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Kurdish Public Opinion in Turkey: Cultural and Political Demands of the "Kurdish Street"

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Chapter 2

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What do Kurds want? As the conflict has continued to persist for more than three decades, both the Turkish state and Kurdish political movements claim to represent the interests of Kurds, particularly cultural and political demands of Kurds in Turkey. Despite the long life of this conflict, and the claims of political actors from both sides, we still do not know how the interests and demands of ordinary Kurds align with specific political actors or, more importantly, with the Turkish government. The competing claims to represent ordinary Kurds cause the major actors in the conflict, whether prostate or pro-Kurdish, to reinforce their positions and intensify the conflict, resulting in greater suffering for the very people they claim to speak.

However, these claims of representation are not empirically verified, and the risk of self-serving bias and distortion is obviously great. The major political parties, including the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), People's Democratic Party (*Halkın Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), or Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), all claim to understand Kurds' needs and be most responsive to and representative of their cultural and political preferences. Unfortunately, neither scholarship nor the media provide much empirical evidence for Kurds' demands. Does the AKP government's offer of optional Kurdish language courses in schools—the most they have managed to secure yet—satisfy Kurds? Or do Kurds have further demands, both political and cultural? What about their views toward the PKK or legal Kurdish parties? Do all Kurds agree with the government's description of the PKK as a "terrorist" organization, and how many see it as a resistance organization fighting for independence?

This chapter investigates these questions by analyzing nationally representative public opinion survey in Turkey. This survey captures cultural and

political demands of Kurds in 2011 and in 2015, respectively, before and after peace negotiations begun between the AKP government and the Kurdish political movement. First, we trace the trajectory of the state policies toward the Kurdish conflict, followed by an examination of proposals, by both the state and Kurdish movements, to "solve" the problem. Then we use an original public opinion data to test the extent to which ordinary Kurds share the views of the main political actors. These surveys conducted before and after the peace talks will help us to capture the change in attitudes between these two different political contexts regarding the Kurdish conflict. While presenting what the Kurdish street wants, we will limit the number of issues to the perception of interethnic equality in the cultural and political sphere as well as attitudes toward Kurdish parties such as the HDP and the PKK.

Our analysis suggests that while Turkish governments have relatively recently implemented reforms to expand Kurdish rights, these have remained limited, and still does not recognize Kurdish identity as a collective cultural and political identity. However, the Kurdish ethnic identity has grown increasingly important to many Kurds as a result of the politicization of their identity during the three-decades-long civil war.[1] Our findings confirm this assessment: The majority of Kurds want education in their mother tongue, to listen to sermons in Kurdish, to restore villages and town to their Kurdish names, and want to be served in Kurdish in hospitals, courts, and other public institutions. As to their political demands, half of the Kurds polled demanded a regional parliament and flag, the establishment of Kurdish as an official language, and political autonomy. Political developments between 2011 and 2015, including the peace talks, the Roboski Massacre on December 28, 2011, the siege of Kobani in October 2014, and the AKP's indifferent reactions to these events have further complicated an already fraught situation. They have served both to increase support for cultural and political autonomy and secession, and to empower Kurdish parties that have gained the reputation as the true representatives of the Kurdish street a few months before the peace process officially ended in the aftermath of the June 7, 2015 elections.

FRAMING KURDS AND KURDISH CONFLICT

To understand and analyze public opinion on salient social, economic, and political issues, we need to investigate how elites across the political spectrum construct a political discourse and function as society's gatekeepers, using media and educational institutions as intermediary agents. Political behavior literature suggests that ordinary people turn to the elites for their cues in forming their opinions on political issues, whether these elites are party leaders, labor unions, the Church, or others.[2] In other words, one's

ideological stance, as well as ethnic and religious identity, affects which elites they will turn to and process information or cues while the elites compete to shape public opinion to their own purposes. In this regard, the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is typical rather than exceptional and illustrates how social and political elites shape public opinion on the Kurdish conflict, and to what extent the Kurdish street is receptive or resistant to the competing discourses and policies of elites, particularly Kemalist elites.

The next section discusses how the state and mainstream political parties approach and frame the Kurdish problem, with a particular focus on the post-1984 era. It investigates their discourses and policies the Turkish mainstream media dutifully propagated. Then, it turns to the Kurdish political movement that offers an alternative discourse, pointing to political and economic discrimination of Kurds, and demanding political and economic equality.

FROM BROKEN PROMISES TO DENIAL

Even though there are different phases of the Kurdish conflict, the state's responses to the Kurdish problem between 1923 and the early 1990s can be identified as the denial of the Kurds and Kurdish "problem." It is true that the Kurdish problem did not start with the formation of the nation-state, but goes back to the centralization policies under the Ottoman Empire; however, for the sake of space, this article will focus on the post-1923 era.[3] The denial policies in this era have dominated the political discourses of both Turkish actors and institutions. The causes of this denial lie, to a certain extent, in the (inherent) colonial/hierarchical mindset of Turkish elites, derived from the institutionalized belief that to catch up to the civilized world, a modern nation-state must be created around a secular Sunni Turkish identity. The ruling elites of the new republic, mostly former generals or bureaucrats originally from the Western provinces of the Ottoman Empire, had shared the belief that adopting political reforms for (religious) minorities or giving political autonomy to them in the nineteenth century had not stopped the disintegration of the empire. Disturbed by this experience, despite the founding elites of the republic promised and even played with the idea of local autonomy for Kurds during the independence war, the Turkish political elites discounted any political reform that would have granted cultural or political autonomy to Kurds. Rather, they formulated policies that viewed Kurdish ethnicity as an existential threat to be either assimilated or repressed.[4]

To assimilate a Kurdish population largely residing in the southern part of the country into the new Turkish national identity in the early 1920s, the state banned the Kurdish language in public spaces and replaced street, village, and town names with Turkish ones.[5] Parents could not give Kurdish

names to their newborn children, and in the eastern and southeastern region of Anatolia, Kurdish schools (mostly religious schools called *medrese*) were closed.[6] Turks received preferential treatment in hiring at public institutions in Kurdish-dominated cities, and many Kurdish-speaking officials critical of the state's repressive policies were either fired or sent to the western part of Turkey.[7] Starting with the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925, and especially after the 1934 Settlement Act, Law Number 2510, Kurdish elites and tens of thousands of ordinary Kurds were forcibly displaced and resettled in the Western cities of Turkey, while migrants from the Caucasus and other regions replaced them in selected provinces.[8] This resettlement policy was phased out after 1950, but its backbone, the rejection of Kurds and their language, remained in effect until the 1990s.

