

UDC 323.15(560)(=915.7)
Biblid 0543-3657, 69 (2018)
Vol. LXIX, No. 1171, pp. 49–63
Original paper

TURKEY'S KURDISH CONFLICT: GENESIS AND A POLITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: The Kurdish issue, that is, the independence aspiration of the largest nation in the world without a state, is the subject of study from a wide variety of aspects. This article deals with the explanation of the Kurdish issue in Turkey from the historical and foreign-policy aspect, as well as with the genesis and the Turkey-Kurdish conflict transformation. The author has also attempted to identify key domestic and international factors that have shaped the Turkey-Kurdish relationship over time. The aspirations of the Turkish Kurds, as a rule, included the taking of ideological standpoints opposite to those of the ruling Turkish political elites. During the XX century, at the time of the secular and pro-Western orientation of Turkish politics, the Kurdish liberation movement was at first painted with religious colors while during the Cold war it was heavily influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideas. This also was a period when the Kurdish question was exclusively the internal issue of Turkey. In the 1990s, the Kurdish political organizations laid the foundations for their ideological transformation into civic-liberal movements, which among other factors contributed to the increase of international public interest for their problems. Today, Turkey's Kurdish conflict is primarily determined by the dynamic of the Syrian civil war, where the Kurdish liberation movement is being consolidated.

Key words: Turkey, Kurds, Kurdish issue, PKK, Kurdistan Workers Party, Kurdish nationalism, Syrian civil war.

INTRODUCTION

The Kurds, with a population of over 30 million, are the world's largest ethnic group without a state. The Kurdish population lives on the territories of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and in fewer numbers in ex-Soviet Caucasus

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republics. Mountainous and natural resources rich² territory of Kurdistan was for centuries under control of the most dominant empires of the Middle East – the Persian and Ottoman empires. During the Ottoman rule, Kurdish tribal leaders enjoyed certain degree autonomy, while the territory they lived on was freely called Kurdistan, unlike the praxis of most of the XX century.

At the end of World War I, the Treaty of Sevres offered the Kurds broad autonomy in the areas of Ottoman Kurdistan, with the possibility of full independence later on. Nationalist victory in the Turkish war of independence brought the Treaty of Sevres to an end, while the new Treaty of Lausanne did not include any of the rights offered by the previous treaty. By the caliphate abolishment and the foundation of the secular Republic of Turkey, Islam was eliminated from politics and most of the public life.³ That way, a link that kept the Kurds bound to the Turkish state for centuries was gone. Hand by hand with the creation and the emancipation of the Turkish nation, Kurdish ethnic identity was systematically suppressed. Suddenly, they are not Ummah brothers and sisters anymore, but “Mountain Turks” who forgot their “Turkishness” (Zeydanlioglu, 2008, p. 7). According to the Treaty of Lausanne, minority status was recognized only to non-Muslim citizens, such as Greek, Armenians and Jews (Gunter, 2008, p. 99). To the Kurdish ethnic group was not recognized any specificity in relation to the dominant Turkish population, hence, no fundamental minority rights, such as the right of official use of the Kurdish language.⁴ Exactly opposite, the Kurdish language, their tradition, a specific way of life and every other form of dissimilarity were systematically suppressed during the century, with the goal of the complete assimilation of the Kurds.

Dissatisfied with treatment by the state, the Kurds during the 20s and 30s rose to rebellions several times. The best know is Sheikh Said rebellion, led by Kurdish tribal leader and quenched in blood by the Turkish armed forces.⁵ Some

² Primarily, with oil and water. Nature’s mercy, however, is Kurdish curse at the same time. Since Kurdish ethnic areas are resources rich, four sovereign nations have imperative of controlling those territories, which, to a great extent, make Kurdish attempts to get their own state difficult.

³ Principles of secularism and nationalism, together with “Sevres syndrome”, decisively determined the shaping of political processes in Turkey during the XX century.

⁴ Good example of how valuable national unity and homogeneity were for new Turkish ruling elites are words of Ismet Ineni, Atatürk’s closest associate, said after ethnic clashes and population exchange during and after World War I: “Entire Anatolia has become ethnically, religiously and spiritually homogenous, which will considerably ease the creation of united Turkish state, without national minorities” (Lalić, 1997, p. 126).

