

## **The Kurdish question in Turkey: Shortcomings of socio-economic methods**

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**Abstract:** The Kurdish issue is one of the biggest political problems of Turkey leading to many democratic, humanitarian and economic costs. According to some Turkish circles, the Kurdish issue is not an ethno-cultural problem, but a question of regional terrorism rooted in feudalism, ignorance and poverty. They argue that the issue would be resolved by means of socio-economic methods aimed at improving ethnic Kurds' living conditions in Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia. They maintain that the improvement would curb Kurdish nationalism and suppress ethno-nationalist attitudes and beliefs among Turkish-citizen Kurds, rendering them loyal citizens of Turkey. At the end of the day, there would be no Kurdish issue, but loyal Kurds who welcome all Turkish-based integrationist policies of Turkey. This essay contends that the socio-economic approach may contribute to the resolution of the Kurdish issue, but this approach alone would not enable Turkey to solve the issue because it would still need to come up with a political formula that satisfies multiculturalist Kurdish demands.

**Keywords:** Kurds, Turkey, integration, multiculturalism, ethno-cultural diversity

### INTRODUCTION

The Kurdish problem is a long-running political issue of the Republic of Turkey that has two main dimensions, an identity rights dimension and its armed conflict counterpart. The identity rights dimension is the consequence of several assimilationist Turkification policies implemented via the cultural togetherness policy – an official policy enforced by the early republican regime, the military administrations of 1960, 1971 and 1980, and their successor governments. The second dimension is the result of the armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên*

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*Kurdistanê*, PKK), an internationally-recognised terrorist organisation, that has continued since 1984.

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has made many reforms in order to resolve the Kurdish problem by democratic and peaceful means. These reforms have transformed the assimilationist Republic. This had recognised, preserved and promoted only Turkish identity – the identity of the majority ethnic group (Turks) – in both public and private areas and prohibited the recognition, maintenance and promotion of all minority identities, including Kurdish identity, in both areas. Turkey is now an integrationist republic where not only Turkish but also Kurdish and other minority identities are recognised in the private realm, but only the majority identity is recognised, safeguarded and promoted in the public domain.

The reforms have not, however, generated a certain political formula for the resolution of the Kurdish problem. The armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the terrorist organisation PKK is continuing at the time of writing. According to some Turkish circles, Turkey may resolve its Kurdish problem through a socio-economic approach aimed at improving living conditions in Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia, where ethnic Kurds constitute a majority. These circles believe that the improvement would suppress or curb Kurdish nationalism, eventually rendering Turkish-citizen Kurds new loyal citizens of the integrationist Republic. At the end of the day, there would be loyal Kurds who are integrated into Turkey.

The socio-economic approach may contribute to the resolution of the Kurdish problem, but the approach alone is unlikely to come up with a certain resolution formula for the problem. The Kurds, whose socio-economic demands have been satisfied, would still call on Turkey to fulfil their identity rights demands. This requires the Republic to adopt a multiculturalist political settlement that enables Kurdish identity and its features (e.g. culture, history, language and traditions) to be recognised, secured and promoted in both private and public realms.

As an interdisciplinary study examining whether Turkey can resolve its long-running Kurdish problem via socio-economic methods, this essay proceeds as follows. In the subsequent section, it understands what the Kurdish problem is. Having understood the problem, the essay scrutinises which demands ethnic Kurds call on Turkey to fulfil. Afterwards, the essay explains why the Republic is unlikely to resolve its Kurdish problem via the socio-economic approach.

## UNDERSTANDING TURKEY'S KURDISH ISSUE

The Kurdish problem is a long-running political question of Turkey that has two main dimensions, an identity rights dimension and its armed conflict counterpart. The identity rights dimension is the result of numerous Turkification policies, e.g. (a) the definition of ethnic Kurds as Mountain Turks [*Dağlı Türkler*] (Hughes and Karakas 2009; Kurban 2003); (b) the filling of administrative appointments in the Kurdish-populated Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia with ethnic Turks (Gunter 1998; Muller and Linzey 2007); (c) the ban on the usage of the word 'Kurd(s)' (Bilali 2014; Heper 2007); (d) the prohibition on the use of Kurdish in courts and schools (Al 2015a; Gourlay 2018a; Yegen 2007); (e) the ban on the usage of Kurdish personal and place names (Al 2015b; O'Driscoll 2014; Yegen 2009); (f) the prohibition on the broadcasting, explanation and publication of ideas and opinions in Kurdish (Robins 1993); (g) the confiscation of Kurdish newspaper, books and films (Kurban 2004); (h) the construction of numerous boarding schools in the East and Southeast with the task of educating Kurdish pupils in an environment that physically separated them from their cultural habitat (Ince 2012); and (i) the forceful deportation of ethnic Kurds from their historic territory to Western Turkey, where they were expected to become assimilated into the dominant Turkish culture (Budak 2015).