The official discourse and popularized public perception in Turkey were that Kurds are not a distinct ethnic group; these Easterners (*Doğulular*) are "mountain Turks," who had lost the linguistic and cultural similarity with the rest of the population, and they needed the modernizing hand of the state. The state's modernization polices aimed to re-acculturate this population so that it could catch up with the western cities of the country, and the country as a whole could in turn catch up with the civilized western world.[9] The inferiority complex toward the West is matched by a superiority complex toward Kurds, along with the right to control and assimilate this less-developed people into Turkish society and culture. In this framework, the conflict becomes a struggle between a modernized state and the culturally backward periphery. Intellectuals, academics, and political elites can thus easily justify downplaying Kurds and assimilationist policies, preferring to focus on the political cleavage, the split between secularism and religion, and the debate between socialism and capitalism/imperialism. With the exception of some socialist movements that incorporated the Kurds into their discourse of class struggle and anti-imperialism, most parties, movements, and major political figures were silent about the Turkish state's denial of an ethnic group's existence and the ban on Kurdish language, music, and culture.

In an attempt to refute the accusation that the state's policies were assimilationist, Heper (2007) claimed that the Turkish state neither denied nor assimilated Kurds, only mistreating them in times of exceptional "trouble."[10] Under normal circumstances, according to the official line as defended by Heper, state policies were geared toward re-acculturating Kurds into Turkish society. In that way, both Kurds and *Kurdified* Turks could be reconciled to the rest of Turkish society, thereby preserving the integrity and unitary nature of the state. Heper conveniently overlooks practices like "skull measuring anthropological attempts to identity 'real Turks'" and the creation of a new Turkish history and theory of language centered around ethnic Turks.[11] Nor does he discuss the thousands of people who died in the name of re-acculturation or

the inequality and discrimination in public employment and the social sphere. He asserted that such policies were products of times of particular "trouble," and assumed that the state was otherwise impartial. To the contrary to Heper (2007)'s claim, as Tezcür and Gürses (2017) empirically show, these discriminatory policies have not gone away in recent decades, but rather have continued to imprint interethnic inequality in the country's political system.[12]

The denial of Kurds persisted long after the suppression of the last major rebellions against the state in the late 1930s. As Turkey developed a multi-party political system, Kurdish elites found themselves forced to navigate conventional party politics, running as candidates for mayors or parliaments in the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP), Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP), New Turkey Party (*Yeni Türkiye Partisi*, YTP), center-left Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), socialist Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP), and Güven Party, as well as independent candidates in the 1950s and 1960s. The relatively free atmosphere of the 1960s provided opportunities for Kurdish nationalists to form their own left-leaning organizations and demand solutions to the socioeconomic problems of the East and the discriminatory policies of the state. Disinterested Turkish leftist groups and organizations viewed the Kurdish problem as a by-product of class conflict and imperialism, gradually alienating Kurdish activists and leading them to form their own Kurdish organizations (e.g., Eastern Meetings) starting with the late 1960s.[13]

The repressive political atmosphere of the 1970s led some socialist movements that included Kurdish youth and students to believe that taking arms against this authoritarian state was the only option, while others remained committed to working inside the system to transform it. Beginning in 1978, martial law was declared in several Kurdish provinces, and in that same year, Turkey's rejectionist and assimilationist policies sparked the formal establishment of the PKK, a Marxist/Leninist group of Kurdish students active in the leftist and Kurdish student movements, headed by Abdullah Öcalan.[14] As most of the Kurdish political movements came to existence throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the PKK built its resistance on anti-colonialism, and the ultimate objective of the movement was to form a single (united) independent state called "Kurdistan."[15] A secondary objective was a "reunification" or "reestablishment" of the left.[16] Although the PKK engaged in armed struggles against Turkish security forces and prostate Kurdish landlords, its future was not certain as it initially had little popular support among Kurds in the region. As Bozarslan (2001) argued, however, the military coup of 1980 facilitated the popular acceptance of the PKK's political discourse after the new government banned Kurdish language and music in public spaces, changed the Kurdish names of villages and towns, and implemented other repressive policies, especially against Kurdish political elites.[17] The PKK's first major

deadly attack came only months after the military transferred power to civilians on August 15, 1984, and Kurds, especially those in southeastern Turkey, saw the strikes against the security forces as a legitimate response to the state's repressive and assimilationist attitudes toward them.[18]

RECOGNITION WITH A STICK

The denial policy finally ended in 1991 when the government sent the bill to remove the ban speaking "languages other than Turkish." The change in the denial policy was the result of the intense fight between the PKK and the security apparatus and the then-president Turgut Özal's realization that this problem could not be solved only through the military means. The PKK had posed itself as a formidable actor against exploitative landlords and the military over time, proving itself as an effective movement from the relatively easily crushed Kurdish rebellion in the 1920s and 1930s. Özal and some civilian elites were aware of a growing threat to the integrity and economic development of the state. For example, a former state minister, Adnan Kahveci had presented a secret report to Özal that it was the Kurdish issue, rather than any economic or other political issue, that posed the greatest problem for the state. Suleyman Demirel, the then prime minister, spelled the possibility of a constitutional citizenship in 1992, and Tansu Çiller, replacing Demirel as prime minister in 1993, briefly suggested the Basque model as a possible solution.[19] Özal contemplated different ideas to end the conflict, including an amnesty to the PKK. However, these ideas were rebuffed by the Kemalist military and bureaucracy, the guardians of the traditional Kemalist regime. Rejecting any sort of accommodation or compromise paved the way for the return of the securitization policies that emphasized a military means to ending the PKK and the Kurdish problem as a whole. The hope of finding a peaceful solution finally ended with the death of Özal in 1993. While recognizing "the Kurdish reality" and Kurdish identity in 1991, the Turkish state had moved from the denial to recognition with a stick, and Kurdish problem is now defined as "separatism/terrorism."

