



Addressing the Kurdish question

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Considering the regional and international ramifications of the Kurdish question in the Middle East, the scholarly attention paid to this topic has historically been inadequate and the subject matter remains in need of serious study. It is therefore welcome that "Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question" specifically sets out to examine the country with the largest Kurdish population in the world at a time when it is struggling to come to terms with this reality. This edited, multi-authored volume brings together both established and new scholars as well as veteran Turkish journalists, some of who have written extensively on the topic over the years.

The editors express the aim of the volume as "clarifying the complexity of Turkey's Kurdish question" and attempt to do so by dissecting its various historical, political, regional and international aspects. Divided into four sections, the first examines the origins of Kurdish nationalism during the late 19th century in the Ottoman Empire, in fact preceding Turkish nationalism, as well as its exacerbation during the Turkish Republic. In Chapter 1 Djene Ryhs Bajalan provides a well-informed and solid scholarly analysis of the origins and evolution of Kurdish identity politics. In Chapter 2, the well-known Turkish journalist Oral Çalışlar gives a descriptive and chronological account of the Kurdish question and Turkey's problematic Kurdish policy. The

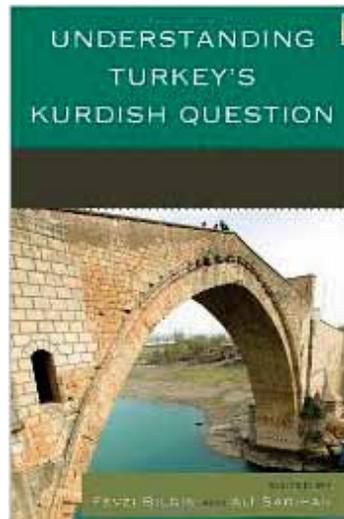
chapter is at times simplistic and rather generalizing: "Every Kurd dreams of an independent Kurdish state" (30), uses almost no sources and supplies a journalistic and personal reflection rather than an analysis. Moreover, the text does not flow well, possibly as a result of poor translation from the Turkish original. This journalistic account sits oddly between Bajalan's historical piece and E. Fuat Keyman and Umut Özkırımlı's theoretical Chapter 3. This short third chapter (only nine pages) can said to be a summary

of what the authors have written previously and repeats the argument that the Kurdish question is trapped between Turkish and Kurdish ethnic nationalisms. The authors do not sufficiently problematize the unequal power relations between the two nationalisms. However, this chapter is one of the few places in the book where the authors highlight that the sometimes violent expression of demands for Kurdish recognition cannot be decoupled from:

The violent tactics used by the Turkish state against the [Kurdistan Workers' Party] PKK, or by turning a blind eye to the exclusionary, assimilationist tendencies of various forms of Turkish nationalism that leave little room for the democratic and peaceful expression of Kurdish demands. (49)

The issue of the systemic violence of the Turkish state and the injustices that it generates, which form a crucial aspect of the Kurdish question in Turkey, is a key factor generally neglected in "Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question." This also naturally informs the deep suspicion held by many Kurds towards the state and its "democratic initiatives" that are launched with much fanfare and media attention but ultimately change little in reality. With daily systematic state violence still meted out against Kurds by the Turkish state, with the most important Kurdish demands still unmet, the authors' proposal of "articulating Kurdish demands within the framework of democratization and citizenship"

HUGH POPE PROVIDES A WELL-INFORMED AND BALANCED OVERVIEW OF TURKEY'S RECENT DIFFICULTIES WITH MEETING KURDISH DEMANDS



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(54-55) rings hollow.

The chapters in the second section take a closer look at the strategies of the Turkish state and the Kurdish nationalist movement spearheaded by the PKK. Cengiz Çandar, a famous Turkish journalist who has deep insight in to the Kurdish question in Turkey, provides a serious analysis in this fourth chapter. Çandar's chapter, unlike any other chapter in "Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question," points to the "crux of the question" by drawing attention to the importance of "Kurdish aspirations of having an independent state own their own" (59) and takes the wider Kurdish geography into consideration in his analysis. However, Çandar's chapter also fails to supply any references or sources. Michael M. Gunter provides in Chapter 5 a descriptive overview of the PKK

and affiliated political structures, which should be useful to beginners in the topic. In Chapter 6, Ali Sarıhan focuses on the military strategies of the Turkish state and the PKK during two different periods (1984-1999 and 2004-2010) comparing the intensity of the conflict during these times and the impact of regional dynamics. Interestingly, this chapter fails to cite any primary sources from the PKK. Chapter 7 by Kılıç Bugra Kanat deploys a "diversionary theory of foreign policy" in order to understand the different tactics used by the PKK in its operations. In fact, the chapter is written from the point of view of a policy report and has specific recommendations for the Turkish state:

In the short term, the first goal of the Turkish state needs to be to increase its intelligence and

improve its ability to predict diversionary attacks that result from internal leadership struggles or organizational problems. (113)

It has to be said that it is exactly these kinds of analyses and advice that have prevented the Turkish state from developing a non-military and peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. In Chapter 8, Hugh Pope provides a well-informed and balanced overview of Turkey's recent difficulties with meeting Kurdish demands and examines the strengths and weaknesses of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) Kurdish policy. Chapter 9 by Gökhan Bacık and Bezen Balamir Coşkun concentrates on the reasons behind Turkey's inability to develop a non-military solution to the Kurdish question.

Special attention is paid to

Thousands gather in Istanbul to demand a democratic solution to Turkey's Kurdish question. Placards read 'Enough! We want a solution.'

