

Fevzi Bilgin and Ali Sarihan (eds.), *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013, 250 pp., (ISBN: 978-0-7391-8402-8).

The Kurdish conflict in Turkey has been a key domestic problem during the past three decades. The significant decline in the violence used by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since 1999 and the minor reforms introduced by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government over the past decade has created a situation where a negotiated end to the conflict is within sight. However, the dialogue between the PKK and the Turkish state is yet to result in a negotiated end to the conflict. The Kurdish experience in Turkey during the past 50 years raises numerous important research questions concerning conflict, violence and mobilisation, which requires careful and in-depth analyses. Described as "an excellent collection of essays on Turkey's most enduring political problem" by Mesut Yeğen, who is a leading expert on the Kurdish question in Turkey, *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question* aims to "clarify the complexity of Turkey's Kurdish question" (p. vii). Written by academics and journalists, it brings together chapters that have both a historical and contemporary focus.

The book is divided into four parts each of which focuses on a distinct aspect of the Kurdish question. The introduction to the book is written by Fevzi Bilgin, in which he briefly reflects on Turkey's Kurdish question and then summarises each of the book's 13 chapters. The first three chapters aim at shedding light on the origins of the Kurdish question and the legacy of Kurdish nationalism. In chapter 1, historian Djene Rhys Bajalan studies the period between 1851 and 1908 to trace the emergence and evolution of early Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish identity politics in the Ottoman Empire. He examines the early articulations of the idea of Kurdish nation by traditional elites, drawing on an impressive amount of primary and secondary sources. The chapter is well written and in particular, he provides analysis of the poetry of Hacî Qadirê Koyî and the contents of *Kürdistan* – the first Kurdish newspaper which was first published in Cairo in 1898. Rather than accepting that Kurdish nationalism contains a particular content or Kurdish identity embodies particular characteristics, Bajalan argues for the need to explain "why different groups within Kurdish society have mobilised Kurdish identity in a particular way in a particular period" (p. 21). His chapter is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Kurdish nationalism that offers a new and nuanced empirical account.

In chapter 2, the well-known journalist Oral Çalışlar discusses the social, political and cultural dimensions of Turkey's Kurdish question. Çalışlar traces the origins of Turkey's Kurdish question to the early years of the republic and

its “monist” approach, which to the Kurds meant denial: “The Kurdish issue was a social problem at the beginning, but with the policies of rejection, denial, and destruction, it turned into a complex issue” (p. 29). The chapter is written in a journalistic style (without end or in-text references, it does not refer to wider academic literature on the Kurdish question and only cites two primary sources) and presents an idiosyncratic narrative of the Kurdish question. For example, to the question why Kurdistan was divided, Çalışlar responds: “Due to their partnership with the Turks during the Armenian massacre and their resistance to the occupation of Anatolia by Western allies, Turks and Kurds became enemies to be punished. ... The punishment of the Kurds came in their division among four states” (p. 30). In addition, the chapter lacks a coherent structure and a clear line of argument. Hence, it will confuse readers who are new to the topic while to experienced readers, it will appear shallow and lacking analytical rigour.

In chapter 3, E. Fuat Keyman and Umut Özkırımlı argue that nationalism as “a strategy used both by the Kurds to put forward their demands for recognition and the state to suppress these demands, is the most serious hurdle in the way of a peaceful resolution to the ‘Kurdish question’” (p. 47). The chapter draws from democratic theory and is situated within Turkey’s ongoing problem of pluralism. They argue that “the solution lies in the democratic reconstruction of the political in Turkey” (p. 47) and propose the “deethnicization’ of the Kurdish question and the exploration of the ways in which identity claims could be articulated with citizenship rights with an emphasis on the rule of law and democracy” (p. 51). However, it is not clear whether their solution is able to accommodate the key Kurdish demands and consequently various major questions remain unanswered: Does the rearticulation of Kurdish identity claims involve its constitutional recognition?; If not, why not?; Does it lead to the satisfaction of the cultural and language rights as has been popularly demanded by the Kurds? Furthermore, the discussion does not take into account the transformation undergone by the Kurdish movement in Turkey over the past 15 years that has led to the rearticulation of Kurdish demands within democratic discourse and not as particularistic ethnic demands as the chapter assumes. Such a framing of the Kurdish question continues to be rejected in Turkey and the authors neither discuss how the rejection of Kurdish democratic demands can be overcome nor identify who will be the agent of the “de-ethnicization” of the Kurdish question.