The political discourse of social, political, and economic elites as well as the Turkish public followed the footsteps of the Turkish military and state institutions over time. In this telling, the Kurdish conflict does not emanate from the denial policies that condoned and even justified repression and human rights violation, but rather from violence/terrorism, supported by foreign powers that have sought Turkey's division since the Sevres Treaty of 1920. Stated simply for the public's benefit, the state is again under siege by imperialist powers, and the PKK is a terrorist organization used by those powers to recruit and brainwash the poor and ignorant or to kidnap children

from their families. As a transitional public discourse from the denial to the unwilling recognition is the claim that the PKK has nothing to do with the Kurds; that in reality, its leader Abdullah Öcalan is of Armenian (read: evils) origins, as are most of his militants.[20]

This narrative regarding the PKK was gradually replaced by various combinations of discourses of terror, foreign powers, and underdevelopment in subsequent years: Kurds or Easterners are poor and ignorant, easily deceivable by the "terrorist" organizations and foreign powers.[21] Mainstream Turkish media, pro-government or not, have popularized the state narrative and worked to discredit the Kurdish political movement. Prior to the 1990s, newspapers rarely used phrases like "Kurds" or "Kurdish" in news reports or columns. In the 1990s, newspapers began using those terms, implicitly acknowledging the reality of the Kurdish situation and a Kurdish ethnicity while still aligning with the state discourse. For example, although the media began discussing the Kurdish language, they did so in a pejorative sense that portrayed it as a primitive language cobbled together from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The papers in question even cited public opinion surveys as evidence that Kurds were primarily concerned about employment opportunities and were relatively unconcerned about learning or speaking Kurdish.[22] The condescending attitude toward Kurdish becomes evident when the newspapers used terms like "so-called Kurds" or claimed that Kurdish language was too primitive to permit sophisticated forms of literature, culture, or politics.

As the government, military, and media promoted the official position, neither the left-wing nor right-wing parties provided a substantive challenge to the accepted narrative, with some limited exceptions. The Kemalist left and its parties, Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkcı Parti*, SHP/CHP, did not offer policies or solutions to the Kurdish conflict that differed from the state's. For them, the problem was socioeconomic; therefore, the solutions remained limited to the eradication of poverty, ignorance, underdevelopment, feudalism and so on.[23] Neither the center-right AP, nor its successor parties went beyond these explanations. When the SHP formed a coalition with the Kurdish party, the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP), Çiller's the Basque model proposal for the Kurdish problem, or Mesut Yılmaz, former leader of Motherland party after Özal, suggested recognizing Kurdish as an official language and offering optional language courses and private Kurdish channels, but they were all quickly rebuked by the military.[24] Nevertheless, these attempts signaled changes in the state's policies in the post-1999 era, when the capture of Öcalan and the European Union (EU) negotiations paved the way for new policies amidst the economic crisis.[25]

As for the socialist movements, their relationship with the Kurdish movement was more constructive, but their popular base was small and they sought

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solutions under the socialist system that they would eventually establish. Like proponents of the idea that "Islam is the solution," the socialist groups kept the pillar of their faith and asserted that "socialism is the solution" and that social class as an identity supersedes all others, including ethnicity, in the struggle against the bourgeoisie/imperialism. Dissatisfied with the socialist movements, Kurdish elites gradually divorced from them beginning in the late 1960s.

The Turkish left's position on the Kurdish conflict should be explored both in international and domestic contexts. The left in Turkey has always been deeply fragmented, not unlike leftist movements elsewhere, such as France. Global contexts (e.g., student movements in the West, the growth of U.S. power) as well as local (the 1960 coup and the relatively liberal 1961 Constitution) paved the way for various leftist movements to appear in Turkey. Almost all of these movements began with a critique of U.S. imperialism. The decade under the governance of the DP was seen as a rupture from the Kemalist revolutionary resistance against the Western imperialism, and therefore one of the most common slogans of the 1970s was "Fully Independent Turkey!" However, as Jongerden and Akkaya (2012) claim, the Turkish left was mostly silent regarding Turkey's status as a colonizing country in the Southeast.[26]

The military coups of both 1971 and 1980 were highly influential in shaping the relationship between Kurds and the mainstream left or social democrat parties. After 1971, the CHP had a great opportunity to convert the high dynamism among far-left groups into a large voter base for itself because there was a high degree of repression on the leftist revolutionary organizations. To use this opportunity, the CHP took some effective steps in 1973 and 1974 regarding political pluralism, and this gained them many supporters especially among Kurds and Alevi citizens. In addition, starting in the mid-1970s, the volume of political violence reached such a height that the people on both sides, Turks and Kurds, began to fear a possible civil war. Therefore, the CHP was seen as the only option to stop the political violence. And as a matter of fact, the 1970s were significant because of the electoral success of the CHP in Kurdistan, thanks to its advocacy of democracy in Turkey. According to Bozarslan (2012), the breaking point was the late 1970s when Mehdi Zana and several Kurdish figures were elected mayors in Kurdish majority cities.[27]

After the military intervention of 1980, all of the preexisting political parties were eliminated, and therefore the relationship between the Kurdish movement and the mainstream left ended. However, a new social democrat party was established in 1985. The SHP can be considered a continuation of the Kemalist CHP and yet managed to become the second largest party in the Turkish Parliament after the 1987 elections. The electoral success included several Kurdish representatives, and it was taken as a sign of greater openness to recognizing the claims of Kurdistan. However, this symbiotic relationship came to a halt after some of the Kurdish deputies participated

in the international Kurdish conference in Paris in 1989, which led to their expulsion from the party. Nineteen more deputies resigned from the party in protest, and laid the groundwork for the establishment of the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP) in 1990, the first of eight such Kurdish parties that have since been banned by the state. The alliance between the representative actor of the Kurdish movement (HEP) and the mainstream Turkish left (SHP) was given one last shot in the 1991 elections, after which twenty-two deputies from HEP were returned to parliament. However, the controversy regarding the swearing-in ceremony of Hatip Dicle and Leyla Zana ended with the revocation of their parliamentary immunity and jail sentences in 1994 for their alleged membership in the PKK.[28]

