

Kurdish identity-making: instruments and possibilities during the last 100 years in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey

The research is based on a historical, comparative analysis of the Kurdish nation-building process. Three different periods are included in the comparison. First of all, the end of Ottoman Empire (meaning the beginning of Kurdish initiatives) and Atatürk's era is presented. The second part makes an attempt to analyse the new wave of Kurdish revival process from the 60's (doguculuk) and the appearance of Kurdish armed groups, as well as the rise of PKK. The final part focuses on the contemporary developments, by putting an emphasis on the AKP-led government's era which created a new atmosphere in order to solve this Kurdish question by launching a programme called 'Kürt acilimi'.

This paper endeavours to mark the cornerstones and features of the Kurdish nation-building process, by emphasizing the role of the creation of myth, traditions, and history: how the different generations of Kurds tried to establish a common culture. The comparison emphasizes the multifaceted features of the process and tries to prove that *'nations are repeatedly formed and re-formed.'* In its focal point there are issues such as the role of Newroz, the national anthem, the flag, or even the history. The theoretical framework used in this comparative study – which analyses the hundred-year-long historical background of the process – is essentially based on the nationalism theory of Anthony D. Smith. Therefore, first and foremost, the main concepts which this comparison intends to use shall be presented.

In Smith's concept of nation formation, he makes a distinction between three main types of communities which are able to create a nation through different means due to their diverse background and features. They are: migrant communities (Afrikaners, Australians), lateral (French, British), and vertical (or 'demotic') ethnies. The latter group reveals a more intensive emotional bond between its members. According to Smith, in this case *'we are dealing with smaller, subject ethnic populations and especially those with a high degree of self-awareness as relatively compact communities of belonging.'*¹ These vertical ethnies construct their nation by vernacular mobilization where a 'returning intelligentsia' began to create a nation through the dissemination of nationalism. Among others, one of the most important means of this intelligentsia to establish and promote a national identity is the 'symbolic cultivation'. It includes the adaption of symbols of dress, emblems, language, myths and history. The definition of homeland, the territory of the nation became crucial as the intelligentsia constructs the border vis á vis other 'nations' alienating different communities from each other. The establishment of common cultural fund, even if it is a top-down process, depends

¹Anthony D. Smith (2009): Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism. Routledge. p. 54.

highly on a demographic (ethnic) core and its existing traditions, myths, history. If the basic, historical cultural fund is stronger, the process has more chance to achieve its aim.

The case of the Kurdish ethnic group is associated with the vertical-demotic community's nation building process. At the beginning of the first period included in this comparison, the Kurds were subjects of an Empire whose ethnic core was based on Ottoman-Turks. They – being a lateral ethnies – could enjoy the advantages of 'bureaucratic incorporation', even after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey.² Albeit the first organizations with a quest for national identity have appeared relatively at the same time within the two groups, the Turks could profit from their positions within the administration. Furthermore, the Kurds composed a less modern, even backward society, based on tribal relations with the practically total lack of national feelings compared to the majority. Turks also outnumbered the Kurds (at the beginning of the 20th century 8-9 million and approximately 1,5 million, respectively). The Kurds were divided into several language groups (Kurmanji, Sorani, Zaza etc.), and they had cleavages along religious lines (Alevi, Sunni, Yezidi and so on). The Kurdish inhabited area's border was not established as the predominantly Kurdish regions had significant Armenian, Assyrian population mixed with other ethnic and religious groups.

After the annihilation of emirates within the framework of Ottoman centralization project in the 19th century, the role of religious leaders (sheikhs) and chieftains has increased imperatively. Abdul-Hamid II managed to involve them to the Ottoman hierarchy by providing their children an Istanbul-based education and by creating the loyal Hamidian army, recruited from Kurds. The Islamism contributed to the success of hamidian policy as well. Briefly: the Kurds had remained loyal to the Empire (Seyyid Abdulkadir, Bedirhans). The first – relatively weak – Kurdish associations were usually based on these groups. They endeavoured to promote Kurdish language education – supported by the Ottoman state which regarded it as a tool of modernization – and they did not claim independence.

