Turkey's Kurdish Question Revisited; Perspectives of Kurdish Political Parties Towards the Kurdish Issue

Ji Nû ve Nirxandina Pirsgirêka Kurdan li Turkîyeyê; Bergehên Partiyên Polîtîk yên Kurdan li Hember Kêşeya Kurdan

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ABSTRACT:

Kurdish question is one of the most complicated matters in Turkey. Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, the issue has evolved and manifested itself differently due to certain socio-political conjunctures. Besides its evolution through socio-political conditions, Kurdish political organizations which comprise different ideologies and visions, have generated varied understanding towards this issue. This article aims to analyze the Kurdish question through the perspectives of the contemporary Kurdish political parties in Turkey. The article initially compares the ideas of different scholars and their definitions of the Kurdish issue. Secondly, it sheds lights on the background of the issue in which its historical evolution is divulged. The viewpoints of the political parties are comparatively studied by the assessment of important aspects of their political opinions. Finally, the study is concluded by displaying some certain outcomes of the differentiations among their perspectives.

KeyWords: Kurds, Kurdistan, PKK, Turkey, Self-determination

PUXTE:

Pirsa Kurdî yêk jî aloztirîn pirs e li Tirkîyê. Ji serdema damezirandina Komara Tirkîyê heta evru, ji ber şert û mernçên komelayetî û sîyasî her dem di nav peresendinekî da buye û bi rengên curawcur dîyar buye. Ji bilî vê çendê, ji layê partîyên sîyasî nêrînên cuda hatine derbirîn li ser vê pirsê ku îdeolojîyên cîyawaz têda cihekê giring hene. Amanca vê gotarê nirxandina pirsa Kurdî ye bi nêrînên partîyên sîyasî yên Tirkîyê. Di despêkê, gotar hizr û ramanên nîvîskarên cuda û pênaseyên wan li ser pirsa Kurdî ber yêk tînît. Duyem, li ser paşxaneya vê pirsê disekinît ku têda peresendina vê ya mêjuyî têda dîyarkirin. Nêrînên partîyên sîyasî hatine berawirdkirin di gel

helsengandina xalên taybet yên ramanên wan yên sîyasî. Li dumahîkê, gotar hatîye encamdan bi pêşandanên derencamên dîyarkirî yên ciyawazîyên di navbera wan rwangeyan.

Peyvên Sereke: Kurd, Kurdistan, PKK, Tirkîye, Çareyî xunûsîn

1. INTRODUCTION

When a country faces a question related to an ethnic group, it is inevitable for the question to have different narratives. These narratives are either influenced by internal and external factors or they are provided by the viewpoints of the actors by considering certain aspects of the question. However, the definition of a question by those who consider themselves as the main actors of this endeavor begs for the question of whether their attempts cause impediments or provide any benefit. Thus, it becomes a question within the question, or a number of questions that emerge due to dissimilarities in terms of defining the very essence of the question. As a matter of fact, to define a problem is to create a concept, and it means to understand the context of it. And therefore, all the steps that would be taken are set accordingly. In the end, the solution alternatives provided against the question are directly related to how it is recognized.

The Kurdish question, like every socio-political issues, has gone through several stages and evolved by including different elements until this day. It is possible to note that it has developed a complex nature within being influenced by several indicators. In general, the Kurdish question, and in particular the question of the Kurds in Turkey, whether it is an ethnic issue or the ways how it is defined by different sides, is one of the most complicated matters even when it comes to research. In Turkey, where the Kurds are believed to constitute %15 to %20[1] of the population, one will always face obstacles when creating a certain approach of analysis. These obstacles and difficulties are either caused by social discrepancies, cultural tendencies, linguistic based politics or policies, self-identification and identity construction, ideological differences, and/or many other related and similar reasons. Taking into account such separate yet linked factors of the same problem, it is possible to see different approaches and alternative solution ways provided by different sides. Even though the overall situation seems to be two sided – opposition vs state, minority vs majority, parent identity and sub identity-, different evaluations of these matters make the issue even more complicated. And this complication has significant influence on the strategies towards solution. Keeping in mind that such a large population which has gone through some remarkable historical events, such as uprisings, persecution, assimilation, and other policies imposed by the state, it is evident that different ideologies, perspectives, and strategies would come to the scene naturally. And eventually, these perspectives create more than one definitions to describe the Kurdish issue.

Currently, there are several political parties operating in Turkey that put the Kurdish question into their agenda. Based on their ideological differences and their standpoints, they can be defined as pro-Kurdish, pro-Islamic, and/or pro-democracy. While some of them follow the same direction and obtaining same agenda, the others provide varied ideas to define the nature of Kurdish issue and to present their solution proposals. However, in general, they can be divided into two main groups; HADEP (People's Democratic

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1 - "***Who are the Kurds?***" https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440

Party) and its predecessor; and the parties that are founded in 2000s, which in this article they are defined as "alternative parties".

The main aim of this article is to analyze the different approaches provided by Kurdish political parties toward the Kurdish issue with regard to how it has been and is being identified on a comparative scale. The article targets the main Kurdish political organizations in Turkey, in the past and the present, and evaluates their agendas, and define the Kurdish question through their lenses.

The article consists of three main chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the conceptual understanding of the Kurdish issue by bringing together the ideas of several scholars. Secondly, the article forms a historical background of the Kurdish question from the foundation of the Republic of Turkey to the present day. The third chapter analyzes the perspectives of the Kurdish political parties in Turkey comparatively by examining their political agendas. Finally, the conclusion part reveals the outcomes of differences between the political parties' approaches to the Kurdish question and how they influence its understanding in contemporary Turkey.