These repressive assimilation policies were implemented not only by the early republican regime, which ruled the country from 1923 to 1945, coercive Turkification policies were also enforced during the second half of the twentieth century, when Turkey witnessed three military coups staged in 1960, 1971 and 1980 (Xypolia 2016). In this atmosphere, the PKK, which was established in 1978, carried out its first terror attacks against the Republic in August 1984 by assaulting gendarmerie stations in the provinces of Siirt and Hakkari, leading to an armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the PKK (Bozarslan 2018; Gourlay 2018b; Gutaj and Al 2017).

The armed conflict has not only left at least 50,000 people dead so far, but it has also led to other humanitarian costs, including forced migrations, extrajudicial killings, persecutions and village evacuations (Belge 2016; Calislar 2013). In addition, the conflict has cost the economy at least 300 to 450 billion American dollars (Candar 2013; Ensaroglu 2013; Yayman 2011). Even the lowest estimates would enable Turkey (i) to construct 30,000 kilometres of expressways

(almost fifteen times longer than the current length); (ii) to open 5 million new classrooms; (iii) to cover its last 80-year health expenses; (iv) to construct 375 new health campuses similar to the Ankara Etilik Healthcare Campus, the largest health campus in Turkey; (v) to build 75 new dams identical to the Ataturk Dam, the largest dam in Turkey; (vi) to construct 60 new railway tunnels akin to the Marmaray Tunnel, Turkey's Bosphorus sub-sea tunnel linking Europe and Asia; and (vii) to build 1500 new sports complexes the same as the Afyonkarahisar Sports Complex, the largest sports complex in Turkey. This list can easily be extended, but what I would like to underline here is just to indicate how the conflict has held back development.

Turkey has made several reforms in order to resolve the Kurdish problem since the last two decades, e.g. 1) the foundation of a compensation mechanism for harm caused by terrorism or fight against terrorism (Kolcak 2015a); 2) the abolition of the emergency rule in the Kurdish-occupied provinces (Koker 2013); 3) the elimination of constitutional and statutory bans on Kurdish broadcasting rights (Coskun 2015; Kolcak 2016); 4) the foundation of TRT KURDÎ, a publicly-funded television channel broadcasting in Kurdish for twenty-four hours a day (Kolcak 2015a); 5) the authorisation of municipalities, private language centres, universities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to offer Kurdish language courses (Kolcak 2015b); 6) the authorisation of public secondary schools to offer elective Kurdish language courses (Kolcak 2016); 7) the authorisation of private schools to form bilingual (Kurdish-Turkish) education systems (Kayhan-Pusane 2014; Kolcak 2015b); 8) the authorisation of public and private universities to offer Kurdish degree programs (Kolcak 2016); 9) the removal of statutory and regulatory bans on the usage of Kurdish personal and place names (Kolcak 2015a; Kuzu 2016); and 10) the elimination of statutory and regulatory prohibitions on the use of Kurdish in courts, prisons and making political propaganda (Kolcak 2016; Weiss 2016).

The above reforms have transformed the assimilationist Republic. Turkey is now an integrationist republic that recognises not only Turkish but also Kurdish and other minority identities in the private area. In its public counterpart, the integrationist Republic recognises, secures and promotes only the majority (Turkish) identity and calls on all minority ethnic groups to converge on this identity.

The Republic has some multiculturalist characteristics that allow Kurdish identity to be recognised, preserved and promoted in the

public domain, such as the establishment of the *publicly-funded* TRT KURDÎ; the authorisation of *public* universities and *municipalities* to provide Kurdish language courses; the authorisation of *public* universities to provide Kurdish degree programs; and the authorisation of *public* secondary schools to offer elective Kurdish language courses. All these multicultural policies, however, are exceptions to the constitutional features of the integrationist Republic.