The first associations of intellectuals aiming to a prospective independence appeared at the end the First World War, and they became more influential after the abolishment of Sultanat and Caliphate by Atatürk. The Turkish nation building and modernization process infuriated the Kurds for three main reasons: (1) the process neglected the Ottoman times and traditions, (2) while it had a dominant secular feature (3) and it had a national agenda including the assimilation of Muslim groups. Different organizations were founded and a great number of revolts were launched. Sheikh Said's rebellion (1925), the revolt of Agri (1927-1930) (Khoybun, Ihsan Nuri) and the revolt of Dersim were the most important. Nevertheless, due

² The population of Ottoman Empire's Anatolia can be considered an amalgam of diverse ethnic and religious communities. This diversity remains significant after 1923 as well. A great number of groups are still living there nowadays (Kurds, Circassians, Albanians, Arabs, Bosniaks, Pomaks, Lazs, Armenians and so on). A recent research showed that about 70% of the total population are Turks.

to the lack of national consciousness, and the fragmentation of Kurds, these attempts could not mobilize the whole Kurdish population.

After the above-mentioned Kurdish attempts have failed, peace was restored in the eastern provinces of Turkey. Because of the important economic and social developments, the Kurdish society has changed significantly during the 1950's and 1960's. An immense flow of workers started to converge in the biggest cities, and the new conditions overwrote the traditional and declining tribal connections.

At the beginning of the 1960's the second period of this comparative research starts. A new, secular (and politically mainly leftist) Kurdish intelligentsia had been risen which *de facto* restarted the nationalization process after 20 years of silence. The first group of them, the so-called Dogucular tried to interpret the Kurdish problem as a modernization process (in accordance with the Turkish concept about the Eastern regions). Albeit this group had to face a probe (49'lar davasi) and jail, the new, liberal constitution adopted in 1961, paved the way to a more opened dialogue about the Kurdish issue. The following years were crucial concerning the nation-building process. The secular, mainly leftist Kurdish intelligentsia accepted important myths and symbols. First of all, the leaders of renewed Kurdish movements interiorized the flag and the anthem of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad. The anthem had great potential to become a symbol of the Kurdish movement whose members were regularly detained: the text of the anthem describes the ideas of a Kurdish poet also being in jail – this unambiguously represents the Kurdish destiny. Furthermore, this period is the fusion of the ceremony of Newroz and the legend of Kurdish hero, Kawa. According to the contemporary interpretation, Kawa was usually identified with a 'leader of proletariat' due to the influence of socialist ideas.

The failure to establish a Kurdish party caused the left-wing parties to become the only channels for Kurds to enter the politics during the upcoming decades. Albeit these parties did not query unity of the state, they made it possible to deal with the Kurdish issue as a regional, development-related problem. In these years several groups were founded by young university students – easily affected by Marxist-Leninist ideas –, which then started to compete for the support of Kurds in the eastern region. The Abdullah Öcalan-led PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party - Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan) become the most successful among them, due to its radical and aggressive methods, with the help of which its members tried to solve the peasantry's problem with the authorities. Their success in managing these 'social conflicts' opened the way to acquire the sympathy of the peasants, who started to back them.

After a few years of preparation, the PKK launched its campaign in 1984. Above the fights with the Turkish Armed Forces the organization managed to affect significant part of the Kurdish population. It was successful in the promotion of national identity, and it was also

the PKK who reshaped the Newroz by placing it on a national base. Mazlum Dogan, imprisoned in Diyarbakir, set himself on fire on 21th March 1982. This suicide action turned into the symbol of the struggle against Turkey within the PKK discourse: Dogan became Kawa, a hero who faced the enemy, while his action was followed by many similar attempts. In parallel with it, funerals of PKK soldiers became ‘national’ events, attended by thousands. During the next years, Newroz ceremony has overspread in Turkey especially in the predominantly Kurdish areas. Later, the Turkish government endeavoured to make Newroz (or Nevruz, in Turkish) a national holiday thus making it integral part of the Turkish identity, but in the end this attempt failed, and it remained the (newly) integral part of ‘Kurdishness’ in Turkey. The rise of PKK was completed as its position grew strong, and with that, our comparison reaches the last period of history.