Even though the SHP agreed to make room for Kurdish representation, there was no further advocacy of pro-Kurdish ideas within the party according to Bozarslan (2012).[29] Also, there was no explicit mention of Kurds or Kurdistan. The party platform's reference to "Turkey-wide democratization" was carefully formulated; in addition, the removal of Kurdish deputies from SHP following the Kurdish conference in Paris was critical because it meant that Kurds could not integrate into the Turkish political elite class, leaving them only the option of becoming autonomous of Turkish political class.[30]

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Yeğen (2007) divides the relationship between the Turkish left and Kurdish movement into four periods between the early republican era and the 1990s.[31] While he describes the 1970s as the period of "decay," the 1990s are the years of "rupture" between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish left. For instance, one of the most prominent leftist parties of the 1990s, the Party of Freedom and Solidarity (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi*, ÖDP), spoke about the need to solve the Kurdish problem but refrained from making it an important element of the party's platform.[32] Leaving the task to Kurdish parties would eventually distance the party from Kurds and Kurds from leftist Turks. Two other important parties representing the Turkish left in the 1990s, the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) and the Labor Party (IP), failed even more thoroughly to recognize the autonomous position of the Kurdish movement. For instance, for the TKP the Kurdish issue is simply an example of a labor issue. This position is what Yeğen (2007) describes as dating "back to the beginning of the socialist movements in modern Turkey's history," which means that the party would support the Kurdish movement not in their efforts of national and cultural rights and demands, but rather in their class struggle against imperialism.[33] The IP, under the leadership of Doğu Perinçek, completely changed its position toward the Kurdish movement, and in 2005, the party declared that the Kurdish issue had been solved regarding democratic rights that Kurds had been demanding.[34] In the following years, the party leadership went even further and adopted a racist and hostile discourse toward Kurds and the Kurdish movement.

On the other hand, the (Turkish) Islamist movements, including the Welfare Party (WP) and their successors have long been attributing the Kurdish problem to secularism and the Kemalist ideology, believing that the secularist policies of "the past" had weakened the religious ties between Turks and Kurds. They courted Kurds with a less nationalistic discourse electoral program. One the one hand, they recognized Kurds as a distinct group with its language and culture in their programs and discourses, but at the same time wanted to subordinate them to a supranational Islamic identity.[35] By capturing the state they tried to Islamize the society but failed to offer any substantive changes to existing political institutions, which were the products of hard-core nation-state ideology. As a result, they neither wanted nor needed to craft a meaningful proposal or policy to deal with the Kurdish question.

Ümit Cizre's work on the Islamist actors in the Kurdish conflict shows how the Islamists portrayed the conflict to their bases in the 1990s. The Turkish-Islamists emphasized the distinctiveness of Kurds. They often highlighted human rights violations in the region, but were careful not to offend the sensibilities of the Kemalist state, emphasizing the integrity of the Turkish state under one flag and motherland.[36] The Kurdish Islamists have sought a solution to the problem from claims of Islamic brotherhood and the formula of "Ummah," but noticed that Turkish Islamists do not share the practical implications of being part of it, noting such glaring absences as constitutional recognition of Kurds or the provision of Kurdish education. The first shock to Kurdish Islamists came with the 1991 electoral coalition of the Welfare Party (WP) with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which wields significant power and influence among the state's security apparatus. This coalition showed the "nationalist reflex" of the Islamist WP, thereby increasing skepticism toward Turkish Islamist parties among Kurds. The party's nationalistic discourse and practices belied their (disingenuous) usage of Islamic brotherhood, resonated less among Kurds, and reduced the total votes for the WP and its successor parties in the region in the subsequent elections even though its national vote increased. However, the post February 28 developments in which the WP-led government was overthrown; the Constitution Court banned the WP, and successor Virtue Party helped Kurds to maintain the benefit of the doubt toward the (Turkish) Islamic movement and its parties.

AKP ERA: HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

The AKP era initially seemed to deserve the benefit of the doubt from Kurds. The AKP leadership's statements did not differ significantly from its predecessor, the WP: They blamed the Kurdish problem on the repression

and mistakes of the past secularist regime. The capture of Öcalan, the EU Accession process, along with the abolishment of the death penalty and other changes paved the way for the AKP to launch some reforms. This era has also been an opportunity, especially for religious Kurds, to test the AKP's discourse of "Islamic brotherhood" between Turks and Kurds. Erdogan's message gave hope to Kurds, as he stated the Kurdish conflict was not the cause but the consequences of the repressive policies of single-party era. To the chagrin of the Kemalist establishment in the state apparatus, the AKP governments have passed several reform bills in the parliament, but the implementation of many programs was purposefully delayed or stagnated by an unwilling security and bureaucratic state apparatus. Nevertheless, assisted also by the bill passed several months before it came to power in 2002, the AKP governments restored Kurdish names to Kurdish villages, private bodies were allowed to teach Kurdish, broadcasting Kurdish in public and private channels was permitted, as was the repatriation of some "internally displaced Kurds to their original homes."[37]

The AKP leader, Erdogan, saw secularism as a cause of division between Turks and Kurds and "highlighted the value of unification and brotherhood on the basis of 'common citizenship' in the Republic of Turkey."[38] Erdogan played with the idea of *Türkiyelilik*, that is to say, belonging to the citizenship of Turkey in the early years of the AKP rule, but his references have become sporadic over time. Given the fact that neither CHP nor any other major political actor offered anything beyond the AKP's policy initiatives, there was cautious optimism among supporters of the Kurdish political movement that the AKP as an antiestablishment party was the one that could solve the Kurdish problem despite its leaders' contradictory or ambivalent statements. The military suzerainty over the political sphere, the party closures, the Internet memorandum (e-muhtıra) of April 27, 2007 by the military—despite the changing rhetoric of Erdogan regarding the Kurdish conflict—appealed to Kurds. This helped the AKP win the majority of Kurdish votes in Kurdish-majority cities, even increasing its share of the vote in Diyarbakır from 16 percent in 2002 elections to 41 percent in 2007.

