

The Kurds in Turkey – waiting for a turning point

Zuzanna Krzyżanowska

The Kurdish question – a term used to define the conflicting aspirations of the Turkish government and a segment of the country’s population – affects all aspects of the state’s operation. It remains inextricably linked to the country’s security, since Turkey has been entangled for more than four decades in an armed conflict with the terrorist organisation known as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The latest manifestation of this conflict was the Kahramankazan attack on 23 October, which claimed five lives and left 22 people injured. It happened at a time when the topic of normalising Turkish-Kurdish relations had re-emerged on the political agenda. The attack exacerbated internal tensions and led to a Turkish military operation targeting PKK positions in Iraq and Syria.

Despite the attack, it remains possible that efforts to find a political resolution to the conflict will be resumed, potentially facilitated by the escalating international situation in Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood and the need to maintain domestic stability. In the longer term, the Kurdish population’s increasing readiness to assimilate may contribute to potential normalisation. If peace talks commence, the Kurdish Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), the third-largest force in parliament, and Abdullah Öcalan, the historic leader of the PKK, will have to be engaged in the process.

The Kurds in Turkey vs the Kurdish issue

The Kurdish question (also known as the ‘Kurdish issue’), a deep-seated conflict persisting between the state and the aspirations of its largest ethnic minority, has become deeply ingrained in Turkish reality (see Appendix). It influences all aspects of the country’s life, including politics, society, economy, security, and foreign policy.

The Kurds’ political aspirations are diverse, shaped by differing worldviews and attitudes towards the Turkish state. Their demands range from expanded cultural rights and autonomy to, in the maximalist scenarios, outright secession, which Turkey perceives as an existential threat. Since its establishment, the republic has been a highly centralised unitary state with a distinct ethnic national identity. In Turkish political culture, the nation-state is regarded as a supreme value. This is reflected in the constitution,¹

¹ One of its regulations provides that: “Everyone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk”. See Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, Article 66, European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), venice.coe.int.

the legal system, and the overall organisation of public life, including education, where patriotic indoctrination plays a significant role. In this context, the government not only directly combats all forms of separatism but for a long time even denied the very existence of the Kurdish nation.

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict began shortly after the republic was established. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Kurdish tribal uprisings erupted in southeastern Turkey,

” **Although the Kurds in Turkey largely maintain their distinct identity, they increasingly identify with the state they inhabit, even though they do feel discriminated against.**

only to be brutally suppressed by the military. By the late 1970s, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),² a terrorist organisation with Marxist-Leninist roots, had emerged as the primary force organising Kurdish resistance against the Turkish state. Armed clashes between the PKK and government forces, occasionally interrupted by ceasefires and peace negotiations, have persisted since 1984. This conflict, involving guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks, has claimed tens of thousands of lives on both sides,³ and brought severe social costs, including criminalisation, forced displacement, family disintegration, and successive generations raised in an atmosphere of terror and repression.

The most recent attempt to peacefully resolve the dispute occurred between 2013 and 2015. The negotiations involved the Turkish government, Abdullah Öcalan (the historic leader of the PKK, serving a life sentence since 1999), and the PKK leadership based in the Kandil Mountains of northern Iraq. Turkish secret services and the legal pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) acted as intermediaries. The peace process ultimately failed, resulting in a renewed escalation of the conflict, including regular street clashes in rebellious cities in southeastern Turkey.⁴

In October this year, the prospect of a peaceful resolution to the conflict with the PKK resurfaced on Turkey’s political agenda. Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which co-forms the government coalition, called on Öcalan to dissolve the PKK in exchange for his possible pardoning. For the first time in over three years, Öcalan’s isolation was officially broken, and he was permitted to meet with his nephew. Through this intermediary, Öcalan conveyed his willingness to engage in negotiations. However, the government’s positive gestures were quickly overshadowed by the terrorist attack on the TUSAŞ defence industry facility in Kahramankazan, near Ankara, in which five people were killed and 22 injured.⁵ An organisation linked to the PKK has claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Kurds in Turkish society

Although the Kurds in Turkey largely maintain their distinct identity, they increasingly identify with the state they inhabit, even though they do feel discriminated against. According to the 2022 *Kurdish Barometer* survey,⁶ 67% of respondents strongly identified as Kurdish, and 71% expressed pride in being Kurdish. The most frequently mentioned identities among participants were Muslim (54%), liberal (28%), and religious (25%).⁷ When asked about the Kurdish issue, 51.5% acknowledged

² The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is recognised as a terrorist organisation by numerous states and organisations, including Turkey, the EU, and the USA. In this text, the term PKK is used collectively to refer to all organisations associated with this party.