⁵ There is no agreement among historians whether Sheikh Said rebellion was primarily religious or ethno-national in its nature. However, “the explicit goal of the revolt was to establish an independent Kurdish state in which Islamic principles, violated by a secular Turkey... would be respected” (Gunter, 2009, p. 179).

authors believe that Kurdish revolts from the early XX century were easily suppressed mainly due to tribalism, one of the characteristics of the Kurdish ethnoscapes of that time, and the fact that there was no central authority which would coordinate different interests of tribal leaders (See Mella, 2005). The disunity of the Kurds, together with a military-technical superiority of the Turkish army allowed the Turkish government to suppress every Kurdish rebellion and give them a blow from which their political elites could not recover for decades. Rebellion crushes were followed by state repression towards Kurdish citizens and their rights and forced displacement of the Kurds from eastern Anatolia to the city centers in the west, where, as a minority population, they were susceptible to assimilation.

AWAKENING OF THE KURDISH NATIONALISM

The Turkish Constitution of 1961 brought more freedom on the field of political association. These rights encouraged “foundation of trade unions and student organizations which would play an important role in the Turkish politics of the 1970s” (Celik, 2012, p. 246). One of the organizations formed was a group of Kurdish revolutionaries gathered around Abdullah Ocalan, which during the 70s worked on spreading of national feelings among the Kurdish population. Reasons for the fail of the Turkish state to subsume the Kurds under the umbrella of the Turkish nation, among other factors, can be found in the exclusive nature of Turkish nationalism. In contrast to the civic form of nationalism, which ties national affiliation for citizenship and citizens’ free will, ethnic formulation binds nationality to a common ancestor. Alienation of the Kurds was, therefore, induced by the fact that “‘Turkishness’, rather than less exclusionary categories such as territory and Islam, came to define the core of the Turkish state and citizenship” (Somer, 2004, p. 241). The Kurdish national awakening was additionally encouraged by the “economic deprivation, social injustice and physical displacement, as well as ideas of ethnic identity, all of which combined in the late 1970s to create the conditions for revolt” (McDowall, 2007, p. 404).

In 1978, Ocalan and his followers founded *the Kurdistan Workers’ Party* (PKK). The ideological basis of the PKK, beside Kurdish nationalism oriented towards the awakening of Kurdish national feelings, was compounded of Marxist-Leninist ideas, which implied the class struggle. They had no intention of repeating mistakes of the Kurdish rebellions from the beginning of the century. Since the tribal division was still sharp, the PKK saw an enemy in Kurdish landlords and tribal leaders, who had certain interests in preserving the *status quo*. The PKK members actively participated in ideological clashes of the left and right, which were shaking the Turkish political scene during the 70s. Their early

days' activities included actions such as the organization of the strikes and street demonstrations or spreading propaganda with the goal of mobilization of the Kurds for the upcoming battle.

Turkey's 1980 coup and then the 1981 Constitution worsened the position of the Kurdish population. The constitution through some of its provisions led to limiting even speaking or writing in Kurdish (Gunter, 2008, p. 5). Following the coup, Turkish southeast where the Kurds consisted majority of the population was labeled as a threat to national unity, while "repression and assimilation of the Kurds reached its peak" (Zeydanlioglu, 2008, p. 11). Some imprisoned PKK members, arrested during the police raids in the south-east, in the forthcoming years, initiated a chain of hunger strikes and self-burnings to draw public attention to poor prison conditions and ill-treatment by the guards. Under such circumstances, the PKK, which grew into the paramilitary organization during the early years of the military junta, in 1985 started with armed attacks on Turkish security personnel.

TURKEY-KURDISH WAR

After the attacks on its security personnel intensified, the Turkish government resorted to creative solutions to cope with the security challenges in its southeast. During 1985, the government, in areas populated by the Kurds, installed "village guards", paramilitary units made of local Kurds designed for prevention and defense of the PKK attacks. In addition, in 1987 Ankara declared the state of emergency (OHAL) which merged ten regions into one super-region, with the governor at its head. During its 15-year lifetime, numerous examples of violence towards civilians were registered, especially towards individuals with connections to the PKK, which was meanwhile declared the terrorist organization by the Turkish government. Conditions created by the Gulf war provided the PKK with a capability of using the territory of Iraq Kurds (*de facto*) autonomous entity for attacking Turkish security forces and the establishment of logistics centers. In order to smash guerilla groups, The Turkish armed forces in 1992 launched cross-border operation, together with Iraq Kurdish groups rival to the PKK. In spite of heavy losses the PKK suffered, the Turks have not succeeded to eliminate their cells in northern Iraq, while after withdrawal peace among rival Kurdish groups was restored.