The methodology of this article is based on *case study* and is largely *qualitative*. The *document analysis* is conducted by studying the programs and charters of political parties. *Analytical, historical*, and *descriptive* methods are used to reveal the evolution of Kurdish question from past to present. Also, evaluation of different ideas and ideologies are managed by using *comparative analysis*. Finally, interviews with chairmen of political parties are delivered by engaging *structured interviews*.

2. A DILEMMA OF A QUESTION

There are several reasons that cause obstacle to define what Kurdish question really is. Since it has historical roots, and the socio-political conditions of each historical era led the Kurdish issue develop differently, by adding distinct elements; hence, different dimensions of the issue have been produced. Scholars, authors, researches, and numerous people who pay attention to the Kurdish politics have contributed to understanding of the issue with variety of definitions. These definitions seems to be created either by observing from one or few angles of the issue or the aspects that are more in concern. On the other hand, there are also evaluations that either deny the very existence of the issue or associate it with other subjects. That is why it has been and being defined as "South Eastern issue", "Terrorism and security issue", or "question of underdevelopment". Besides, it can also be seen that the evolution of the issue and the development of socio-political conjunctures play an important role on its recognition. As Çalışar states that the Kurdish issue was a social problem at the beginning, but with the policies of rejection, denial, and destruction, it turned into a complex political issue.[2]

One of the widely accepted arguments is the ethno-political dimension of the issue. In Yazıcıoğlu's thoughts, the Kurdish problem is an ethno-nationalism problem, arising from the identity need and demand of a community that differs from the majority with its ethno-linguistic characteristics, and which express itself through various methods of violence such as rebellion and terrorism over time. As such, the Kurdish problem is basi-

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2 - Çalışar, O., ***The Kurdish Issue in Turkey: Its Social, Political, and Cultural Dimension***s, Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Issue, Ed. Fevzi Bilgin and Ali Sarıhan, UK, 2013, p.53

cally an ethnic problem that emerges between the state identity and the Kurdish identity and produces violence on this axis.3 Erdogan and Coskun also present the same ethno-politic argument stating that the Kurdish issue, which is currently the biggest obstacle to social peace and tranquility in Turkey, is essentially an ethno-political issue.4

It is a fact that when the Kurdish issue is defined in the framework of ethno-politics, eventually it brings the question of ethnic conflict between the Kurds and the opposite party. However, Bruinessen suggests not seeing it as an ethnic conflict with other nations. In his ideas, Kurdistan is a complex society with many internal conflicts and competition; these problems are further aggravated by state-level economic and political conflicts. The local relationship and conflicts have been linked to state-level and inter-state-level conflicts, and different forms of intensive cooperation have developed between local rulers and the state apparatus (or another state-like actor).5

Considering the denial of the Kurdish identity, Beşikçi's evaluation of the Kurdish issue is within the frame of colonialism; as he claims that Kurdistan is an international colony in the middle of the Middle East. He claims that even the status of the Kurdish nation is much lower than the colonies by giving example of the denial of the existence of the Kurds in Turkey. Beşikçi emphasizes that every effort is made to crush, dissolve, and destroy the Kurdish identity. The fact that the Kurds are treated equally with the Turks is subject to the condition of Turkification. It is racist, which is unique in the world. And it is colonial.6

Evidently, a question that encompasses several aspects causes difficulties in terms of on what particular ground it should be placed, yet each approach is useful to understand different side of the question. Nevertheless, it creates an indeterminate situation particularly toward solution of the issue. In this respect, Kurdish problem, similar to the other international political conflicts, is like an iceberg; what is seen at the top is a small part of the conflict, but beneath there are perceptions, interests, values, culture, attitude, needs, expectations, assumptions, suppressions. Thus, in order to understand it properly, it needs to be analyzed in details with its historical background, social, economic, cultural and political reasons, dynamics and actors involved, factors and elements that led the conflict escalate.7

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE BACKGROUND OF THE KURDISH QUESTION

The historical background of the Kurdish issue is displayed by the events which have significant effects on the memory of the Kurds and form remarkable stages in their historiography. Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, there has always been clashes between the state and the Kurdish political movements. Several organizations that emerged in the early Republican era have brought different perspectives in terms of the status of Kurdistan and the conditions in which the Kurds lived. Those organizations that were generally led by the Kurdish elites resided in Istanbul, were mainly formed by notables who had previously participated in the activities of the Young-Turk movement.

3 - Yazıcıoğlu, U., Turkiye'de Kürtler, Europaisches institute fur Menschenrechte, p. 13
4 - Erdoğan, M., and Coşkun, V., *Turkiye'nin Kürt Meselesi*, Journal of Liberal Thought, 2008, p.5
5 - Bruinessen, M., Kurtluk, Turkluk, Alevilik, Iletisim, 2000, p.11
6 - Besikci, I., Unescoya Mektup, Yurt, 1992, p.32
7 - Akyeşilmen, N., *Revisiting Kurdish Question in Turkey: A Hope for Solution?* Journal of Social and Economic Research, 2013, Vol.25, p. 90-91

This indicates that their political visions were determined by their reformist and modernist Turkish comrades. Even when they started to draw their lines based on nationalist notions, there has always been a part taken from the Young-Turks and added to their milestones. An example of this is the letter one of the prominent Kurdish intellectuals, Jaladet Badirkhan, addresses to Mustafa Kamal, mentioned the Turkish Hearths (Turk Ocakları), stating that "these hearths have trained Kurds for us as it has trained Turks for you."[8]