June 1, 2008
PHOTO: REUTERS,
OZMAN ORSAL



religious organizations in the third section, namely the movement associated with Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen and the Kurdish Hizbullah movement (not related to the Lebanese Hezbollah) active in Turkish Kurdistan. Chapter 10 by Mustafa Gürbüz concentrates on the Kurdish Hizbullah and provides an account of its dark history and activities in Turkish Kurdistan and a good analysis of the transformation of the movement's discourse and recent incorporation of Kurdish identity claims. Chapter 11 by Doğan Koç is highly problematic and basically sets out to praise the Gülen movement and its "peaceful" and "pacifist" activities in Turkish Kurdistan (in opposition to the PKK's "violent teachings and activities") and is lacking in any scholarly distance or critical approach to the topic of study. The author deploys a strange calculus and makes a correlation between the movement's activities and the decrease of support for the PKK. Along with chapters 6 and 7, this chapter constitutes the poorest aspect of this volume, where official Turkish propaganda becomes difficult to separate from scholarly analysis.

The last section of the volume considers the regional and international aspects of the Kurdish question and its impact on Turkey's difficult and changing relationship with regional states, as well with as the US and the EU. This final part forms the strongest of all the four sections, and both Chapter 12 by H. Akın Ünver and Chapter 13 by Joshua W. Walker provide a thorough overview of the internationalization of the Kurdish question. Walker also delivers a much-needed insight

into the AK Party's limitations and its highly authoritarian and nationalist tendencies.

One of the main weaknesses in the volume is the framing of the PKK as a "problem" and an "obstacle" to the solution of the Kurdish question, a discourse also frequently deployed by the Turkish authorities. In his introduction to the volume, Fevzi Bilgin sets the tone early on by describing the PKK as a "militant", "violent" and unreliable organization (xiv) that "seemingly cannot free itself from its militant legacy" (xii). He adds

JOSHUA W. WALKER DELIVERS MUCH- NEEDED INSIGHT INTO THE AK PARTY'S HIGHLY AUTHORITARIAN AND NATIONALIST TENDENCIES

that this has "adverse effects on the peace process [and] make[s] it very difficult to resolve the Kurdish question" (xiv). This is also repeated in several other chapters. For example, in Chapter 7, Kanat problematizes the PKK as a "non-state terrorist organization" and the entire chapter regards PKK cease-fires as a diversionary strategy for political survival. Similarly in Chapter 9, Back and Coşkun designate the PKK movement as a "major threat" to the government's initiative due to its fear "of permitting the existence of an autonomous Kurdish party" (162). Various authors in this volume

thus seem to fall into the trap of "blaming the PKK," while it is well-documented that Turkish governments have frequently broken promises for fear of populist and nationalist backlash, as confirmed by Walker (234-235). In the current "peace process" for example, it is becoming evident that the government is not fulfilling its agreements and is instead watering down the process until the upcoming elections. The democratic package declared by the government was far from meeting Kurdish and international expectations and the writing of a new democratic constitution has halted with the PKK warning that the government is not sincere. As Çalışlar highlights, "Turkey does not display the maturity to either accept the Kurdish identity or to create an appropriate legal structure for this purpose" (46).

Furthermore, various chapters, (in particular 6, 7 and 11 but also aspects of Chapter 9), overtly rely on terrorism/security studies literature or other state-centered policy-inclined research. Accordingly, their primary concern becomes the demotion and delegitimization of the PKK and its disarmament, which is what the AK Party government understands from the stagnating "peace process." Relatedly, several authors in the volume also label the PKK as a "terrorist organization," which is highly problematic and politically loaded and, as Pope warns, "obstructs realistic thinking about the PKK" (137). Indeed no effort is made in this volume to understand the PKK and its framing of the Kurdish question, whilst two whole chapters are devoted to the Gülen and Hizbullah movements.

Again, in line with the official paradigm of discussing the PKK and its armed struggle in isolation of historical Turkish state violence, "PKK violence" is objectified and stigmatized out of context and we are instead left with an analysis of "PKK tactics for survival" and "geostrategic maneuvering." No attempt is made to understand how it is that the PKK has sustained an insurgency against the Turkish state for three decades and mobilized millions of Kurds in the process. What we know today is that there will not be a meaningful solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey (or in Syria for that matter) without the PKK. Various scholars have also shown that the PKK has morphed from being a guerrilla movement into a mass movement and framing it as a "terrorist organization" and an "obstacle" is not helpful and only serves to reproduce the intractable aspects of the Kurdish question. Actual progress in the Kurdish question has been achieved only when the PKK has been treated as an interlocutor.

Overall, this edited volume appears dislocated, and often there is no flow between chapters. Little effort had been made to link or connect chapters with cross-referencing and thus many authors waste the reader's time repeating historical backgrounds. One example of such disjuncture is that in the first chapter Bajalan discusses the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in 1851, and yet in Chapter 12 Ünver refers to "literature" showing Kurds discovering their national consciousness after World War I. It is also the case that the volume is separated into four parts and

yet in the introduction Bilgin describes it as being divided into three sections. In addition, the spelling of the Kurdish names of the PKK and Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) varies throughout the book. While a few articles in this volume manage to make a genuine contribution to our understanding of the Kurdish question, or at least provide an insight into important aspects of it, others deploy a highly problematic, security-centered and pro-Turkish government

perspective. Moreover, several chapters do not critically engage current literature or the topic at hand. In the process, unfortunately, "Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question" not only fails to "clarify the complexity of Turkey's Kurdish question" but, at least as far as certain chapters are concerned, actually reproduces the very problem it seeks to analyze. 

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A Turkish soldier on patrol, Hakkari province, southeastern Turkey. Oct. 22, 2011
PHOTO: REUTERS, STRINGER