Side by side with armed struggle against the PKK members, the Turkish government was fighting the public opinion, suppressing and sharply punishing every attempt of expression of public sympathy or compassion with Kurdish actions. According to Article 312 of the Turkish penal code, "mere verbal or written support for Kurdish rights could lead one to be charged with 'provoking hatred or animosity between groups of different race, religion, region or social

class” (Gunter, 2008, p. 6). All-inclusive criminalization practically led to a denial of the Kurdish problem and establishment of taboo around the Kurdish issue in public life of Turkey (Yildiz, 2012, p. 153). During Turgut Ozal’s presidency, the government attempted to shift the approach for solving the Kurdish problem. Ozal broke the official taboo by using term “Kurd” and tried to initiate a more liberal approach towards dealing with the Kurdish problem, in areas such as the use of language (Noi, 2012, p. 16). President Ozal, who himself was half-Kurd, in 1993 initiated negotiations with the PKK which resulted in militants’ unilateral cease-fire in March same year.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of communism, the ideological base of the PKK has changed, where ideals about the independent Kurdish state completely prevailed Marxist-Leninist principles and ideas about a classless society. Since the early 90s, the PKK has begun with distancing from communist ideas on behalf of ethno-national, with a struggle for Kurdish rights and freedoms as fundamental principles. Side by side with the PKK’s ideological transformation, there are attempts of prominent Kurdish political figures to organize into a strong organization, capable of participating in the field of legal and institutionalized political contest in Turkey. After pro-Kurdish and leftist *People’s Labor Party* was forbidden in 1993 by the decision of the Constitutional Court of Turkey, a number of its ex-members founded *the Democratic Party*, which also got disbanded the following year. Six members of the party were arrested and condemned to multiyear sentences for the promotion of Kurdish nationalism and collaboration with the PKK, while the whole case attracted the attention of the international community and pro-human-rights organizations. In 1994, lawyer Murat Bozlak founded *the People’s Democracy Party*, which became a backbone of the Kurdish legal political struggle in Turkey until the Constitutional Court forbade it in 2003. However, none of these parties could reach the election threshold of 10% and enter the Turkish parliament. Consequently, their actions were limited to the local level and areas where the Kurdish population was a majority.

A liberal attitude towards solving the Kurdish issue was abandoned soon after Ozal’s sudden death in April 1993. In less than a month, tens of unarmed Turkish army recruits were killed in an ambush attack. Although the PKK never took responsibility for this attack, the Turkish government launched a large-scale campaign - military in the southeast and political one against anyone who could be connected to the PKK. The conflict intensified during the 90s when thousands of people were killed, hundreds of thousands lost their homes, while Kurdish peasants were exposed to humiliating behavior, torture and careless violation of their property rights (Zeydanlioglu, 2008, p. 12). Apparently, lack of reactions of relevant international political factors encouraged Turkish ruling elites to carry on with its repressive measures oriented towards a violent and

unilateral solution of the conflict. On the other hand, the PKK during the 90s carried out a series of bomb attacks all over Turkey. Except for the limited success of inflicting damage in sudden attacks, the PKK did not have much luck in direct clashes with the Turkish armed forces in southeastern Anatolia, where they suffered heavy losses. During the 90s the Turks succeeded to marginalize the PKK as a military threat, additionally weakened by Ocalan's imprudent decision from 1995 to attack the forces of Masoud Barzani, leader of Iraq Kurdish group and rival to the PKK (Gunter, 2008, p. 6). With a goal of eliminating the PKK's cells on the territory of northern Iraq, the Turkish armed forces launched cross-border operations in 1995 and 1997, but without the success of giving the Kurds the final blow.