During the 1990’s due to settlement policy in eastern Turkey and the struggle with the PKK, mass Kurdish immigration began. Initially, the most important cities of the region, like Diyarbakir, Sanliurfa, Mardin etc. became the main destinations of this flow; in parallel with this a sizeable Kurdish population have settled in western Turkey’s cities and towns as well. The segregation between Kurds and Turks has increased more significantly in the medium-sized or small towns, than in the cities or in the southeast. Ethnic polarization became an important problem mainly in the mixed areas. Furthermore, a determinant and influential Diaspora has emerged in Western Europe. The nationalist or PKK-aligned groups of the Kurdish community living abroad started to support the ‘national aims’ by propaganda, financial assistance and launching satellite TV channels (Medya TV, Roj TV etc.) which could participate to the national building process not just in the Diaspora but in Turkey as well.

The foundation of the first, legal Kurdish party opened a new chapter in the Kurdish nation-building process. The Kurdish parties’ existence³ and ‘national’ agenda paved the way to a tenser struggle for the Kurdish vote. During the 2000’s, the AKP-led government was usually successful to acquire Kurdish support in the East. It was true especially at the general elections in 2007 when the newly-founded Kurdish party had a very weak performance. But later, due to the new campaign of PKK and failure of the army to tackle it, the Kurdish issue was put on the agenda again. In spite of significant breakthroughs, like the foundation of state-owned Kurdish TV channel (TRT-6), the DTP was able to win in nine provinces at the local elections in 2009, which has meant a real political threat for the AKP. Because of the above-mentioned reasons, the government has launched a Kurdish initiative (or Kurdish

³ The main Kurdish parties during the period: People’s Toiling Party (Halkin Ekmek Partisi - HEP) (1990–1993), the Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi-DEP) (1993–1994), the People’s Democracy Party (Halkin Demokrasi Partisi - HADEP) (1994–2003), the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi - DTP) (2005-2009) and finally the Peace and Democratic Party (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi – BDP) (2010- to the present).

opening – Kürt acilimi). This attempt to settle the PKK problem was presented in a comprehensive democratization plan (in harmony with other initiatives aiming Alevis, Gypsies, Greeks, Armenians, Kaferis), based on a (relatively) nation-wide dialogue, involving NGO's, media, political parties, the TSK and the MIT *per se*.

After the Habur incident the initiative slowed down.⁴ Albeit the AKP has implemented some measures, it has failed to meet the Kurdish politicians' requirements. After the closure of DTP, a new and more self-conscious party, the BDP (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi – Peace and Democracy Party) has emerged under Selahettin Demirtas' leadership. The party started to claim autonomy and more educational rights. The failure of the opening to solve the Kurdish problem, the large-scale detention wave among Kurdish mayors in 2010 has resulted in deepening cleavages between Kurds and Turks (the result of the referendum in September of 2010 showed the strength of BDP in the Southeast).

As a conclusion, we can observe that the Kurdish identity-making started too late and therefore remained instable during the Ottomans and during Atatürk's reign. Although the initiative of identity-making has become more effective later, it still has limited opportunities as opposed to the Turkish nation-building process – even in spite of the fact that nowadays it has an undoubtedly greater room for manoeuvre.

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⁴ 34 PKK member entered in Turkish territory in order to surrender. But their arrival has turned to a 'show.' Kurdish masses mobilized by DTP welcome them as national heroes. This event, broadcasted by TV channels, infuriated the Turks and caused a fall in the AKP's popularity index.