³ According to data from the International Crisis Group, over 7,119 people were killed in clashes and attacks in Turkey and northern Iraq from the collapse of the peace process in 2015 until 20 September 2024. This total includes 639 civilians, 1,491 members of the state security apparatus (soldiers, police officers, etc.), 4,763 PKK fighters, and 226 individuals of unspecified affiliation. See ‘Türkiye’s PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer’, International Crisis Group, [crisisgroup.org](https://www.crisisgroup.org).

⁴ M. Chudziak, ‘Turkey’s internal front: the conflict with the Kurds escalates’, OSW, 30 December 2015, osw.waw.pl.

⁵ A. Michalski, K. Strachota, ‘The PKK’s attack heralds an escalation of tensions over the Kurdish question’, OSW, 24 October 2024, osw.waw.pl.

⁶ Kurdish Barometer is a study conducted in 2022 with a sample of 1,492 Kurds by the Kurdish Centre for Studies, an independent research institute based in Diyarbakır. See *Kurdish Barometer: özet rapor*, Kurdish Barometer, 2023, kurdish-barometer.com.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 10–17.

its existence, citing the lack of official recognition of Kurdish identity and discrimination by the state as the primary causes. A strong sense of injustice persists within this group: only 28% of the Kurds believe that the state treats them equally with ethnic Turks, while 58% reported experiencing discrimination due to their ethnicity.⁸ Nonetheless, over half (53%) identify as *Türkiyeli*, meaning ‘a citizen of Turkey’.⁹

Despite the strong sense of ethnic identity among the Kurds in Turkey, proficiency in their mother tongue is declining within the population.¹⁰ In the aforementioned survey, only 30% said their Kurdish

” The opposition left-wing Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which is the third-largest force in the Grand National Assembly (holding 57 out of 600 seats), aspires to be the main representative of Kurdish interests in Turkey.

language skills were ‘good’, while 31% rated them as ‘average’. This suggests that the language is being transmitted less effectively from one generation to the next. Among those who described their Kurdish skills as ‘good’, only 44% reported that their children had similarly strong skills.¹¹

The status of the Kurdish language in Turkey remains ambiguous. As a result of the political liberalisation during the first decade of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) rule and the peace negotiations with the PKK, the government discontinued its policy aimed at completely eliminating the Kurdish language from public life. However, its use remains limited. The public broadcaster TRT operates a television channel and airs a radio programme in Kurdish. Furthermore, books and newspapers are published in the language.

Students can learn Kurdish as an elective subject in primary and secondary schools, and Kurdish studies programmes are offered at state universities.¹² However, the demand for Kurdish language classes in the 2023/2024 school year was exceptionally low, with just over 23,000 students enrolling. Kurdish activists accuse the authorities of deliberately lowering the quality of these classes by appointing too few teachers,¹³ and supplying substandard teaching materials.¹⁴

In the Turkish parliament, microphones are turned off when speeches are delivered in Kurdish. Additionally, citizens who do not speak Turkish, often elderly individuals, are sometimes denied access to public services.¹⁵ Recognising Kurdish as an official language and expanding the right to learn and use it in state institutions are among the primary demands of the Kurdish community. According to *Kurdish Barometer*, 44% of respondents expressed support for bilingual education, while 27% would rather see Kurdish taught as a separate subject.¹⁶

Political engagement – from the left...

The Kurds in Turkey are represented by a wide range of political parties. The opposition left-wing People’s Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which is the third-largest force in the Grand National Assembly (holding 57 out of 600 seats) and governs six provinces in the country’s southeast,¹⁷ aspires

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 30. This term is difficult to translate. *Türkiyeli* refers to a person who is a citizen of Turkey or originates from the country, regardless of their ethnic identity. This term emerged as an alternative to *Türk*, meaning an ethnic Turk.

¹⁰ Abdullah Öcalan has admitted himself that his Kurdish is very poor.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 33–37.