OCALAN'S ARREST

Ocalan, even since before the full escalation of the Turkey-Kurdish conflict, was located in Syria from where he led the rebellion. He was forced to flee when the Syrian government, under Turkey's pressure (Tanasković, 2011, p. 110), had to deny him hospitality in 1998. In February 1999, Turkey's secret service operatives located and arrested Ocalan in Kenya. Turkish authorities charged him for the death of more than 30 000 people during the 15-year conflict, which faced him with a possibility of the death penalty. First days of his imprisonment were portrayed by the world-wide Kurdish protests when angry masses attacked diplomatic missions of the states they found responsible for Ocalan's kidnapping, which they viewed as the arrest. To everyone's surprise, jailed Ocalan called for dialogue and peaceful solution: "I really love Turkey and the Turkish people. My mother was Turkish... Sincerely, I will do all I can to be of service" – are the first Ocalan's words after imprisonment, profusely broadcasted by the Turkish TV stations (The New York Times, 1999). On March 18, Ocalan's lawyer conveyed his message to the public: "A solution based on the unity and independence of Turkey, which would guarantee peace and real democracy and create conditions for the peaceful coexistence of all peoples in peace, is also our innermost wish" (International Action Center, 1999). Many in Turkey's ruling political circles saw this drastic change of tone only as his attempt to save his own skin and hence did not want to take it as a serious platform for a political solution of the conflict. In August 1999, Ocalan went even further and called the PKK guerrillas to withdraw their forces out of Turkey, for the sake of securing the basic preconditions for the political dialogue. However, the Turkish government rejected all of these initiatives.

Armed clashes have stopped after the PKK's withdrawal, while Ocalan's calls for peace and democracy woke up the domestic and international public. Voices that called for compromise and concessions with the Kurds were getting louder

and surprisingly were coming from the side of prominent political figures. Ocalan, on the other hand, was skillfully using publicity and gladly replying to the “imagined” interlocutors from the Turkish political establishment, simulating negotiations that way. Although the government refused to accept any talks with Ocalan and the PKK, they apparently left the communication channels opened. In the process of informal negotiations, both Ocalan and Turkey endeavored to get as much as possible out of new circumstances. Turkey rulers, as clear winners, highly valued recently achieved peace period and, in that sense, Ocalan alive was of great importance. On the other hand, potential instability which the PKK represented for the Turkish government was “the capital” by which Ocalan strived to “trade” the basic human rights for the Kurds.

Kurdish informal diplomacy was in the offensive these days – they attempted to present their problems to OSCE and other relevant international organizations and individuals, who must have found Ocalan’s calls for democracy attractive. Their efforts were very significant after the Turkish court in November 1999 rejected Ocalan’s complaint and confirmed June’s death sentence. The European Court of Human Rights appealed to Turkey to delay the execution. Following the initiative of international courts and organizations for human rights, the execution was then put in the middle of Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union (EU). The German ambassador in Turkey, Joachim Vergau, warned Ankara that Turkey would not get the EU membership candidacy on the forthcoming Helsinki Summit if Ocalan got executed (The Guardian, 1999). All coalition government parties, except the extreme rightist *The Nationalist Movement Party* (MHP), agreed to postpone Ocalan’s execution until Turkey got its candidacy status. In 2002 his sentence was definitely commuted to life imprisonment. Ocalan’s arrest, the decreased threat to national security and EU attractiveness, altogether affected creating a new atmosphere in the process of solving the Turkey-Kurdish conflict (Somer, 2004, p. 235). New circumstances made it possible to shift the focus of the Kurdish fight for basic human rights from the domain of the use of force to the field of legal political struggle.

“THE DEMOCRATIC OPENING” OF THE AK PARTY

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power in 2002 meant a more liberal approach to the Kurdish issue, which was one of Erdogan’s pre-election promises. Because of the nature of The Copenhagen criteria and partly due to the diplomatic initiative of Kurdish organizations and lobbies, the question of Kurdish rights was taken into the middle of Turkish efforts to start with EU accession negotiations. Solving the Kurdish issue that way became the indicator of the “democraticness” and proof of the maturity of Turkish society on its route to the EU. In that sense, the government initiated several reform packages

oriented towards the harmonization of Turkish legislative with EU standards.⁶ As a result, restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language were eased, so the Kurdish language could have been heard on the state-owned TV stations since 2004. In his historic speech in Diyarbakir, Erdogan admitted past mistakes and promised to Kurdish crowd that the government would resolve problems with “more democracy, more civil rights and more prosperity” (Al Jazeera, 2005). The EU recognized his efforts and Turkey’s accession negotiations were initiated in October 2005. In spite of government’s goodwill and symbolic concessions, key issues, which would include the Constitution change on the matters of life importance for the Kurds, have not been solved. The PKK leadership, dissatisfied with the achievements of the peaceful years, has renewed low-intensity conflicts in the southeast of the country. Since, regarding the numbers of fighters, it was not as strong as in the 90s, the PKK changed its tactic – in the new circumstances they relied primarily on the small groups of fighters and shootings from a distance or an ambush while avoiding a direct clash with the Turkish armed forces. Sporadic fighting with occasional periods of the unilateral ceasefire lasted until 2009.

