



Thoughts on the Ethno-Territorial Demands of Kurdish Political Groups

Kurdish political parties in the Middle East are more important political actors than ever before. Yet whether they prefer mere autonomy or a nation state remains unclear as LSE PhD candidate and Emirates PhD Award winner Zeynep Kaya considers.

By Zeynep Kaya

There is no doubt that Kurdish political parties in the Middle East are more important political actors than ever before. In April, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional President, Massoud Barzani, was granted an official reception with President Obama in the White House, which shows the importance given to Barzani’s leadership by the US. There are also increasing signs of an assertion of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s autonomy from the Baghdad government when it comes to oil exportation. In Iran, ongoing tensions between Kurdish tribes, intellectual elites and the Iranian state look unlikely to end in the near future. The Kurds in Syria continue to be severely suppressed and many are denied citizenship. Unsurprisingly, many Kurds are part of the protestors against Assad’s regime. Yet perhaps the most seemingly complicated and pressing Kurdish challenge presently lies in Turkey.

In Turkey, the Kurdish problem is a pressing issue that requires an urgent solution because of its domestic implications as well as its negative influence on Turkey’s foreign relations. The PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party) and the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) have repeatedly voiced a desire for a solution in the form of Kurdish autonomy within Turkey. They

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have been quite assertive in their insistence that they are ready to negotiate a solution as long as Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, **is released and the Turkish government agrees to sit at a negotiation table with him**. Meanwhile, the Turkish government leaders publicly declare that they refuse to negotiate with what they consider a terrorist organisation. There is no immediate sign of a solution.

Yet whether Kurdish leaders see autonomy as a step towards future independent statehood or not is unclear. Alongside their seemingly traditional demands for Kurdish self-determination, they also often claim that 'nation-states' are a thing of the past. The BDP leaders deny that they are engaged in ethno-politics, and instead claim that they are actually aiming only for recognition of the Kurds and the creation of a more pluralist and democratic Turkey. They state that the ambitions of Kurds in Turkey are decidedly different from that achieved by their Iraqi Kurd neighbours. Such a rejection of Iraqi Kurdistan is intriguing and perhaps can be attributed to the internal instability in northern Iraq stemming from **corruption scandals, dissident activities and illegal detentions**.

Given this picture, it is a fair statement to say that Kurdish nationalist organisations typically define their goals and problems in a way that is strictly limited to the country in which they reside without reference to other Kurds and Kurdish parties from other states. Each group faces different problems that have emerged as a result of the distinct political, social, historical and economic circumstances of each state. In fact, no contemporary Kurdish nationalist party in the Middle East so far has made an explicit demand to establish a greater Kurdistan (defined as the ideal homeland of Kurds), that would unite all the Kurds living in different states within a new single political entity.

The notion of greater Kurdistan and maps of this territory are the most obvious aspects of Kurdish nationalism and they stand in stark contrast to the actual divided status of the Kurds and the aims of the various parties which lead them. In spite of this, the notion of greater Kurdistan and **its cartographical depiction** are commonly used in the rhetoric of almost all Kurdish nationalist organisations and activist groups, both in the region and in the diaspora. Kurdish nationalists' use of the notion of Kurdistan (encompassing sections of the territories of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia) is based on a claim to ownership of this territory since 4,000 BCE. Such a claim forms the basis of the perception that Kurdistan is an existing ethnic/national territory.



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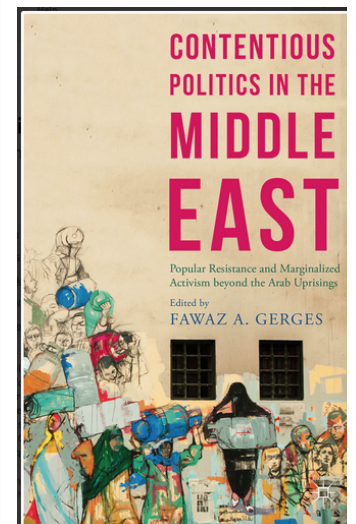
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However, what is most interesting is that this understanding of Kurdistan has moved beyond the discourse of Kurdish nationalists and become embedded in the language used by other influential groups, too. Many state politicians have **adopted similar conceptions in their attempt to support the Kurdish cause** by encouraging their states to put pressure on regional governments, particularly evident in the cases of Turkey and Iraq. Today, both Kurdish nationalists and their sympathisers often refer to the region as 'Kurdistan'. In this context, notions of 'eastern Turkey' or 'northern Iraq' seem to fail to express their aspirations.

The map of Kurdistan appears on Kurdish websites and in academic works, **journals and newspapers**. It is well-established that this map overlooks the heterogeneous character of the population inhabiting the area as well as the political boundaries of the existing states. However, many outsiders still readily accept the accuracy of the boundaries indicated on this map and, generally speaking, fail to indicate the heterogeneous population of the region. As such, even though the idea of greater Kurdistan is generally perceived as unfeasible, it is considered by the majority of the international community of scholars, activists, journalists and certain state officials to represent the Kurdish people's ethnic and historical territory.

In my PhD research, I have been exploring the possible reasons why territorial claims typically embrace, either implicitly or explicitly, ethnic conceptions, looking at the Kurdish case in particular. An ethnicist understanding of nations in the academic and non-academic literature implies that a territory is more or less a given feature of groups, based on objective characteristics and features. Such a view strengthens and gives credibility to perceptions of a Kurdish homeland and underpins the map of Kurdistan. Kurdish activists in the region and in the diaspora have unfailingly promoted the idea of Kurdistan to the international community, often framing their promotions within the language of human rights and self-determination to make their claims as legitimate as possible to those democratic countries whose influence they are trying to gain.

Understanding why sub-state nationalist groups, such as the Kurds, adopt specific ethnic and territorial identities requires an awareness of the political and international ideational context in which sub-state groups interact with other international actors. Therefore, the meaning sub-state nationalist groups attribute to self-determination is often and certainly in

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the Kurdish case, linked to a specific normative context that embraces a belief in democracy and human rights for groups with distinct cultural, linguistic and ethnic characteristics. National self-determination relies on liberal principles such as self-rule and democracy, but at the same time it reifies the primordial and ethnic features of a national identity. Framing their claims to autonomy or independence based on distinct cultural and ethnic characteristics within the context of self-determination help them to maximise their legitimacy and influence within international society.

With this in mind, the question then becomes whether a form of politics based on ethnic conceptions of national identity is the best route for a democratic and peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue.



Zeynep Kaya is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the London School of Economics. Her expertise is on the political activities of Kurdish nationalist groups and their interactions with international society. Her PhD title is *Maps into Nations: Kurdistan, Kurdish Nationalism and International Society*. If you would like to contact her, please send her an email to z.n.kaya@lse.ac.uk.

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