For the Kurdish political movement, despite some "positive" steps and discourse from the AKP, as a result of the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK) operations that started in April 2009, more than 8,000 people were imprisoned, signaling the return to securitization policies of the Kurdish conflict.[39] For the Kurdish movement, and later for Kurds outside of the movement, "the distinction between the 'Kemalist state' and the 'AKP government'" has become hazy, even for secular pro-Kurdish movements which had previously sympathized with the AKP. Furthermore, the AKP's cyclic arrogance toward the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, its harsh response to Kurdish demands for democratic autonomy in Turkey, and its aggressiveness toward

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the creation of a de facto Kurdish autonomy in Syria have revealed to traditionally religious Kurds just how limited its discourse on Islamic brotherhood really is.

When it comes to the recognition of collective rights, such as having Kurdish education in public and private schools or the acceptance of Kurds in the Constitution as a separate ethnic group, Erdogan was discreet or quietly unwilling while the Kemalist vanguard organization, the military, was not. As a reaction to the EU Commission president who urged Turkey to reform cultural and political rights for Kurds, in 2008, the then chief of staff, İlker Başbuğ, said the following: "Nobody can demand or expect Turkey to make collective arrangements for a certain ethnic group in the political arena, outside of the cultural arena, that would endanger the nation-state structure as well as the unitary state structure."[40]

While this skepticism was increasing within the Kurdish political movement, there were still secret negotiations between the AKP governments and the Kurdish movement. News of the Oslo Process, which consisted of secret talks between the PKK and state officials, was leaked by the security apparatus associated with the Gülenist movement that wanted to resolve the Kurdish problem through their own form of Islamic brotherhood. For this purpose, the Gülenist movement actively engaged in opening schools, university preps institutions, and houses for young Kurds.[41] As they competed for Kurdish membership, they not only received support from their members, but also from nonmembers who saw them as a lesser evil than the PKK. The state has also collaborated with major business organizations such as Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSIAD) and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), as well as local and national NGOs, to assert its assimilationist policies toward Kurds. These organizations actively drafted programs or participated in "no child behind" policies, "required preschool initiatives" in order to "enable children in whose houses the spoken language is Kurdish to speak Turkish well."[42]

What about the Kurdish movement and the trajectory of their policies toward the conflict? According to Güneş (2013), the PKK began its attempts to adopt a political solution to the conflict in the 1990s, especially following Öcalan's trial when the organization began to frame the solution to the Kurdish question "on the basis of development and deepening of democracy and the creation of decentralized and democratized political entities."[43] The significant shift regarding the demands and goals of the PKK, from regional autonomy or federalism toward democratic autonomy, was justified by the fact that the Kurdish population in Turkey was geographically dispersed. In 2005, the PKK announced that the original objective of forming a Kurdish nation-state had become an impediment on the route to freedom and the new strategic goal was the establishment of "an interlinked network of councils

as the basis of self-determination and a means of living together."[44] This change in discourse does not mean that the PKK gave up on its claims to self-determination; rather, it had developed a new understanding of a radical democracy that will become possible only through the active involvement of citizens.

The Kurdish movement also used religious discourse both to attract religious Kurds and to serve as a counter-move to the religious rhetoric of the AKP. To counter both the government and Islamic movements, the predominantly secular elites of the Kurdish political movement continually softened its secularist stance. This strategic change can also be found in its leaders' writings. While Öcalan considered Islam reactionary and backward in the 1980s, his later writings assigned it a positive role to Islam, in particular, the revolutionary character of Prophet against established order. Sarıgil (2018) describes how in March of 2011 pro-PKK clerics refused to participate in Friday prayers in Turkish, and instead began offering public prayers in Kurdish as a counterweight to the state-controlled mosques.[45] The Democratic Islam Congress and other affiliated religious bodies have also pursued policies to appeal to religious Kurds. Several prominent political Islamists were also nominated as members of Parliament (MPs), such as Şerafettin Elçi and Altan Tan, and others were chosen as electoral candidates to become either mayor or MPs of pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in the elections of 2011 and on.

Through negotiating with the Kurdish movement both openly and secretly, the AKP resorted to the policies aimed to increase religiosity in the region. Religious schools (Imam Hatips) and mosques have disproportionately mushroomed in the region under the AKP when compared to the rest of the country.[46] The directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and their salaried imams and the employment of "meles," who are the graduates of informal religious schools (madrasas) in the region, have been mobilized with the goal of reducing the influence of the Kurdish movement. Also, the AKP governments have pursued the policies to strengthen rival Kurdish movements in the region. These religious movements ranged from the Gülenist movement to the various factions of Nur and Nakshibendi movements to the Islamist Huda-Par and its predecessors. At the same time, these movements, through normative and resource ties to the governments, expanded their sphere of influences, increasing their activities and associations as well as through media and radio. They have been a major rival to the Kurdish movement in its efforts to increase its sphere of influence to the rest of Kurds in the region.[47]

After continuous disappointments with the government reform promises, the Islamic movements' approach and solutions have started to converge with the Kurdish movement. While still seeing the Kurdish movement a rival anti-religious movement, religious Kurdish movements have had to

adapt their discourse in order to compete effectively in Kurdish cities.[48] Over time, these movements have also increased their demand for the right to have education in mother tongue, Friday sermons (*hutbe*) in Kurdish, and Kurdish names for villages and towns. Besides, observing the growing nationalist discourse of Turkish Islamists and their disinterest in the Kurdish problem has further reduced the credibility of the solutions based on "Islamic brotherhood." In contrast, as the findings below suggest, secular and non-secular Kurds have started to converge regarding their linguistic and cultural demands.

