Turkey, in several articles and laws, emphasizes the need for national unity. And the constitution correlates unity with nationality, in particular, Turkish nationality. This means that even though it initially stated rights for minority groups, the constitution became more favorable of the Turkish language and culture, hence proving the notion that the Turkish constitution is biased towards certain groups. Not explicitly, to target them, but the ideals of one nation can be misunderstood as bias against smaller nationalities.

The Kurdish struggle, as discussed in previous chapters, is not only exclusive to Turkey. However, the biggest Kurdish population is in Turkey; at the same time, Turkey is the few countries where Kurdish languages and literature have been banned. Here, we found out that imposition of emergencies in certain regions, changing of cities' names from Kurdish to Turkish, and forcing a mass internal displacement of Kurdish people were all systematic steps taken to oppress the Kurdish people.

The Kurdish people and movements have tried both peaceful political measures and violent ones. In the facts and history, we understand that the Kurds are not a state in themselves, and even though violent Kurdish forces got outside funding, no country openly supports a violent movement like the PKK. The state has used its apparatus to suppress all violent movements, and has only caused more death and bad PR for the Kurdish cause. However, we see, the intimidation of peaceful mobilization, working. Whenever Kurdish forces campaigned and used nationalism as a rallying cry, more people, and even international forums, supported them. The dissolution of political forces was done in accordance with constitutional policy. Proving that sometimes laws that promise to uphold the essence of human rights are used to trample them.

The Turkish state does not allow any actions that are seen as a threat to security. In it, evidently, the state fought against violent separatist elements. However, they also banned languages and entire communal heritage, signaling an authoritarian and almost totalitarian state that gets to decide the fate of an entire ethnic community. The research disproved the notion that violent nationalism was more beneficial to the cause. As we read, political forces were all systematically banned; however, on legal grounds, those bans could be challenged. If political opponents are imprisoned or stopped, the international community steps in and blames the state



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for being authoritarian. This is why all legal verdicts accuse, accused parties of wanting self-determination, so they could legally be stopped from doing politics.

## **6. Conclusion**

The way forward for the Kurdish movement in Turkey is seeing a positive change. As recently, i.e., in the year 2024, fighting between forces like the PKK and the Turkish army stopped. Referendums and provisional autonomy for Kurdish-populated areas are one of the most sane and safe ways to make this cause a reality. Self-determination, as we know, can be internal as well. In the case of Turkey, federally run units or regions with regional autonomy could be a reasonable option.



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