It is possible to address this era the first stage of Kurdish nationalism. However, this nationalism, as mentioned above, developed by Kurdish notables who were mostly members of high Ottoman bureaucracy and as such an integral part of the Ottoman state. Their well-being depended heavily on the existence of the state.[9] David Romano explains this stage as "missed opportunities". He argues that four political variables (instability of governing elite alignments, the presence of elite allies, the state's incapacity to repress, and a supportive international context) favored Kurdish challengers to the emergent Turkish state. Besides the apparent openness, he states that the second major reason for Kurdish nationalist failure relates to the ambiguous position of Kurdish elites as many were more tribal or sectarian than nationalists, and therefore willing to be coopted by the Turkish state or to happily sit on their hands as their insurgent tribal rivals were crushed.[10] And he adds:

> *"If there were ever existed an auspicious political opportunity Kurdish nationalists, it was embodied in the Treaty of Sevres, forced upon the Sultan and his coterie of government elites and endorsed by the allied powers. Ataturk's nationalist coalition, which rejected the Treaty, had its hands full in 1920 fighting Greek, Armenian, French, and pro-Sultan forces on all fronts. Hence there existed little state capacity to repress Kurdish nationalists, should they have chosen this window of opportunity to make the Treaty of Sevres' provisions for a Kurdish state a reality."[11]*

The Kurdish intelligentsia of the late Ottoman and the early Republican era have revealed their visions toward the nature of the Kurdish question and the status of Kurdistan by publishing several newspapers and journals. In these publications, it is possible to observe the dissimilarities among their perspectives when it comes to create certain arguments in which these subjects are evaluated. In a general sense, their ideas can be put on two main pillars; *Ottomanists* (based on Muslim identity) and nationalists (a late awakening); and they have become driving forces when it comes to nation-building. When Bozarslan defines this era as "self-remaining, yet becoming other", he mentions the concept of universality in order to give a meaning to their identity which is widely understood and defended as 'civilization'. And this civilization is only one side of being a nation; rather than changing the Kurdishness, it allows it to survive.[12] One of the famous publications, *Kurdistan,* describes the Kurds as the most distinguished tribes that constitute the eternal Ottoman state.[13] The paper also includes the emphasis of the Muslim

8 - Bedirxan, C., Bir Kürt Aydınından Mustafa Kemal'e Mektup, Istanbul, 1992, p.32

9 - Özoğlu, H.**, "Nationalism" and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman – Early Republican Era**, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol.33, 2001, p.383

10 - Romano, D., The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity, Cambridge, 2006, p.26-27

11 - Ibid., p. 28

12 - Bozarslan, H., **Turkiye'de Yazılı Kürt Tarihi Söylemi Üzerine Bazı Hususlar**, Vali, A., Kürt Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri, Istanbul, 2005, p.45

13 - **Bedirxan, M., "Şevketlu Azametlu Abdulhamid Sani Hazretlerine Arzuhal-ı Abidanemdir**" (Mikdad Bedirxan's letter to Sultan Abdulhamid), Kurdistan, Vol, 1, p.146. Edited by M. Emin Bozarslan, https://archive.org/details/kurdistan-magazine-1898-1902-all-issues-1-57

identity of the Kurds mentioning the significance of their religious status for the sake of prevention any attempt to occupy Anatolia by Russians and Armenians.14 In the second phase of the publication of *Kurdistan*, preservation of territorial integrity of the Ottoman State and implementation of Sharia law have been openly expressed. And about the Kurds, the attention was drawn to improve their contemporary needs and education.15 Bajalan explains that the writers of *Kurdistan* have dealt with the Kurdish question from the perspective of Ottoman patriotism. These writers adopted the Ottoman State as their homeland and viewed Kurdistan as an inseparable part of it. However, the paper also published articles criticizing the Abdul Hamid administration, particularly the Hamidiye Regiments.16

This era has witnessed several other newspapers and magazines in different years. However, the vision of Kurdistan and the concept of Kurdish question seen throughout these publications are not different from each other. On the contrary, they are seen as complementary to each other. *Şark ve Kürdistan* (East and Kurdistan, 1908), *Rojî Kurd* (The Kurdish Day, 1913), *Yekbûn* (Unity, 1913), *Hetawî Kurd* (The Kurdish Sun, 1913), *Bangî Kurd* (The Kurdish Call, 1914), *Kürdistan* (1914), and *Jîn* (Life, 1918) were the main publications of the time in which the Kurdish intelligentsia envisioned a Kurdistan that was a part of the Ottoman State or an autonomous structure.

After the stagnation period followed by the Dersim rebellion in 1938, in the Kurdish movements that revived between the 1940s and the 1980s, the Kurdish question have been viewed with the ideologies of the modern world. Namely, the leftist perspectives dominated the core understanding of the Kurdish politics where the activists saw themselves as a part of socialist-Kurdish structure. That is why most of the activists took side of the Labor Party and brought the Kurdish issue on an internationalist ground. Although this stage can be described as the era which the Kurdish movement was perceived with ideologies, two main aspects have had mainly contributed to the recognition of the Kurdish question; socialist revivalism and nationalism. On one hand, a question that is observed through Marxist-Leninist perspective (Labor Party), and on the other hand, a question that is only related to national identity, therefore can only be solved with national liberation (Kurdistan Democratic Party-Turkey). However, the emergence of the DDKO (Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths) was an important step that represents the separation of the Kurdish activists from the Turkish left. The reason for this separation, as Doğanoğlu describes, was that the Turkish left did not show the necessary sensitivity to the Kurdish issue and was far from showing it. In the DDKO's view, the Turkish left argued that the Kurdish problem will naturally be resolved with the advent of socialism. However, the Kurdish issue was a very concrete issue that needed to be embraced and voiced without delay.17 Doğanoğlu reveals the reasons of the emergence of the DDKO by quoting from Hikmet Bozcalı, one of the founders of the party:

> *"FKV, DEV-GENC, and TIP called the "Kurdish question" the "Eastern question".*
> *Since there was no an open environment of the discussion of such issue, whether such*

14 - Ibid., Vol.1, p.259

15 - Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Gazetesi, Teşrin-i Sani, 1324, Issue 1, p.6-7, Ed. M. Emin Bozarslan, Sweden, 1998, Available at: https://archive.org/details/kovara-hawar-hawar-magazine-1932-1945-all-issues-1-57-kurdish-french./K%C3%BCrd%20 Teav%C3%BCn%20ve%20Terraki%20Cemiyeti_Gazetesi%

16 - Bajalan, D., R., Jön Kürtler, Avesta, Istanbul, 2010, p.90

17 - Doğanoglu, M., *Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları ve Siyasal Ayrışma*, University of Ankara, Journal of SBF, Vol. 71, No.3, 2016, p. 945

issue exists or not, it was not being debated. Bu we, the Kurdish origin, were aware of the existence of such issue since we had experienced it ourselves. The existing parties and organizations did not pay attention to it and did not provide a solution, we started to shed lights on this issue among ourselves. At this point, it became necessary to create our own organization."18

Unlike the other political organizations, the foundation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has opened a new chapter in the Kurdish politics in Turkey. Not only did it become an important turn of the events but also changed the entire narrative of the Kurdish question. Although to these days the PKK came up with different and controversial proposals for the solution of the Kurdish issue, in the handbook of the party, *Kurdistan Devriminin Yolu-Manifesto* (The Path to Revolution of Kurdistan-Manifesto), the Kurdish question was sought as a colonial matter, and therefore it necessitates the establishment of an independent democratic Kurdistan.19 When this narrative meets the armed struggle, the Kurdish question becomes an issue of security and terrorism in Turkey's agenda. And to solve that, the only way was decided to use the military apparatus. According to the 2020 report of International Crisis Group, the clashes between the PKK and the Turkish state cost the lives of 492 civilians, 1, 231 state security force members, 226 individuals of unknown affiliation, and 2, 895 PKK militants.20

In sum, what crated the background of the Kurdish issue was the socio-political conditions in which both the Kurds and the Turkish state have experienced. In the early 1990s, the Kurds took a new step in their struggle by becoming a part of political process in Turkey with their own political parties, participating in the elections and even gaining seats in the parliament. But in fact, the parties that carried the leftist vision did not set up their agenda different than the PKK's. In fact, following the footsteps of the PKK caused them certain obstacles when it comes to the legitimacy of their activities. Since the Kurdish issue was embodied with these organizations, the understanding toward the issue was also conceptualized in the same directions and the visions they adopted. In the end, the Kurdish question is displayed in a more complex structure. Moreover, the state associated the issue with the PKK, namely a security and terror issue. And the political parties that follow the same ideology were accused to aiding terrorism.

ISSUES WITHIN AN ISSUE; FORMATION OF DIFFERENT NARRATIVES ON THE KURDISH QUESTION

With the Resolution Process and Democratic Opening Projects that started in 2000s, the conditions for political participation for the Kurdish parties have become more convenient than ever before in Turkey's history. Thanks to these initiations, new Kurdish political organizations and parties emerged which were seen as a formation of a new step in the Kurdish political struggle in the Turkey's political arena. In a way, such formations was also translated as an alternative to the political monopoly that started with the HEP (People's Labor Party, 1990-1992) in the 1990s and continued until the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) to the present day. Until the HDP, several parties were founded following the same agenda and all of them were closed for similar reasons, OZEP (Freedom

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18 - Ibid., p. 947
19 - Öcalan, A., Kürdistan Devriminin Yolu-Manifesto, 1993, p.127
20 - ***Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer***, Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkeys-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer

and Equality Party, 1992-1993), OZDEP (Freedom and Democracy Party, 1992-1993), DEP (Democracy Party, 1993-1994), HADEP (People's Democracy Party, 1994-2003), DEHAP (Democratic People's Party, 1997-2005) and DTP (Democratic Society Party, 2005-2009). The allegations of having links with the PKK, to aim to disrupt the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation and to act in this way, aiding the PKK and becoming the center of illegal activities, acting by the instructions of Abdullah Öcalan, attending the funerals of the terrorists, and similar reasons have resulted with the closure of most of these parties.

As mentioned earlier, with the foundation of several Kurdish parties in 2000s, a ground for a new political environment was emerged. Although these parties, AZADI (Freedom), T-KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party-Turkey), KADEP (Participatory Democracy Party), PAK (Kurdistan Freedom Party), PAKURD (Kurdistani Party), HAK-PAR (Rights and Freedoms Party), and other alternative parties did not have the capacity to replace the HDP in political terms neither did some of them participate in the elections, they still put an effort to redefining what the Kurdish question is, and also suggested new alternatives for the sake of solution of this question. This section will analyze comparatively the approaches of the Kurdish political parties regarding their vision toward the structure of the Kurdish issue as well as their solution proposals.