In 2009 Erdogan announced a new initiative for solving the Kurdish issue, known as “the Kurdish opening” or “the democratic opening.” The goal of the initiative was the promotion of Kurdish rights or as the Turkish Interior Minister said, “solving problems with an egalitarian approach through democratization” (Today.az, 2010). Erdogan could not count on the support of the biggest opposition parties: *The Republican People’s Party* saw the initiative as an attack on the states indivisibility, while nationalist MHP continued with its military-based rhetoric (Yildiz, 2012, p. 156). The initiative achieved certain concessions with the Kurds, primarily those oriented towards easing of the linguistic barriers – it was allowed to use Kurdish titles for toponyms, while legal barriers for the Kurdish language and literature at universities and for speaking Kurdish during prison visits were eliminated (Gunter, 2011). However, the Constitutional Court ban of pro-Kurdish *Democratic Society Party* meant the *de facto* end of the initiative. That way, the Turkish side was left without any possible legal negotiator from the Kurdish side since the government never wanted to accept negotiations with imprisoned Ocalan.⁷ In fact, it seems that Erdogan on the field of solving the

⁶ As the AKP’s ambitious foreign policy was formulated on the basis of “zero problems with neighbors” principle (Jojić, 2018, p. 63; Lazić, 2017, pp. 59-60), the new government had an additional motive to initiate the Kurdish issue resolution process.

⁷ In 2003, the Constitutional Court of Turkey forbade *the People’s Democracy Party*, whose place of leading Kurdish party was taken by *the Democratic People’s Party* (DEHAP). In 2005 DEHAP transformed into *the Democratic Society Party*, which will lead the Kurdish political struggle until December 2009. *The Peace and Democracy Party* quickly became the strongest Kurdish party. In 2014, it merged with several other Kurdish political movements into *the People Democratic Party*

Kurdish issue never wanted an equal partner in any of the Kurdish parties or figures. The AKP did not want to accept any intermediate between the state and the Kurdish population, neither to give any Kurdish party legitimacy and exclusive rights to defend the Kurdish interests. In this way, the AKP has sought to gain and retain as more as possible votes of the Kurdish minority and thereby increase its chances for absolute victory in the elections. Instead of concretizing the democratic opening, the Turkish government, through the concept of “fraternally harmony”, sought to gain the support of conservative Kurds.⁸ In that sense, common features of the Turks and Kurds were promoted, such as common religion and multi-centuries history⁹. The ruling conservative AKP saw Islam as a bond between the Kurds and Turks, through which they emphasized “unity”, “oneness” and “sameness”, while the Kurds used Islam to highlight the “diversity”, “difference” and “injustice” (Sarigil & Fazlioglu, 2013, pp. 559-562).

Dissatisfied with achieved over the past year, the PKK in 2010 officially renewed the insurgency in the southeast. Tensions grew in 2001 when inspired by “the Arab awakening” the Kurds occupied streets in the eastern Anatolia. Although “the Kurdish awakening” has never happened, protests demanding decentralization and Ocalan’s freedom continued in 2012 as well, which was followed by the escalation of armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish security forces. Erdogan’s new initiative on winter 2012/2013 ceased the fighting. In addressing to his party members, Erdogan said that government was “once more – with ambition and patience – in an honest effort to end violence and terror” (BBC, 2013). As a response to this new initiative, the PKK guerrillas in 2013, once more, withdrew to the territory of northern Iraq.

SYRIAN CIVIL WAR IMPLICATIONS

According to Arin (2015, p. 13), “after great acclamation by the AKP and resistance from neo-fascist MHP, the Erdogan Administration used delaying tactic to postpone the process of democratization in Turkey. While the PKK insisted on the third side mediation in the peace process (Salih, 2015, p. 8), the HDP demands were nothing less than recognition of the Kurds as an ethnic minority, giving the Kurdish language official status and broad autonomy for southeastern parts of Anatolia (Arin, 2015, p. 14). The HDP co-president,

(HDP), which today is the dominant pro-Kurdish party and leading advocate of civic and liberal values on the Turkish political scene.

⁸ The religious narrative provided the AKP with considerable support among Kurdish voters (Janković, 2013, p. 142).