Part two of the book explores the contemporary period. In chapter 4, the renowned Turkish journalist Cengiz Çandar provides an overview of the Kurdish question in Turkey, with brief comments on its regional dimensions.

Çandar also writes in a journalistic style but in contrast to Çalışlar's chapter, his account is much more focused and coherent. It also briefly covers the major developments connected to the Kurdish question in the past century. In a similar fashion, in chapter 5, Michael M. Gunter provides a descriptive overview of the different organisations that collectively make up the Kurdish national movement in Turkey. He briefly discusses the emergence and evolution of the PKK up to the year 2012, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), which is described as an "umbrella pan-Kurdish organisation" (p. 77), the then pro-Kurdish political party the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) with a brief history of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey that came into being in 1990, and the Democratic Society Congress (DTK). The Kurdish Diaspora activism is also briefly mentioned.

In chapter 6, Ali Sarhan compares and contrasts the periods of 1984–1999 and 2004–2010 in which the PKK carried out an armed campaign with the aim of explaining the intensity of the conflict. It provides a description of the PKK, its aims and how it is run on a daily basis. However, it does this without the use of any ideological material produced by the PKK to explain itself and motivate its actions. In chapter 7, Kılıç Buğra Kanat uses the concept of diversionary strategy to explain the reasons behind the PKK ending its ceasefires. The chapter starts with an overview of the Kurdish question in Turkey, which is repetitive of what has been discussed in previous chapters and goes on to explain the PKK's return to military attacks by way of Abdullah Öcalan's attempt to continue his dominance within the PKK. In chapter 8, Hugh Pope examines the AKP's "Democratic Opening" in 2009 and discusses the actual steps taken by the party and the problems faced during its attempts to broaden Kurdish rights in Turkey. The chapter does well to question the claims made in other chapters about the PKK being an impediment to peace and Turkey's democratisation: "Disappointment deepened as the AKP became more nationalist ahead of the 2011 elections, in which Erdoğan dropped two key Kurdish candidates from his list, denied any plan to reduce Öcalan's multiple life sentences, and said that he would have hanged the PKK leader" (p. 124).

In chapter 9, Gökhan Bacık and Bezen Balamir Coşkun discuss the reasons behind Turkey's failure to develop a political solution to the Kurdish question and identify four reasons: first, the state tradition in Turkey, which leads to preference of the military approach; second, the absence of an acceptable interlocutor caused by the state's oppression of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement, who, given the opportunity, could have developed (and subsequently has over the past two years) into an acceptable interlocutor; third, the political cost of peace being high, which prevents governments taking risks; and, fourth, the "international conjecture" (p. 157). The authors do not explain

what “international conjecture” refers to but I wonder if it should instead be rephrased as “international conjuncture”?