In sum, as the AKP was associated with the state, not a party that challenges the Kemalist state, its solutions became very similar to those of the Kemalists, with some minor improvements. The AKP has viewed "the PKK and underdevelopment as the diagnostic," to solve the conflict it relies on the socioeconomic development policies as well as bestowing some cultural rights as individual rights. It offered to teach Kurdish as an optional course, but not as a collective right that guaranteed an education in the Kurdish language, or that established Kurdish schools.[49]

THE KURDISH STREET AND CULTURAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

During the peace talks, the AKP governments reached the limit of its willingness to compromise by offering to recognize the "folkloric identity" of Kurds, that is to say, permitting optional Kurdish language, allowing defendants speaking Kurdish to use translators (but paid by themselves) in courts, opening Kurdish language departments in selected universities, Kurdish TV channels, and so on.[50] Erdogan was using ambiguous language, regarding education in Kurdish, to court Kurds and not to increase resentment among Kurds until around the peace process was failing in 2015.[51] Erdogan's press talk, soon after he repudiated the Dolmabahçe talks is revealing. Erdogan disclosed his opinions on "solving the Kurdish problem" when asked about education in Kurdish: "Did we put optional courses in mother language within our education system? Done. What else do you want? Do you suggest that it be required? How come something like this happens? This country has one official language. (If you give this up), you cannot stop other demands."[52]

In contrast, the Kurdish movement has demanded the recognition of Kurds in the Constitution, education in the Kurdish language, Kurdish names for places, religious sermons in Kurdish, recognition of Kurdish as an official language, a Kurdish parliament, and so on. Islamist Kurdish movements also share similar positions on linguistic and cultural demands but differ in their

political ones such as regional parliament, flag, and autonomy and secession. While Turkish governments keep defining the PKK as a terrorist organization even while negotiating in secrecy and the HDP as an organic extension of PKK, the Kurdish public views them differently, as the election results and public opinion surveys show.

Is there a convergence between Kurdish public opinion and political actors concerning the issues discussed above? To determine this, we utilized two nation-wide representative surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.[53] The survey was conducted in Turkish and Kurdish (the latter in the Kurdish-populated residential areas). Using a multistage, stratified, clustered random sampling, these surveys reached approximately 6,900 and 7,100 adult participants across Turkey in 2011 and 2015, respectively. Fourteen percent of the respondents in 2011 (901 persons) and 17 percent in 2015 (1,340 persons) identified themselves as Kurdish. The responses display the preference of only the Kurdish respondents in this study.

To capture public opinion among Kurds, we first turn to table 2.1 to present the results of the public opinion survey about the extent to which Kurds feel that they are equal citizens of the Turkish state. Table 2.1 suggests that 47 percent of Kurds in 2011 believe that the state discriminates against Kurds. This rate rose to 57 percent in 2015. When the respondents were asked whether civil rights and liberties in Turkey reflect equality between Turks and Kurds, 65 percent of Kurds said no. The same percentage of Kurds perceived interethnic socioeconomic inequality. When we imperfectly compare these results with Ergil's findings, which are based on a public opinion survey conducted in August 2008 in cities where Kurds make up a significant percentage of the population, we see that the perception of discriminatory behavior was also high.[54] When people were asked in his survey whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that Kurds experience discrimination in western cities, this perception of discrimination reached 51.2 percent in the then DTP-dominated cities and 29 percent in the regional cities where DTP is not dominant. Imperfect comparison of Ergil's findings with this study, as the sampling methodology and differences in the wordings of the survey questions, suggests that the perception of discrimination and interethnic inequality has remained high among Kurds.

When the second survey was conducted in April 2015, the future of the peace talks looked bleak, yet it was before the urban warfare started in Diyarbakır's historic Sur region and other Kurdish cities, and the Kurdish opening officially ended in August 2015. Between 2013, when the peace was officially celebrated and 2015, when the second survey was conducted, the PKK and the HDP had both increased their popular support among Kurds. The Roboski massacre and the Kobani siege had resulted in great disappointment in the AKP, which was perceived as condoning of the killings of Kurds by the

Table 2.1   Perception of Interethnic Political and Economic Inequality

	2011 (%)	2015 (%)
State discrimination against Kurds	47	57
Inequality in civil rights and liberties	–	65
Inter-ethnic socioeconomic inequality	–	65
N	901	1340

Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that Kurds face discrimination from the state? Do you think that Kurds and Kurds have the same civil rights and liberties?; Do you think that there is socioeconomic equality between Turks and Kurds? The answers were either yes or no; and some answers were recoded while making this table.
Source: The authors created this table using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

Turkish military and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) respectively. The AKP's policies and the political mobilization of the Kurdish movement for the defense of Kobani siege also created sympathy toward the Kurdish movement among the Kurds who had distanced themselves from the PKK. In addition to the Roboski massacre and Kobani, one can argue that peace talks legitimized the PKK in the eyes of skeptical and pragmatic Kurds that do not want to be alienated from the Kurdish political movement for potential political and economic benefits in the aftermath of possible peace process and new political configurations. If the state recognized the PKK, then people hailed the PKK and the Kurdish movement as a powerful political organization of the future. The increasing legitimation of the PKK has become obvious in respondents' answers to three questions. Table 2.2 shows that 30 percent in 2011, and 55 percent in 2015 stated that the PKK represents Kurds. Those who did not recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization increased from 48 percent to 55 percent in 2015. Given the possibility that some Kurds may view the PKK not a terrorist organization, but do not see it as an organization representing Kurds, we operationalize another variable: popular support for

Table 2.2   Kurdish Street and PKK

	2011 (%)	2015 (%)
PKK represents Kurds	30	55
PKK is not a terror organization	48	55
PKK as a legal political party	63[*]	85/57[*]
N	901	1340