⁹ The desecuritization of religion, i.e. „releasing the previously restrained Islamic character of the Turkish society“(Jeftić-Šarčević & Tančić, 2012, p. 110), certainly eased this process.

Salahattin Demirtas, as a solution proposed democratic autonomy as “a governing system in which groups of people govern through their own autonomous laws” and “radical democracy” which would “build such a system, putting into practice a truly democratic understanding through concrete policies” (Demirtas, 2015, pp. 32-33). No serious progress had been made, both due to government’s unwillingness to make concessions on the issues of vital importance to the Kurds and the increasingly complicated situation in Syria. Siege of the Kurdish border town of Kobani in northern Syria by the terrorists of the Islamic State (ISIL) and the passivity of Turkey during the siege, provoked frustration among the Kurds in Turkey, who expressed their protests on the streets of Turkish cities. The terrorist attack in the Turkish city of Suruc in July 2015, brought the definite end of negotiations and a two-year peace period. The Islamic state took responsibility for the attack in which more than 30 Kurds were killed. Three days later, in retaliation attack, a group of PKK supporters killed two Turkish policemen. It was good enough reason for the Turkish government to remilitarize the Kurdish question.¹⁰ The Kurdish question, once again, became “a factor of significant internal instability and division” (Janković, 2016, p. 17). In response to increasing terrorism, the Turkish security forces in July 2015 launched massive counterterrorism operations in the southeast, including nationwide police raids against the ISIL and the PKK members and their collaborators.

The situation for the Kurds got particularly difficult after the Turkish government began with *Operation Euphrates Shield* (OES) in August 2016. Namely, the Turkish armed forces, jointly with Syrian opposition groups close to Turkey, launched the military operation in northern Syria with a goal of expelling the ISIL out of the narrow belt along the Turkey-Syrian border. Even though operation included actions against the ISIL terrorists, its main cause can be found in the disproportionate territorial expansion of Rojava, the entity under the control of Syrian Kurds. The territory covered by OES, which included cities as al-Bab, Jarabulus and Azaz, was an area through which Syrian Kurds intended to connect their compact eastern part of the entity with Afrin enclave in the far

¹⁰ It is hard to believe that the death of two police officers in the attack for which the PKK never took responsibility, was the true and only reason for re-securitization of Kurdish question in Turkey. The decision was primarily determined by unexpected the HDP election success in June 2015, when they became the first pro-Kurdish party to reach to 10% threshold and enter the parliament, as well as by the situation in Syria, where Syrian Kurds, after they broke the siege of Kobani, launched an offensive against the Islamic state. After the failed coup in July 2016, pro-Kurdish parties and activists got under the additional surveillance of the Turkish government, this time even more sensitive to any potential form of conspiracy. Soon after, both of the HDP co-presidents and several prominent members and parliamentarians were arrested for keeping close ties to the PKK.

northeast of Syria. That option presented a nightmare for Ankara, concerned that the PKK would consequently gain more territory to develop its logistics network, while the Kurdish movement would gain one more valuable actor for the overall Independent Kurdistan struggle.¹¹ The OES successfully ended in March 2017, with the capture of al-Bab the northernmost ISIL stronghold, which definitely repelled Ankara's fears of the establishment of semi-independent Kurdish entity along complete Turkey-Syrian border. In January 2018, Turkey launched a new operation called *Olive Branch*, this time directly oriented towards Syrian Kurds and their forces stationed in the western enclave around the city of Afrin. Due to technical and numerical advantage, forces under Turkish operative command captured territory of the entire enclave in less than 70 days, making Manbij and Tell Rifaat the only cities west of the Euphrates under Kurdish control. Spreading of operations to the east was prevented by the diplomatic initiative of the United States of America and the agreement made with Turkey about the PKK's withdrawal east of the river.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the Ottomans period, the caliphate and Islam were the factors that decisively defined Turkey-Kurdish relations. By the limiting of the role of Islam and the establishment of the secular Republic of Turkey, the bond between the Kurds and the Turkish state was gone. The aggressive and exclusive nature of Turkish nationalism from the beginning of the XX century, as well as the traumas from the end of World War I, determined state's repressive policy towards the Kurds during the century. The bipolar structure of the international political system to a great extent eased Turkey's policy since, due to its geostrategic importance, the question of its minorities' status and rights was never raised by Turkish Western allies. After the awakening of Kurdish nationalism in the second half of XX century, the Turkey-Kurdish conflict escalated and turned into an armed struggle. During that period, the achievement of any long-term solution was impossible. The Kurdish status improved during the first decade of the 2000s when the satisfaction of the fundamental human rights for the Kurds has become the indicator of Turkey's democratization process on its path to the EU. Today, factors that decisively define Turkey-Kurdish relations and determine their conflict nature are the strengthening of the HDP and their positioning as liberal political power, the dynamics of the Syrian war and freezing of Turkey's Euro-integration process.