4.1. People's Democratic Party (HDP); the question of pro-Kurdish and pro-Democracy

The first question that comes to mind when mentioning the HDP is how the party determines its political position, and more importantly, how it assesses the Kurdish question. It is a fact that the HDP is now considered as the most influential pro-Kurdish organization both in Turkey and in the view of the international communities. The party, despite always having experienced challenges with the state, for instance, the most recent detention cases after Diyarbakir and Istanbul congresses,[21] investigation against Pervin Buldan, deputy of Istanbul,[22] and still facing closure by the decision of the Constitutional Court,[23] attempts on politically ban on 687 politicians,[24] not to mention the fact of imprisonment of the co-leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, and numerous other examples, continues its political struggle in the same determination that began with the HEP in the 1990s.

The political vision that began with the HEP in Turkey's political arena perpetuated until today's HDP under several different names; OZEP, OZDEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP, and DTP. However, the view of these parties toward the determining the composition of the Kurdish issue has always remained in a complex structure. For instance, the HEP accepted the solution of the Kurdish question as a fundamental element in the functioning of democracy in the country with all rules and theories. Therefore, it aimed to defend

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21 - HDP Gençlik Kongresine 16 gozaltı, https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2021/12/27/hdpnin-genclik-kongresine-16-gozalti, HDP Istanbul Kongresi Soruşturması: 12 Kişi Gözaltına Alındı, https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/hdp-istanbul-kongresi-sorusturmasi-12-kisi-gozaltina-alindi

22 - HDP'li Pervin Buldan Hakkında Soruşturma, https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2021/12/30/hdpli-pervin-buldan-hakkinda-sorusturma

23 - AYM'de HDP'nin Kapatılması İstemiyle Açılan Davada ilk inceleme Bugün, https://tr.euronews.com/2021/06/21/anayasa-mahkemesi-hdp-nin-kapat-lmas-istemiyle-ac-lan-davada-ilk-incelemeyi-yar-n-yapacak

24 - Turkish prosecutor seeks political ban on 687 pro-Kurdish politicians, https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-prosecutor-seeks-political-ban-on-687-pro-kurdish-politicians-news-56691

the life style of all segments of the society in Turkey under equal conditions.25 But the party did not emphasize the nature of the question although it aimed to solve it within the integrity of Turkey, in line with the provisions of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Helsinki Conclusions, by a democratic and peaceful method.26

Founded in 1994, HADEP stated that the realization of democracy and peace in the country depends on the solution of the Kurdish problem. The party argues that the solution of this issue can only be possible by opening modern, participatory, human rights-based, democratic solution channels. In addition, it is one of the most important matters that the Kurdish problem could be solved by providing a free discussion environment without using violence.27 Following the footsteps of the HADEP, DEHAP also claimed the Kurdish problem to be the country's most fundamental democracy and freedom issue, which is important for Turkey's distant and recent history and future, and which preserves its relevancy to this day.28 In the eyes of the party, a republic was established as a result of a joint struggle of the Turkish and Kurdish nations, and the Kurds are one of the essential elements of this historical heritage.29 Considering these claims, the party was proposing 'a just solution to the Kurdish question in accordance with the principles of contemporary, universal and supranational law, on the basis of equal and constitutional citizenship, and practices that reject oppression and inequality in economic, political, cultural, and all fields.30

When it comes to 2005, this political perspective continued with the same determination with the DTP. The DTP first emphasized the denial of the Kurdish identity. Unlike the discourses of its predecessors, the party evaluates the Kurdish question as not only limited to Turkey but as a question of democracy in the Middle East. The DTP believed that the democratization of Turkey would have a decisive role in the democratic structure of the Middle East. Hence, it argued that this possibility can only be realized by solving the Kurdish issue.31

The party generally adopted the following principles;

1. A contemporary approach based on historical unity and brotherhood relations between Turks and Kurds,

2. Equal, free and fraternal union of the Kurds and the Turks, contrary to denial and separatist approaches,

3. The necessity of radically changing the state's view and approach to this problem,

4. Acceptance and constitutional guarantee of Kurdish existence and identity,

5. Legal assurance of their language and culture,

6. Use of Kurdish as the language of education and training.32

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25 - *Halkın Emek Partisi*, Party Program, Library of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, 1990, p. 18
26 - Ibid., p.18-19
27 - HADEP, Program, p. 8-9, https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/
28 - DEHAP, Program ve Tüzük, p. 14, https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/
29 - Ibid., p. 15
30 - Ibid., p.16
31 - *Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, Program ve Tüzük, 2005, p. 33, https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/
32 - Ibid., p. 34-35-36

Finally, after the closure of these pro-Kurdish parties, a new political body came on the stage in 2012, Peoples Democratic Party, defined itself as a democratic and peaceful force of Turkey; representatives of labor, ecology and women's rights associations, artists, writers, intellectuals, independent individuals, workers, representatives of different ethnic and religious groups, the unemployed, the retired, farmers, the handicapped, scientists and those whose cities are being destroyed have united here.33 The party also identifies itself as a party of freedom and equality, pro-peace, pro-labor, pro-self-government, pro-gender equality, and a green party. The HDP added several important topics into its Purpose, in article 2. In general, these are issues such as equal rights for the people, faith communities, capitalism, gender inequality, LGBT rights, and other issues that are interested by the whole population of Turkey. With regards to the Kurdish question in particular, the position of the party is to 'strive for a lasting peace in the Kurdish question and for a democratic solution to all the problems of the Kurdish people within the scope of collective rights.34