Part 3 of the book is titled ‘Civil Society Efforts in Turkey’s Kurdish Region’ but limits the discussion to Islam based challenges to Kurdish nationalism from the Hizbullah and Gülen movements. It is not clear why mainstream Kurdish civil society activism by human rights organisations, women’s organisations, trade unions, and Kurdish language and culture orientated organisations are left out of the discussion completely. In chapter 10, Mustafa Gürbüz focuses on the radical Islamist group Hizbullah and its attempts in the past decade to transform itself into a non-violent social movement that has increasingly tried to rebrand itself as Kurdish Islam. It discusses some of Hizbullah’s activities but within the context of “its armed struggle with the ethnonationalist PKK in Kurdish cities such as Diyarbakir and Batman” (p. 168). Such a focus is too narrow and ultimately prevents the author from seeing the full dimensions of Hizbullah’s past activities. A fuller account of the Hizbullah’s murderous campaign against Kurdish civilians during the early 1990s is needed in order to highlight the difficulties Hizbullah faces in transforming itself into a civil society movement. The process of transformation depends on whether Hizbullah will be able to gain widespread acceptance from Kurdish society in general, which in turn depends on its successor organisation’s ability to acknowledge and face Hizbullah’s past crimes against Kurdish civilians.

In chapter 11, Doğan Koç discusses the activities of the Gülen Movement (GM) – also known as the Hizmet Movement – and tries to show how they are useful in reducing the appeal of the PKK. The discussion is contextualised within civil society’s role in conflict resolution but the chapter does not explore peaceful resolution of the conflict. Instead it focuses on how the educational activities of the GM (university preparation centres, private schools and tutoring centres) are effective tools against the PKK. The argument is based on select interviews with pro-GM Kurds and statistics on the numbers of PKK members and attacks that the author has compiled from various sources, some of which are based on conjecture. On the basis of statistical analysis, he establishes a positive correlation between the increase in GM activities in Kurdish majority areas and the decrease in the PKK activities (attacks as well as recruitment). However, the statistical analysis summarised on page 190 seems spurious and at best highly suspicious because the decline in PKK attacks during the 2000s can actually be attributed to the ideological and organisational transformation that the PKK underwent coupled with the resultant ceasefires declared during this period, one of which lasted almost 5 years. However, Koç makes no reference to the transformation in the conflict. Additionally, he does not discuss the views of the GM regarding the Kurdish conflict and the accommodation of

Kurdish rights in Turkey. It would have aided our understanding if the chapter explored the publications and other organisational materials the GM produced that target the Kurds, including the numerous emotional sermons of Fethullah Gulen in which he articulated the GM's position on the Kurdish Question and argued for the need to target the Kurdish nationalist activism with more force and severe security measures. Instead the chapter assumes – as the proponents and supporters of the movement do – the GM to be an agent of peace and in the service of sustainable peace building in Turkey. Hence, in order to present a credible argument the author needs to prove that there is a positive correlation between the conflict transformation achieved by the PKK's ceasefires and GM's activities in the Kurdish region.

In part 4, the international dimensions of the Kurdish question are discussed. In chapter 12, H. Akın Ünver focuses on the way Kurdish question has been discussed in the West, in particular by the European Parliament and the US Congress. The chapter seeks to highlight the dominant frames used by the Western countries in their discussion of the Kurdish question, and also the way in which the Kurdish question has impacted on Turkey's external relations. In chapter 13, Joshua W. Walker tries to understand how the Kurdish question has "affected Turkey's perceptions about its international environment starting with the Cold War" (p. 224). Both chapters offer a historical overview of the Kurdish question as well as the main events that have shaped its trajectory, which is quite useful.

The main weakness of the book is that it discusses the Kurdish question while ignoring the main actors that have put the Kurdish question on Turkey's agenda in the contemporary period. The chapters in part 2 ignore the discourses and practices of the Kurdish national movement (the PKK as well as the legal pro-Kurdish political parties) and more specifically its articulation of the Kurdish question, the Kurdish demands, its ideological evolution, how it managed to mobilise the Kurds during the past 30 years etc. This becomes a serious weakness for chapters 6, 7 and 9, in particular because they seek to understand and explain the actions of the PKK as an organisation and its behaviour during the conflict but we learn almost nothing about key issues such as how the PKK managed to mobilise a large number of the Kurds, what the party's key demands have been or how and why it has evolved and transformed ideologically and organisationally. None of these chapters refer to the PKK's publications or analyse its discourse in any meaningful way. The weakness such an exclusion creates becomes very clear in chapter 9 when such a complex process as the PKK's mass mobilisation of the Kurds during 1980s and 1990s is merely explained through the actions of the Turkish state: "In retrospect, it was mainly due to the Turkish state's tactical errors that the PKK was

able to become a major organisation that represents the larger Kurdish groups” (p. 146). Such a description completely removes political agency from the PKK and more broadly the Kurds.