¹² E. Ölmez, ‘Türkiye’de Kürdoloji eğitimi: Üniversiteler, puanlar ve dersler’, *Bianet*, 31 August 2024, bianet.org.

¹³ In Turkey, every teacher must be appointed by the Ministry of National Education in order to have the right to work in this capacity.

¹⁴ D. Temiz, ‘Talep var ama ana dilinde eğitim yok’, *Evrensel*, 9 September 2024, evrensel.net.

¹⁵ ‘Siirt’te Türkçe bilmeyen hasta muayene edilmedi’, *Serbestiyet*, 19 September 2024. serbestiyet.com.

¹⁶ *Kurdish Barometer: özet rapor*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ In the 2024 local elections, DEM secured victory in ten provinces. However, trustees appointed by Ankara have taken over governance in four of these provinces (Hakkâri, Batman, Mardin, and Tunceli) so far (see below).

to be the main representative of Kurdish interests in Turkey. Another parliamentary group representing the Kurdish minority is the Islamist Free Cause Party (HÜDA PAR), which has four deputies.

DEM is the most vocal party on Kurdish issues, with its political manifesto combining left-wing and nationalist demands. The party

” For much of the Kurdish left, Abdullah Öcalan, the historic leader of the PKK, remains a central figure of authority.

positions itself as an advocate for the rights of the Kurds and other ethnic minorities, calling for Kurdish to be granted an official language status, as well as for the decentralisation and increased autonomy of local governments. The vision of governance adopted by the Kurdish left is directly inspired by Abdullah Öcalan’s doctrine of democratic confederalism, which emphasises local self-governance and community autonomy. In addition to its Kurdish-focused agenda, the party addresses social, labour, and environmental issues, as well as the rights of women and sexual minorities. The balance between its pro-Kurdish and progressive ideological positions often shifts, largely depending on the political climate.

DEM is deeply rooted in a long-standing tradition of Kurdish left-wing political movement. Since the early 1990s, Kurdish communities have established several parties, all of which have faced serious obstacles from the state apparatus.¹⁸ Some of these parties were banned due to allegations of links to the PKK, accusations that their members consistently deny. However, all of these parties share a similar base of public support, making them susceptible to influence from the PKK and its leadership.

For much of the Kurdish left, Abdullah Öcalan, the historic leader of the PKK, remains a central figure of authority. This political movement has also been influenced and inspired by Selahattin Demirtaş, the charismatic former co-chair of the HDP (DEM’s predecessor) and a previous presidential candidate, who remains the most popular Kurdish politician in Turkey.¹⁹ In 2016, he was imprisoned along with other senior HDP leaders. Until his incarceration, he embodied the belief, central to the Kurdish political movement, that the Kurdish issue could be resolved within the framework of the Turkish state. Although Demirtaş no longer holds any party position and has officially announced his withdrawal from politics, he frequently comments on current affairs and attempts to influence decisions within his former party. His involvement could therefore prove pivotal in any future peace process.

DEM, previously known as the HDP and later the Green Left Party (YSP), faces significant challenges in governing at the local level. The removal of democratically elected mayors and their replacement with state-appointed trustees has become an instrument for exerting pressure on the Kurdish political movement. During the 2019–2024 term, Turkey’s Ministry of the Interior imposed trusteeships in 48 of the 65 municipal bodies governed by the HDP across various administrative levels.²⁰ In the current term, trustees have taken control of four out of ten provinces. The most recent three nominations occurred after the PKK’s October attack in Kahramankazan. It is highly likely that trusteeships will be implemented in other local governments led by DEM during this term.

DEM operates within a highly polarised political landscape. The party remains in opposition to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) while avoiding definitive alliances with the main opposition group, the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP). Although DEM has occasionally endorsed CHP candidates in the past, attempts at deeper cooperation have faced resistance on both sides, largely due to nationalist tendencies within the CHP.

¹⁸ These include HEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP, DTP, BDP, HDP, and YSP.

¹⁹ *Kürt Meselesi, Kürt Siyaseti ve Demirtaş*, Rawest Research, May 2024, rawest.com.tr.

²⁰ H. Kamer, ‘Kayyumların yıldönümü: HDP’nin kazandığı belediyelerde son durum ne?’, BBC News Türkçe, 19 August 2022, bbc.com/turkce.

The parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023, followed by the local elections in 2024, plunged DEM into a state of crisis. In the presidential elections, the party (then operating as YSP) chose not to field its own candidate but supported the nominee of the opposition alliance. In the parliamentary elections, it achieved the lowest result in its history, securing 8.8% of the nationwide vote – a decrease of 2.9 percentage points compared to 2018. Following a reorganisation and name change, DEM was relatively successful in the local elections in the predominantly Kurdish south-east of the country, increasing the number of provinces it won from eight to ten. However, poor results outside the region sparked disappointment among party members.

... through the centre to the right

The Kurdish electorate is not exclusively represented by the political left. The AKP, particularly during its first decade in power and later during the Turkish-Kurdish peace process, reached out to the Kurds who had previously been excluded from mainstream politics. The AKP maintains support in south-eastern Turkey, where it is often the second most popular party, drawing votes from conservative Kurdish voters who are either disinclined towards the left or content with the current status quo. Moreover, some senior AKP figures, such as Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek, openly acknowledge their Kurdish background. Similarly, Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz is known to be of Kurdish origin, and it is speculated that Hakan Fidan, the long-time head of the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), who currently serves as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, might also have Kurdish roots.

In the most recent parliamentary elections, the AKP collaborated with HÜDA PAR, an Islamist party that combines conservative reli-

” **The AKP maintains support in south-eastern Turkey, where it often draws votes from the conservative Kurdish electorate.**

gious views with Kurdish nationalism. This party is suspected of being the civilian wing of the Islamist terrorist organisation Kurdish Hezbollah,²¹ a claim its leadership denies. In the 2023 elections, HÜDA PAR supported President Erdoğan and ran its candidates for the Grand National Assembly on the ruling party's lists. This strategy allowed it to bypass the 7% electoral threshold and secure parliamentary representation for the first time in its history, securing four seats.

The recent electoral cycle has made it clear that the Kurds, particularly those living outside south-eastern Turkey, in metropolitan areas, and in the west of the country, are increasingly influenced by the nationwide polarisation between the AKP and the CHP. Consequently, they may be inclined to vote for the main opposition party. This trend may also suggest that ethnic identification is becoming a less influential factor in voting decisions. According to public opinion polls, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the opposition mayor of Istanbul, is the second most popular politician among the Kurds.²² At the same time, the CHP itself, though inconsistently, has been making gestures of goodwill towards the Kurdish electorate.

Security first

From the perspective of the Turkish state, tensions linked to the Kurdish issue pose significant threats, particularly to its security, stability, and territorial integrity. Over the years of conflict, Ankara has invested substantial resources in an extensive apparatus of control and security measures. Previous attempts at peace negotiations have failed, eroding mutual trust between the parties. Furthermore,

²¹ Kurdish Hezbollah emerged in the late 1970s. The organisation remains in conflict with the PKK, a rivalry that has also taken the form of bloody clashes and targeted assassinations. At various times, it is believed to have received support from Iran and Turkish intelligence services. See M. Gürkan, 'Kurdish Hezbollah and AKP's alliance partner Hüda-Par', Yetkin Report, 20 April 2023, yetkinreport.com/en.

²² Kürt Meselesi, Kürt Siyaseti ve Demirtaş, *op. cit.*

the presence of the PKK in Iraq and Syria, near Turkey's borders, along with the Kurdish autonomies in these countries (the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and Rojava, a de facto autonomous region in Syria), elevates the Kurdish issue to a more significant level in international relations.

” **The tensions linked to the Kurdish issue have spilled over into Europe, often accompanying migration flows from Turkey. Clashes between Turkish and Kurdish groups frequently occur in Western Europe.**

Currently, clashes between Turkish forces and the PKK are largely concentrated outside Turkey's bor-

ders. In Syria, Turkey conducts regular attacks on positions held by PKK-affiliated groups – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the People's Defence Units (YPG). Operations against the SDF and YPG create friction not only with Syria and Iraq but, most notably, with the United States, which supports both organisations as local allies in the fight against Islamic State. In Iraq, Turkey targets PKK-linked groups operating along the Turkey-Iraq and Iran-Iraq borders in the Kandil Mountains. In May, Ankara announced plans for a large-scale military operation against the PKK in northern Iraq. The intervention, scheduled for summer 2024 in coordination with Baghdad, aimed to establish a 40-kilometre security zone along the Iraqi side of the border. However, the operation was aborted for reasons that have not been disclosed to the general public.