There are some certain aspects that reveal the position of the HDP towards the Kurdish question which are mainly based on the rhetoric of 'people' rather than creating an ethnic fragmentation among the components of 'people'. Since the protection of the territorial integrity of the country is one of the key considerations of the HDP's vision, the party did not define the Kurdish question on a certain ground. In other words, without making any ethnic distinction between the Kurds and other ethnicities within Turkey, the party has insisted on the 'democratic autonomy' project offered by its predecessor, the DTP, which is believed to be a supporting mechanism to the 'democratization of the politics' and make it 'belong to people'. Although the project of democratic autonomy has a significant importance in the party's program, it does not indicate a clear strategy to how to realize the project and how to put it into practice. On another hand, in the statement under the title of 'fighting for peace, equality, and a democratic solution in the Kurdish problem', while the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people is being defended and evaluated within the framework of a principled approach, democratization of the country is foresighted as a crucial element, and by the solidarity between 'peoples.' This principle can be brought to practice with respect to the territorial integrity of the country.35

Although the 'democratic autonomy' project, based on the directives of Öcalan, seems to be an open solution, it also contains several controversies. It is possible to see that, in addition to containing ambiguities about how it would be applied to the practice in social sphere, a definite road map has not been drawn regarding the possibilities within which even its theoretical application will be applied. This project adopts:

1. To envisage a radical reform in order to ensure democratization in Turkey's political and administrative structure,

2. Based on the self-sufficiency of the society, rather than changing the state system for the solution of the problems,

3. For the methods to be developed in the solution of the problems, it acts with the philosophy of empowering the local and making people have a say and decision.

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33 - *Peoples' Democratic Party*, https://hdp.org.tr/en/peoples-democratic-party/8760/
34 - *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, https://hdp.org.tr/tr/parti-tuzugu/10/
35 - Ibid.

4. It advocates democratic participation in order for the people to be included in the decision making processes and is based on the parliamentary system in all local units,

5. It advocates a regional and local structuring in which cultural differences are freely expressed, rather than an understanding of autonomy based solely on "ethnic" and "territorial",

6. While the "flag" and "official language" are valid for the entire "nation of Turkey", it defends that each region and autonomous unit form its own democratic self-government with its own colors and symbols,

7. The democratic self-government is organized as a "regional assembly" and the people taking part in the assembly are defined as "regional assembly representatives". The assembly separately elects both the chairman of the assembly and the member of the executive committee who will carry out the work in the field in which it is assigned. It is suggested that the chairman and the members of the executive committee are responsible for the execution of the decisions taken by the assembly.

8. Each of regions shall be referred to by the special name of that region or the name of the largest province within the jurisdiction of the regional council.

9. In the democratic autonomy model, provincial governors are responsible for implementing the decisions taken by both the central government and the regional executive board. The provincial organizations of the ministries will also be subject to the same procedure. Other administrative structures such as Provincial Assemblies, Municipalities, and Headmanships will continue to exist.[36]

By adopting the aforementioned principles in the project, the DTK and the parties that follow the same linage openly demonstrated their ideological perspectives and their vision for solution of the ethnic issues which Turkey faces. However, the question about this project is that it does not specify the ethnic groups in the country, neither the Kurds nor any other. This makes this political circle more pro-democracy rather than and ethnic party, namely a Kurdish party. Mesut Yeğen argues that it is difficult to discuss the democratic autonomy proposal of Kurdish politics; it is difficult because the authors themselves define the proposal in different ways, with a lot of uncertainty. Abdullah Öcalan is the first and main author of the idea of the project. Ocalan defined it in 2007 as "which will both ensure internal democratization against the internal backwardness of the Kurdish society and express the Kurds' stance against the outside", "not anti-state", "not aiming to establish a state", "representing the freedom of Kurds within the existing borders and state structure", "without having issue with borders", "the locals expressing themselves within the state", and "a structure where the Kurds somehow meet their own demands alongside the state institutions".[37]

The most salient feature is that the HDP did not provide a precise definition to the Kurdish question. Instead, the party examined the issue by adding general problems of the country, yet making the problem as a part of them. But taking into account the steps that are adopted for the solution, it is possible to draw a map in which the Kurdish question can be evaluated and what measures are suggested;

36 - DTK'dan 'Demokratik Özerklik' Kararı, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/dtkdan-demokratik-ozerklik-karari-18255535
37 - Yegen, M., **Demokratik Özerklik Üzerine**, p.1, https://hyd.org.tr/attachments/article/124/demokratik_ozerklik_-_agustos_2011.pdf

a. A problem that has risen as a result of nationalism and denial policies,

b. A situation blocked by war policies,

c. The pressure of antidemocratic system on the society,

d. Use of violence, arrests, and impoverishment policies,

e. An issue of status.

And against these:

1. Within unitary state structure, the Kurds to form their own decision mechanisms,

2. Implementation of a democratic model to prevent centralization and unification,

3. Changing the monist constitution which is based on denial,

4. Creation of a constitution that is based on decentralization,

5. Acceptance of mother tongue, identity, and culture.[38]

All in all, in the eyes of the HDP and the parties that laid the infrastructure of the same political vision, the Kurdish question generally remains as a question of democracy. And therefore, only by bringing democracy to the country shall the question be solved. And to bring democracy, time to time, the party offered projects, such as 'democratic autonomy', which the effort to realize is still inconclusive. In this regard, at the first steps of its foundation, the party called different political ideologies to take part under its umbrella. On the other hand, since the leftist tendency of the HDP is an undeniable fact, it has an important role in its decision-making mechanism, although it was suggested that the left can be a driving force, in can lead, but the main goal was not to combine the left. Indeed, assimilation, warfare, denial policies, and the means and measures used by the state for the sake of solution takes a significant space in the party's targets to fight against. However, to fight against them and to create an alternative ground is seen within the circle of 'collective rights' rather than any particular right to be given to the Kurds in Turkey. On the other hand, although the party seems to have defined the Kurdish issue as an 'issue of status', it lacks precise indications of the term 'status'. Instead, as mentioned in the project, the greatest importance is given to language and culture.