[*]*Note*: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that the PKK represent Kurds; is the PKK a terrorist organization? The question for the PKK as a legal party was asked differently in these surveys. The 2011 survey asks "PKK should disarm itself and participate in politics" while the 2015 survey divides the question of the earlier survey and asks as two separate questions: (1) Should PKK disarm itself and end the armed struggle? (2) Should PKK form a political party and participate in politics?
Source: The authors created this table using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

the PKK. The popular support, that is to say, those who do not view the PKK as a terrorist organization and at the same time view it as an organization that represents Kurds, has increased from 27 percent in 2011 to 45 percent in 2015. Ergil (2010) had found that the percentage of those who do not view the PKK as a terrorist organization was 29 percent in DTP dominant cities and 16 percent in other cities in the region.[55] However, the high percentage of "I do not know," 24 percent in the first group of cities and 16 percent in the second group suggest that the actual support may be higher.[56]

Figure 2.1 displays the results of the BDP in 2011 and HDP in 2015. The percentage of people who believed that Kurdish parties represent Kurds increased from 55 to 64. Those who answered negatively to this question declined from 22 to 15 percent in 2015. Taking into account those who view the PKK only partially favorably, the results suggest that both before but more significantly after the peace talks, the Kurdish political movement had reached a high degree of support, more than 64 percent.

Figure 2.2 suggests that the linguistic and cultural demands of Kurds from the state is at a level higher than the Turkish state imagines or is willing to grant. Even before the peace talks, Kurds wanted Friday sermons in Kurdish (70%), education in in their mother tongue (65%), optional Kurdish courses (80%), Kurdish names for villages (80%), towns, and other localities (74%), as well as wanting to be served in Kurdish in state institutions such as municipalities, courts, and hospitals (82%). The support for these linguistic
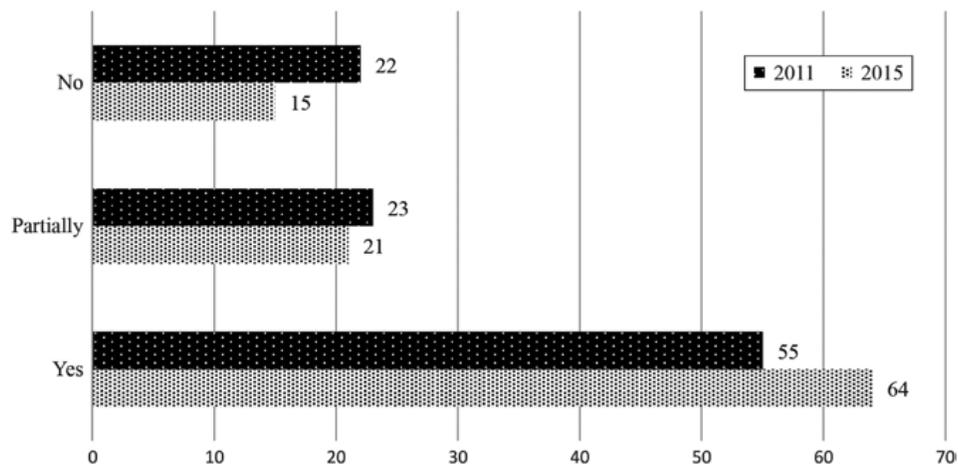

Figure 2.1 Do Kurdish Parties Represent Kurds? (%) Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that the successor party of HADEP and DEHAP, the BDP is a party that represents Kurds? (2011); and do you think that the successor party of HADEP, DEHAP and BDP, the HDP, having seats in Parliament, is a party that represent Kurds? (2015). *Source*: The authors created this figure using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.
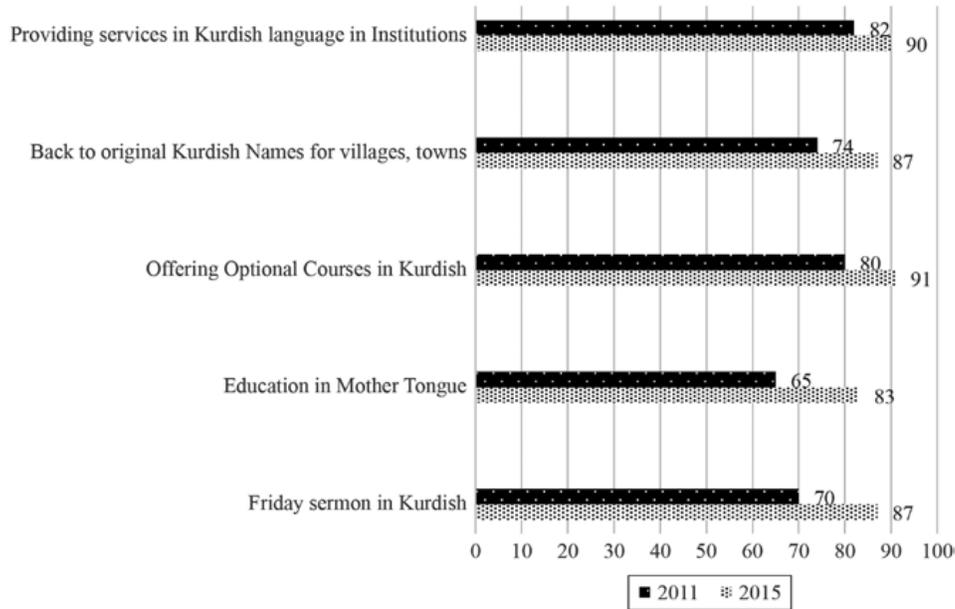
Figure 2.2 Support for Linguistic/Cultural Rights (%) Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that municipalities, hospitals, and courts provide services in Kurdish? Kurdish names for locations such as villages, towns, and cities would be allowed; education in mother tongue in primary/secondary and high schools should be allowed if there is a demand? Do you think that optional courses in Kurdish should be offered like English and German? Friday sermon in Kurdish should be provided in the Kurdish-dominant places? *Source*: The authors created this figure using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

rights has reached 87 percent and more, except for education in their mother language (83%). Ergil (2010) asks a similar question, whether one supports education in Kurdish.[57] Fifty-nine percent of Kurds in DTP-dominant cities and towns said yes, but this percentage went down to 16 percent in regional cities where DTP was not the dominant party. However, the high percentage of "I do not knows" in the first (14%) and especially in the second category (38%) does not allow us to make a meaningful comparison, but due to the reasons discussed in footnote 6, the results suggest that support for cultural rights have been high among Kurds.