Article 3 of the Constitution of Turkey recognises Turkish as the *only language* of the Republic.<sup>1</sup> Article 42(9) of the Constitution hinders *public* schools from using any language other than Turkish as the language of education or instruction. Furthermore, Article 66(1) of the Constitution defines all citizens as Turks by stating that “[e]veryone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk”. Hence, the phrases ‘no Turk’, ‘every Turk’ and ‘all Turks’ are the common words in the Constitution and other legal documents, including acts, by-laws, decrees, etc.

The Constitution enshrines Turkishness in its preamble. This section stipulates that “no protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to Turkish national interests, Turkish existence and the principle of its indivisibility with its State and territory, historical and moral values of Turkishness”. The preamble also states that “[this constitution] has been entrusted by the TURKISH NATION to the democracy-loving Turkish sons’ and daughters’ love for the motherland and nation”. Many such phrases as ‘Turkish Motherland’ [*Türk Anavatanı*], ‘Turkish citizens’ [*Türk vatandaşları*], ‘Turkish existence’ [*Türk varlığı*], ‘Turkish State’ [*Türk Devleti*], ‘Turkish Nation’ [*Türk Milleti*] and ‘Turkish society’ [*Türk toplumu*] are incorporated into some constitutional provisions as well as various other legal materials (Kurban and Ensaroglu 2010).

The reforms have transformed the assimilationist Turkey into an integrationist republic, but they have not come up with a political formula for the resolution of the Kurdish question. The last round of the armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the outlawed PKK has been continuing since July 2015.<sup>2</sup> It has cost at least 2,748

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<sup>1</sup> The Turkish Constitution is available at: [https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution\\_en.pdf](https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf) [accessed: 17.10.2019].

<sup>2</sup> The PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire in April 2013 after Turkey had introduced many democratic reforms aimed at resolving the Kurdish issue in a peaceful manner. On 11 July 2015, the PKK declared the end of the ceasefire on the grounds that Turkey used the ceasefire to prepare for a new war and strengthen its

lives so far (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2016). Around 100,000 Kurds lost their homes, whilst up to 500,000 were temporarily displaced when the State imposed curfews in order to remove the barricades and trenches set up by PKK militants in several Kurdish-dominated provinces (ICG 2017).

#### LIMITS OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC APPROACH

A multiculturalist political arrangement satisfying main Kurdish demands would be a key element that helps Turkey to resolve its long-running Kurdish issue. Most segments of Kurdish society have made a consensus on some demands. Removing any sense of ethnicity-based discrimination in the Constitution of Turkey and all primary and secondary laws is one of such demands. According to a report published by the Wise Men Centre for Strategic Studies (*Bilge Adamlar Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*, BİLGESAM) in 2011, almost 90 per cent of Kurds ask Turkey to eliminate all discriminatory ethnic biases in its Constitution and laws. The report finds that 30.2 per cent of Kurds want no reference to ethnicity; 57.4 per cent of Kurds want all ethnic groups, including the Kurds and Turks, mentioned; and the remainder (12.4 per cent) back the current legal discourse that incorporates only Turkish-based ethnic phrases into the Constitution and other legal materials (Akyurek and Sadi Bilgic 2011, 60).

Many subsequent reports support the findings of the 2011 BİLGESAM Report. According to a report prepared by the Economic and Social Studies Foundation of Turkey (*Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, TESEV) in 2012, 71.6 per cent of Kurds want the Constitution to mention all ethnic groups; 13.1 per cent of Kurds want no reference to ethnicity in the Constitution and other legal materials; and the rest (15.3 per cent) support the *status quo* (Mahcupyan, Kentel and Genc 2012, 32).

While the 2011 BİLGESAM Report and the 2012 TESEV Report hear Kurdish standpoints from all regions of Turkey, another report prepared by the Political and Social Studies Centre (*Siyasal ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi*, SAMER) in 2012 pays attention to Kurdish opinions only from the Kurdish-populated regions, Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia. The 2012 SAMER Report finds the followings: 62

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hand in this upcoming war by building many military roads, dams and posts for the use of the Turkish Armed Forces. Following this declaration, the PKK waged a new terror campaign, resulting in a new round of armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the PKK (Cicek and Coskun 2016).

per cent of Kurds want the Constitution and other legal documents to touch on all ethnic groups; 33 per cent of Kurds want no reference to ethnicity in constitutional, statutory, regulatory and other legal documents; and the remainder (5 per cent) want the Constitution and other legal sources to mention solely Turkish- and Kurdish-based ethnic phrases (Gurer 2012, 32).