4.2. Kurdish Question in the view of Alternative Parties

First of all, it is necessary to explain why the term 'alternative' is being used. As mentioned earlier, the PKK's monopoly in Kurdish political history since 1980s is an undeniable fact. And another indispensable fact is the principles that constitute the ideological background of this political monopoly and that are now being represented by the HDP in the political arena. In this regard, the principles that the HDP adopted and the projects that are presented for the solution of the Kurdish issue made the party to be sort of the sole interlocutor as well as a representative in this sphere, seemingly the Kurdish question was embodied with the HDP.

Between 2001 and 2004, 'democratization packages' presented by the state, included substantial loosening of restrictions on the Kurdish freedom of expression and assem-

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38 - ***Kürt Sorununa Çözüm Deklarasyonu***, https://hdp.org.tr/tr/kurt-sorununa-cozum-deklarasyonu/12017/

bly, as well as the lifting of emergency rule in the southeast. Although broadcasting and teaching in Kurdish were still highly circumscribed and some of the reforms were only erratically implemented, the constituted an important symbolic transformation that was reflected in the new day-to-day atmosphere in mostly Kurdish regions of the country. In March 2004, a pro-Kurdish mayor again took office in Diyarbakir, but this time the election campaign occurred without the considerable restrictions that had beset pro-Kurdish parties in the past.39 These initiatives offered opportunity for several pro-Kurdish parties to emerge with entirely a different spectrum in which they observed the situation of the Kurds in Turkey. Some of them openly displayed their political ideologies by using the word *Kurdistan* in the name of their parties, such as Kurdistan Democratic Party-Turkey, Kurdistan Freedom Party, and Kurdistani Party. Thus, defying the ideologies and strategies of the PKK and the HDP, alternatively, they built their agendas based on the principles of Kurdish ethnic and national identity and the rights, which makes them not merely pro-Kurdish but literally Kurdish parties.

Even though these so called alternative parties seem to share same ideology, they still differ from each other with their unique intellectual structures and the political agendas they developed. For instance, the Rights and Freedoms Party (Hak-Par), founded in 2002 and currently chaired by Abdullatif Özdemir, urges a radical change in the very roots of Turkey's system. This radical change requires a democratic constitution. The party's charter states that the party will reconstruct Turkey administratively, politically, socially and economically; in a democratic and federal manner, on the basis of the equality of the Kurdish and Turkish people within the norms of universal democratic law. Thus, the Kurdish problem will be resolved through social reconciliation based on equal rights.40 As declared in the paragraph b of article 4, the party aims to realize a social , new, pluralist, democratic, and decentralized project, and to solve the Kurdish question with such project.

The party's program starts with the slogan of 'a need for a democratic constitution for Turkey which complies with international legal norms, is pluralistic, participatory, based on human rights and the rule of law.41 Although at the first glance, the Hak-Par's resolution for Kurdish issue seems to have similarities with the HDP's, Hak-Par, in its project of "Initiative for Democratic Federal Proposal for Kurdish Question" declared in 2009, defines the Kurdish question as:

- The Kurdish question is also a democracy and a Turkish problem,

- The Kurdish question is a question arising from the usurpation of the basic rights of the Kurdish people.42

The proposal also defines the Kurds as a nation, thus suggests that their rights that come from being a nation should be respected. Another clear statement is the principle of self-determination which the party advocates the right of the Kurdish people to live freely, with dignity and security in their ancestral land. The party also argues that this right is in accordance with international law.43

39 - Watts, N., F., **Activists in Office: Pro-Kurdish Contentious Politics in Turkey, Ethnopolitics, Vol.5, No.2, June 2006, p.139**
40 - Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi Tüzügü, Article 3, http://hakpar.org.tr/2020/05/17/1382/parti-tuzugu/
41 - HAK-PAR, Party Program, Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi Programı | Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi (hakpar.org.tr)
42 - **Açılım ve Kürt Sorunu için Demokratik Çözüm Federal Çözüm Önerisi**, http://hakpar.org.tr/2020/05/18/1449/hak-ve-ozgurlukler-partisi-hak-par/
43 - Ibid.

Ethnicity-oriented alternative parties, or in another word Kurdish parties, prioritize their identity as a fundamental element of their politics, and they draw the lines of their party programs and charters in this direction. Rather than paying attention to the general issues in the country, as in the strategies of the HDP and HAK-PAR, some of the parties' goal are set only on the Kurdish rights and freedoms, and this constitutes their sole concern. Indeed, this limits the range of these parties in terms of the political activities overall the country. This is another indication that displays the reasons why these alternative parties do not replace the HDP when it comes to be an influential body to represent the tendencies both in social and political spheres. One of the examples of this specific political tendency is the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (T-KDP). The KDP presents itself as pro-independence, patriotic, democratic, majoritarian, and a participatory mass party. In the view of the party, as a result of centuries of oppression and assimilation, the Kurdish people have been truly traumatized. In order to overcome this trauma, it is necessary to enter a radical and realistic renewal process. And for that, only two ways are foreseen; federalism and/or independence.44 The right of self-determination of the Kurds was also defended by both Pdk-Bakur (Kurdistan Democratic Party-North) and KADEP.