Do these results translate into supporting political autonomy or even secession? Figure 2.3 suggests that more than half of Kurds would like to entertain their linguistic and cultural rights with political autonomy as citizens of the Turkish state. The peace talks increased their demand for regional parliaments (49 to 64%), a regional flag (40 to 58%), and Kurdish as an official language (56 to 74%) as the survey year moves from 2011 to 2015. Having said that, the support for an independent Kurdish state increased significantly,
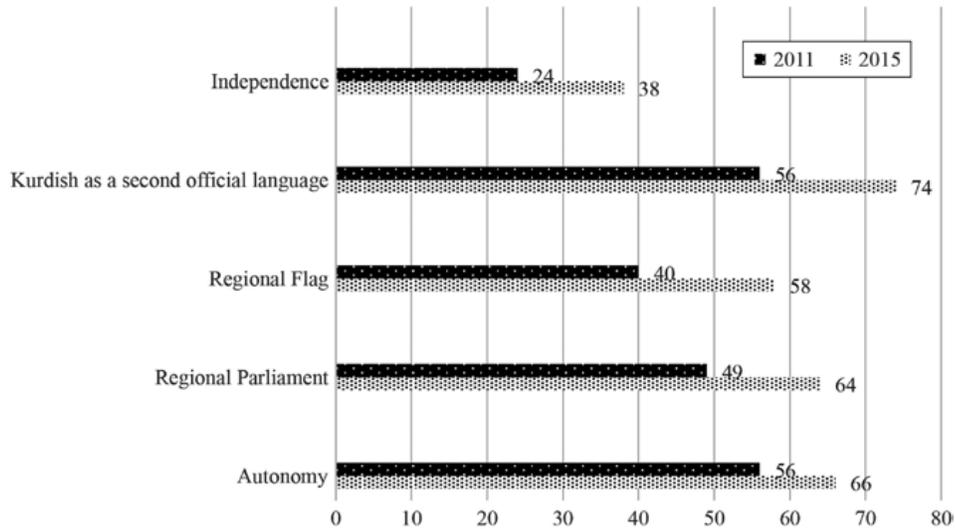
Figure 2.3 Support for Political Rights: Autonomy, Independence and others (%) Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that Kurds should secede from Turkey and form an independent state? Do you think the Kurdish language, in addition to Turkish, should be recognized as an official language? Do you think that there should be a regional flag in the Kurdish-dominant places? Should there be a regional parliament in the Kurdish-dominant places? Do you think that Kurds should have autonomy in Turkey? The respondents answered this question, Yes or No. *Source*: The authors created this figure using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

but remained at less than half of the population, rising from 24 percent in 2011 to 38 percent in 2015.

CONCLUSION

We discussed the changing policies and positions of political parties and Kurdish political actors over time and claimed that the lengthy civil war has created a convergence of demands between secular and religious Kurds, in particular linguistic and cultural rights. The findings on the public opinion survey conducted in 2015 suggest that more than 80 percent of the Kurdish public has demanded the right to study their language, receive an education in their mother language, get served in public institutions in Kurdish, and want to listen to Friday sermons in Kurdish. These figures imply, without the fulfillment of them that neither the Kurdish conflict nor the political instability fed by it will end.[58]

Furthermore, the Kurdish public opinion wants "an official recognition" without a stick. Despite some reforms, the Turkish state under the

conservative AKP governments still refuses official recognition of Kurds and the Kurdish language. The "too little too late" policy of the Turkish state toward the Kurdish conflict created not only distrust between Kurds and the Turkish state, but also fostered cultural nationalism, a prerequisite for political demands.[59] Now, Kurds want their language to be an official state language and they aspire to have their regional government, parliament, and flag within the existing borders. While the majority agrees upon autonomy of these regional institutions, only a little more than one-third of the Kurds seek secession. However, the maltreatment of the Kurds and the continuation of the rejection of linguistic and cultural rights may help the upward trend in demanding an independent state, fostering inter-ethnic communal violence and social unrest.[60] In this sense, the findings confirm that the securitization of the Kurdish conflict has transformed Kurds with a private ethnic identity or non-politicized disposition into politicized ones; this is especially true of Kurdish youths who associate the Turkish state with the military and police, and their hostile attitudes and behaviors toward them.[61]

Turning to Kurdish actors, the higher support for legal politics through the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) and HDP, rather than support for the PKK, suggests that the Kurdish public opinion lends its support for these parties. Kurds have already endured decades of "Emergency Rule" (OHAL), curfew, extrajudicial killings, and human rights abuses amidst economic and social difficulties. High support for legal Kurdish parties suggests that seeking an "ordinary life" and "ordinary politics" is among their primary preferences. The urban warfare in the post-2015 era and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people as a result may exert an effect on attitudes toward Kurdish parties and the PKK that should be examined in future studies. One can assume that while the PKK lost some support among Kurds, this does not mean that it was replaced by support for the AKP or the state actors, especially as long as Kurds do not see any improvement in their political rights and economic situation. Now, the AKP has been transformed from anti-establishment party to the statist party in the eyes of the Kurdish public as a result of increasing terror discourse toward the Kurdish conflict by the AKP government in alliance with the ultranationalist MHP). This perception has been consolidated by the replacement of elected mayors by the state-appointed ones (*kayyum/kayyım*) between 2016 and the 2019 March local elections and the ongoing imprisonment of Kurdish MPs, including the party cochairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. There is increasing evidence that there is high support for the securitization of Kurdish rights among the Turkish state apparatus and the Turkish public. This trend, merged with the state's concerns due to the Kurdish enclave in Syria and unforeseen events in the region, is likely to prolong the political status quo and civil war at the cost of significant loss of life, as well as civil and

political liberties.[62] Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how long this unofficial recognition with a stick policy toward Kurds will continue without a reformed political system that is responsive to the cultural and political demands of Kurds.

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