¹¹ Another reason for concern was the ideological and historical closeness of the PKK and *the Democratic Union Party*, the ruling party of Rojava. Also, two parties share the affiliation to the same umbrella organization, *Kurdistan Communities Union*.

The dichotomy of “the Kurdish cause” - “the Kurdish problem,” that is, the opposite views that the Kurdish and Turkish political elites have about resolving the Kurdish issue, gives good evidence how distant are the stances of the two sides. For the Kurds, “the Kurdish cause” is a struggle for their historical right to rule their own fate, while “the Kurdish problem” for the Turks represents a historical obligation not to allow Sevres reprise and splitting of the state along its ethno-national lines.

It seems that the Kurdish struggle, as a rule, meant taking the ideological standpoint opposite to the dominant political mood in Turkey. During the period of radical secularism in Turkey, the Kurdish uprisings were religious in its nature. During the Cold War, when Turkey was the most important member of the eastern wing of the NATO alliance, Kurdish nationalism was influenced by Marxist-Leninist thoughts. Today, the Kurdish political movement in Turkey, which attempts to impose itself as an alternative to the conservative AKP rule, is primarily guided by liberal and civic ideas.

Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, dealing with the Kurdish issue was exclusively Turkey’s internal issue, so the militaristic approach of issue resolution was in effect. During the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, the Kurdish issue was placed in the context of Turkey’s Euro-integration process, while the realization of the fundamental human rights for the Kurds was seen as a proof of Turkish society’s maturity. Nowadays, when Turkey is more than ever distant from the Western allies, phrases like “sovereign state”, “internal issue” or “counterterrorism” are the main feature of the discourse on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. While in unstable states, Iraq and Syria, the Kurds managed to achieve and increase their autonomy. In the case of the strong Turkish state, their reach is quite limited. Moreover, Turkey is today sufficiently capable and willing not only to limit Kurdish efforts domestically, but also to decisively involve into Kurdish attempts in neighboring states. Consequently, the potential reach of Kurdish movement efforts in Turkey is more limited than ever.

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TURSKO-KURDSKI KONFLIKT: GENEZA SUKOBA I NJEGOV POLITIČKI KONTEKST

Apstrakt: Kurdsko pitanje, odnosno težnja najvećeg naroda na svetu bez svoje države za osamostaljenjem, predmet je proučavanja sa najrazličitijih aspekata. Ovaj rad bavi se objašnjavanjem „kurdskog pitanja“ u Turskoj, sa istorijskog i spoljopolitičkog aspekta, kao i genezom i transformacijom tursko-kurdskog konflikata. Takođe, autor je pokušao da identifikuje ključne domaće i međunarodne činioce koji su tokom vremena oblikovali tursko-kurdski odnos. Nastojanja turskih Kurda su, kao po pravilu, podrazumevala zauzimanje suprotnog ideološkog stanovišta u odnosu na vladajuće raspoloženje u Turskoj. Tokom dvadesetog veka, u vreme sekularne i pro-zapadne orijentacije turske politike, kurdski oslobodilački pokret je, najpre, bio obojen religioznim bojama, da bi tokom hladnog rata poprimio marksističko-lenjističke obrise. To ju ujedno i period kada je kurdsko pitanje predstavljalo isključivo unutrašnje pitanje

Turske. Do interesovanja međunarodne javnosti za problem Kurda u Turskoj dolazi tokom devedesetih godina, otkada kurdski politički pokreti uspostavljaju temelje za svoju ideološku transformaciju u građansko-liberalne pokrete. Danas, tursko-kurdski konflikt je primarno određen dinamikom sirijskog građanskog rata, gde je došlo do konsolidacije kurdskog faktora.

Ključne reči: Turska, Kurdi, Kurdsko pitanje, PKK, Radnička partija Kurdistan, Sirijski građanski rat.

Received: 24.08.2018.

Revised: 18.09.2018.

Accepted: 25.09.2018.