At this point, it is worth bringing up the question of the frameworks in which the Kurdish issue is being evaluated, in other terms, whether it is being widened and narrowed down, and what are the outcomes of such fragmentation of evaluations. This matter shall be studied in the further chapter. However, it will still not be a fruitful analysis to reckon without the perspectives of the political bodies that are believed to represent both religious and national aspects of the Kurdish struggle. Although they are considered as religion-oriented parties, they strongly advocate the national rights of the Kurds and the right of self-determination. Namely, the Azadi Party (Freedom Party) perceive the Kurdish national struggle as a religious duty. It is based on three fundamental pillars; a-the Kurds are a part of humanity as well as of Islamic ummah, b- the homeland of the Kurds is the historical Kurdistan territory, c- like every other nation, the Kurds have the right to have a state where they will be independent in their own territory.45 The Azadi firstly believes in national unity, and therefore calls for all *Kurdistani* parties and organizations to create a common body which the Kurds will be represented. Also the freedom of Kurdistan is prioritized and regarded above any ideas and ideologies.46 The three main pillars of the Azadi which are constructed with regard to the notion of self-determination are made more evident by a proposal containing five crucial demands. The proposal begins with the definition of the party as an Islamic one, and the following demands are explicitly addressed:

• The right of self-determination of the Kurds like very nation, and demand to support this right;

• The acceptance of the territory of Kurdistan and as the ancestral homeland of the Kurds;

• Therefore, to strive in order to establish a state in this ancestral territory;

• To use the resources and alternatives of the Kurdish political bodies for the sake of the freedom of the Kurds rather than against each other;

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44 - Turkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi Tüzügü, Article 3: Partinin Amacı
45 - Partiya Azadi, Party Program, p.25
46 - Ibid., p. 13

• The reality of Kurdistan as one piece and thus the first step of freedom begins with self-recognition.[47]

For this work, an interview was conducted with the chairman of the Azadi party, Ayetullah Aşiti, in which he pointed out some important aspects of the Kurdish issue. However, first of all, Aşiti states that he does not agree with the term of "Kurdish question", believing that the term connotates as if being a Kurdish is an issue. He believes that this is not an issue of being a Kurd or an issue of the Kurds. The main issue lies in the oppression done by the occupants and the authorities which deprived the Kurds from their rights. Shedding light on the position of the religion in general and particularly for the Kurds, Aşiti states that the Kurds have become the victims of wrongly perceived religion. Although the party is known to be a religion-oriented, Aşiti regards Kurdishness before the religious identity. The same response was given by the chairman of Kurdistan Islamic Party, Hikmet Serbilind, who states that they are Kurds before being a Muslim.[48] Both chairmen share the idea of Kurdishness and the Kurdish movement to be purified from ideologies including religion.

According to Serbilind, what causes the Kurdish issue to have a complex structure are three crucial problems; the notion of ummah by the Islamists which does not offer a legitimate status to the Kurds, the ideologies that support the democratic republic and democratization of the country based on Kemalist ideas, and the nationalism which is still being fed by socialism. And against these three problems, he offers a-) a national representation, b-) a collective political language, and c-) a movement that is not a victim of ideologies. Another shared ideas by Serbilind and Aşiti is the right of self-determination of the Kurds without engaging any violence. To the question of federative system or independent state, both chairmen agree on the conditions for which one of the options could be foreseen.

To conclude, despite the differences between the ideological backgrounds of the alternative Kurdish parties, they are certain on one point, self-determination. The notion of self-determination they seek starts from a federative system, unlike the HDP's project of autonomy which envisions the democratization of Turkey based on equal citizenship and preserving the common homeland under the principles of democracy, and ends with an independent state when necessary and when the conditions are suitable. Although in their party programs and charters they claim to be participatory and pluralist, their main agenda is built upon Kurdish nationalism that is a fundamental element of their vision towards the Kurdish issue.

5, CONCLUSIONS

Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the Kurdish question has been evaluated from different perspectives. This differentiation is not limited only with the perspectives but also manifests itself as a separation among the Kurdish political parties. Observing an existing issue from different angels is indeed a natural behavior. However, when it comes to determining the destiny of an ethnic group or a nation, it causes a certain complexity in terms of which directions the steps should be taken. And this complexity can be seen in the Kurdish question perspicuously.

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47 - Ibid., p. 22
48 - Interviews with both Mr. Aşiti and Mr. Serbilind were carried out online on 4th December, 2021

In this regard, the lack of a certain concept in the Kurdish question has become an undeniable fact. That is because, the evaluations of such a matter, which has a historical importance for all sides, from different perspectives, resulted in associating it with different problems. Thus, many answers to the question of "What is Kurdish issue?" have been provided and therefore more than one Kurdish problem have emerged.

Another important issue is an uncertainty about representing the Kurds have been caused. And this uncertainty creates a situation where it cannot be decided who will be the interlocutor for the solution of the Kurdish problem.

The disagreements between the political parties leave the question of "What do the Kurds want?" unanswered. One the one hand, the HDP, which seeks for the 'brotherhood of peoples' within the framework of democratic Turkey, and on the other hand, the alternative parties that are in favor of self-determination, deepens the question of demand of the Kurds.

Finally, perhaps one of the most important consequences of this differentiation is that it causes polarization among the Kurds. And this polarization has been the most important factor for them to gain their national consciousness and national unity for more than a century.

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