Similar results are found by the International Cultural Research Centre (*Uluslararası Kültürel Araştırmalar Merkezi*, UKAM) in its 2013 report. According to this report, most Kurds want Turkey to strip all discriminatory ethnic phrases from its Constitution and other legal documents by either recognising all ethnic groups or using a neutral legal language that does not give priority to any ethnic groups (UKAM 2013, 33). Similarly, the Justice Defenders Strategic Studies Centre (*Adaleti Savunanlar Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*, ASSAM) states in its 2015 report that most sectors of Kurdish society want Turkey to eliminate discriminatory ethnic biases in constitutional and other law-related sources (ASSAM 2015, 4). In a similar vein, the KONDA Research and Consultancy (*KONDA Araştırma ve Danışmanlık*, KONDA) finds in its 2016 report that removing any sense of ethnicity-based discrimination in the Constitution and other law-specific materials is a Kurdish demand on which almost all Kurdish circles, irrespective of their sociological, political and religious backgrounds, have agreed (KONDA 2016, 19-24).

A similar consensus has been made on the official usage of Kurdish. According to the 2011 BİLGESAM Report, four-fifths of Kurds want Turkey to recognise Kurdish as one of its official languages (Akyurek and Bilgic 2011, 65). It is argued in the 2012 TESEV Report that nearly three-fourths of Kurds want Kurdish to be recognised as an official language in Turkey (Mahcupyan, Kentel and Genc 2012, 44). The 2016 KONDA Report affirms that almost three-fourths of Kurds ask for the official use of their native tongue (KONDA 2016, 41).

Another consensus has been reached upon the matter of mother tongue education in Kurdish. The 2012 TESEV Report finds that 78 per cent of Kurds want Turkey to establish a new education system that enables Kurdish to be used as the language of instruction or education in both public and private schools and universities (Mahcupyan, Kentel and Genc 2012, 42). Similarly, this Kurdish aspiration is regarded as one of the most widely-heard Kurdish demands by the UKAM Report (2013, 8) and the ASSAM Report (2015, 3). Finally, the 2016 KONDA Report finds that 85 per cent of

Kurds dream of exercising their full right to mother tongue education (KONDA 2016, 37).

According to some Turkish circles or tendencies, ethnic Kurds may give up their aforementioned demands if their socio-economic conditions are improved in Eastern and South-eastern Turkey (Brown 1995; Loizides 2010; Sarigil and Fazlioglu 2014). These circles define the Kurdish problem not as an ethno-cultural question but as an issue of regional terrorism rooted in feudalism, ignorance and poverty (Cornell 2001; Lundgren 2007; Sarigil and Fazlioglu 2013). They argue that improving socio-economic conditions would curb Kurdish nationalism and suppress ethno-nationalist attitudes and beliefs among Turkish-citizen Kurds (Icduygu, Romano and Sirkeci 1999; Mutlu 2001; Yegen 2011). This would render ethnic Kurds loyal citizens of Turkey who back all Turkish-based integrationist policies (Kushner 1997; Sarigil 2010; White 1998). At the end of the day, there would be no Kurdish problem, but loyal Kurds integrated into the Republic (Sarigil and Karakoc 2016; Yegen 1996). This argument can easily be dismissed.

The socio-economic approach is a product of modernisation theory. This assumes that socio-economic underdevelopment and backwardness increase the likelihood of ethno-nationalism and separatism, while higher levels of income and education weaken primordial ethnic loyalties and identifications and reduce the likelihood of ethno-nationalism and secessionism (Sarigil 2010, 537-540; Sarigil and Fazlioglu 2014, 438-441). There are some significant studies confirming the assumptions of modernisation theory. For example, in his comprehensive study analysing various separatist movements around the globe, Donald Horowitz (1981, 170) concludes that “rich regions are not the leading secessionists. They are far outnumbered by regions poor in resources and productivity”. In his later study scrutinising African, Asian and Caribbean ethno-nationalist movements, Horowitz (1985, 233-239) finds a similar result: backward groups in economically and socially underdeveloped regions are more likely to support ethno-nationalism and separatism. Gellner (1983), Hayes and McAllister (2001), Hechter (1975, 1992) and O’Gara (2001) agree that rich groups in economically and socially well-developed regions are less likely to support ethno-nationalism and separatism.