Similarly, the book ignores the pro-Kurdish democratic movement (except very briefly in chapter 5) and the series of legal political parties that have represented it since its formation in 1990. Such political parties have been significant actors in the Kurdish question but again we learn nothing from this book about their key political objectives and how have they articulated Kurdish demands. On page 92, the pro-Kurdish democratic movement gets treated as being connected to the PKK, which is the repeated accusation the pro-Kurdish political parties have faced for articulating Kurdish demands and simply serves the aim of delegitimising the pro-Kurdish movement and undermining its democratic demands. Hence, the way pro-Kurdish political parties are framed by Turkey’s state and mainstream political actors is reproduced uncritically within this book. In contrast Hizbullah, which is responsible for the murders of hundreds if not thousands of civilians during the 1990s, is described as a “revolutionary Kurdish Islamic movement” (p. xviii).

In addition, this exclusion becomes a major barrier to the book’s ability to present nuanced and impartial accounts that aids our understanding of the Kurdish question in Turkey. Without offering due considerations or providing a substantiated account, various problematic and incorrect claims are made about the Kurdish movement. As an example, Sarihan states “The Iraqi war [of 2003] strengthened and encouraged the PKK to pursue the ideal of an independent Kurdistan” but in actual fact from the early 2000s onwards the PKK have been advocating a solution to the Kurdish question on the basis of self-rule for the Kurds within existing state borders. Similarly, completely ignoring the fact that the pro-Kurdish movement has been in existence in Turkey since 1990 and the DTP was established by numerous well-known Kurdish politicians, he states, “In 2005, the PKK also founded the Democratic Society Party (DTP) as a political representative of the organization” (p. 92).

Chapter 7 claims that movements whose leaders are imprisoned are less motivated to generate great change (p. 113) but ignores the fact that the PKK experienced a major discursive and organisational transformation during the 2000s in the time Öcalan has been in prison. In chapter 9, contradictory statements are made: the authors argue that “Since 1994, the PKK has repeatedly called for a ceasefire” (p. 150), which acknowledges that the PKK has been attempting to end the conflict through a peace process. Furthermore, they argue “In 1993, the PKK declared its first unilateral ceasefire, which enabled it to initiate a process that eventually led to a negotiated solution. However, the Turkish government never moved to take serious stock either of the PKK’s

successes, or of its preparedness to negotiate” (p. 145). However, later on in the chapter, they argue “A further reason for the failure of a political solution to emerge is that the PKK never felt obliged to seek a peaceful solution” (p. 157). Inadvertently, their discussion reveals the difficulties involved in bringing about and successfully completing a peace process to end the conflict. Given the deep roots of the conflict and its complexities, such difficulties are understandable and Turkey needs to overcome them if it is to succeed in peacefully solving the conflict. Instead of exploring these difficulties and how can they be overcome, the dominant tendency (except perhaps chapter 8) – as the above discussion shows – is to blame the PKK for the failures of the attempts at conflict resolution, which uncritically reproduces the government’s argument.

Lastly, some of the chapters contain quite similar sections on the background to Turkey’s Kurdish Question, which is repetitive and perhaps a little tedious for the reader. Instead, the introduction could have been longer and provided the background information to the conflict, which would have opened up space for the chapters to engage with the subject matter on a deeper level.

Overall, some of the chapters do make a contribution to our understanding of the Kurdish question in Turkey. However, others fail the test of objective research. A more inclusive and unbiased approach to the Kurdish movement in Turkey would have allowed for an accurate analysis of the difficulties involved in the resolution of the conflict.

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