Other studies have questioned these arguments. In his comprehensive article examining separatist movements as social and



political phenomena, John Wood (1981, 116) argues that “there are many instances of economically worse-off people who do not attempt secession, as well as some cases of better-off people who do ([Yugoslav] Croatians, [Nigerian] Ibos, [Spanish] Basques [and Catalans])”. Similarly, in his pioneering work scrutinising various ethno-nationalist and secessionist movements in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, the Middle East and Africa, Ted Robert Gurr notes:

Spanish Basques [and Catalans], [Canadian] Quebecois, [Soviet] Armenians, [Soviet] Ukrainians, and [Yugoslav] Slovenes all were separatist in the 1980s despite regional prosperity, limited autonomy, and significant national political influence (1993, 82).

In addition to these works questioning the assumptions of modernisation theory, there are also other studies disproving them. In his Soviet-specific analysis, Henry Hale (2000, 44-48) concludes that there is a strong positive correlation between socio-economic development and secession, meaning that the more a regionally concentrated ethnic group is economically and socially developed, the more it is willing to secede. In their Russia-specific study examining popular support for secessionism among Russians and non-Russian titular nationalities in ten autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, Hagendoorn, Poppe and Minescu (2008, 365-369) reach a similar conclusion that socio-economic development and prosperity are likely to promote secessionism rather than suppress it. Many other studies, including Emizet and Hesli (1995), Frye (1992), Roeder (1991), Sorens (2004), Treisman (1997) and Wallerstein (1961), agree that socio-economically advantaged groups are more prone to ethnic activism, nationalism and separatism in comparison with their disadvantaged counterparts.

In light of all these studies contesting the assumptions of modernisation theory, we may argue that increases in the socio-economic status of Eastern and South-eastern Turkey might not decrease or restrain the likelihood of Kurdish ethno-nationalism; instead, it may result in the opposite. I should emphasise that I am not saying socio-economic development would certainly engender a more powerful Kurdish ethno-nationalist movement that might perhaps back even an outright independent Kurdish state established in Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia, or an irredentist formula asking for the amalgamation of all Kurdish-dominated regions in the Middle East under the title of a new Kurdish nation-state. I argue that having been

socio-economically developed, ethnic Kurds might not become loyal citizens of Turkey who support all integrationist policies recognising, protecting and promoting solely Turkish identity. The Kurds would still voice their identity rights and demands for political representation and call on Turkey to offer a multiculturalist political formula enabling the recognition, protection and promotion of Kurdish identity in both public and private domains. In the absence of such a formula, the socio-economic approach would not enable the Republic to solve its long-running political question.

The Kurds have made some socio-economic demands, e.g. introducing province-based projects on agricultural, rural and livestock development; initiating a comprehensive demining process to obtain new agricultural and grazing lands in Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia; providing entrepreneurs with special grants and loans to set up factories in the two regions; providing regional infrastructural investments, especially in the areas of transportation and energy; launching new government policies to advance nature and winter tourism in the regions; and constructing cultural, rehabilitation and social centres for children and women (Kurban and Yolacan 2008, 1-5; Assam 2015, 2-3). The fulfilment of these socio-economic demands and their similar counterparts would contribute to the ultimate resolution of the Kurdish issue, but the Kurds are unlikely to give up their identity rights and demands for political representation following the satisfaction of the socio-economic demands.

## CONCLUSION

The Kurdish question is one of the biggest political problems of Turkey. It has led to numerous humanitarian, democratic and economic costs. Turkey has made various reforms in order to resolve its Kurdish issue since the last two decades. These reforms have transformed the assimilationist Turkey into an integrationist republic, but they have not resulted in a political resolution to the issue.

This essay has sought to examine whether Turkey can resolve its long-running Kurdish issue by way of socio-economic methods. The essay has ultimately reached the conclusion that the socio-economic approach may contribute to the resolution of the Kurdish question, but the approach alone would not come up with a political resolution formula for the question. Having fulfilled socio-economic Kurdish demands, Turkey would still be asked to adopt a multiculturalist political settlement that permits Kurdish identity and its characteristics,

such as culture, history, language and traditions, to be recognised, preserved and promoted in both public and private domains.

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