The unresolved Kurdish issue has also significantly influenced Turkey's actions within the international community. Ankara's security-first approach was evident in its initial refusal to approve Sweden and Finland's NATO membership. Turkey conditioned its consent on the signing and enforcement of a trilateral memorandum, which included commitments to combat PKK-linked organisations within the signatories' territories, restrict these organisations' financing and propaganda activities, and extradite individuals suspected of terrorism to Turkey. The tensions linked to the Kurdish issue have spilled over into Europe, often accompanying migration flows from Turkey. Clashes between Turkish and Kurdish groups frequently occur in Western Europe, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, where both communities have their well-established institutions, including organisations and associations.

Turkey's policy towards the Kurds has long been a source of disagreements in its relations with the European Union. EU institutions, including the European Commission, have repeatedly criticised Turkey for its lack of progress in addressing the Kurdish issue. In its most recent report on Turkey's accession process, the European Commission accused Ankara of employing excessive force and measures beyond the scope of a democratic state governed by the rule of law in its fight against Kurdish terrorism. Furthermore, the EU has condemned Turkey's repression of the legal Kurdish political opposition, including the imprisonment of prominent Kurdish politicians, most notably Selahattin Demirtaş. Ankara has voiced strong objections against such criticisms, accusing EU institutions of failing to understand Turkey's security challenges and alleging bias and political motives behind these statements.²³

Prospects

The Turkish government has once again revisited the issue of normalising Turkish-Kurdish relations, nearly a decade after the last attempt to politically resolve the conflict. The timing is deliberate. On the one hand, the tense situation in Turkey's immediate neighbourhood, including the prospect of an Iranian-Israeli confrontation, is driving the search for solutions. On the other hand, the prospect of political normalisation with the Kurds is being considered within the context of drafting a new constitution, which would allow President Erdoğan to seek another term in office. In exchange for

²³ *Türkiye Report 2024*, European Commission, 30 October 2024, neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu. For more information on Turkey-EU disputes see A. Michalski, 'Turkey and the European Union: in a maze of disputes', *OSW Commentary*, no. 586, 3 April 2024, osw.waw.pl.

support for the new constitution, the government may agree to concessions for the Kurds, such as granting them official minority status or significantly expanding the right to education in their native language. Resolving the conflict could also encourage assimilation among the Kurds and foster a growing identification with the Turkish state.

However, in the event of negotiations being resumed, several challenges will have to be addressed, including the multitude of actors and the internal divisions within the Kurdish movement. These divisions were highlighted by the bombing in Kahramankazan, allegedly orchestrated by a PKK faction opposed to resuming talks with Ankara. It remains uncertain whether respect for Abdullah Öcalan still holds sway over the current PKK leadership in the Kandil Mountains. The prospect of normalisation has further dimmed following the attack, due to Turkey's military response against PKK-affiliated groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as state repression against the pro-Kurdish DEM party. Nevertheless, there appears to be ongoing strong support within the government coalition for efforts to achieve a political resolution to the Turkish-Kurdish dispute, primarily led by Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

APPENDIX

The Kurds in Turkey

Ethnic Kurds live in areas divided among Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as in diaspora communities worldwide. The largest Kurdish community lives in Turkey, with estimates ranging from 12 to 20 million people, representing 14% to 23% of the total population. The exact number of ethnic Kurds in Turkey remains unknown, as official state statistics do not include ethnic identity questions in censuses. Determining the population size is further complicated by factors such as high natural population growth and differing levels of individual identification with Kurdish ethnicity.

In Turkey, the Kurds predominantly inhabit the southeastern regions, encompassing provinces such as Adıyaman, Ağrı, Ardahan, Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Erzincan, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Hakkâri, Iğdır, Kars, Malatya, Mardin, Muş, Şanlıurfa, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van (see map). The city of Diyarbakır, with a population of 1.8 million, is often considered the informal centre of this area. Kurdish nationalists refer to the region as Northern Kurdistan (*Kuzey Kürdistan* in Turkish, *Kurdistana Bakurê* in Kurdish), while Turkish politicians generally use the neutral term 'region' (*bölge* in Turkish). In addition to the southeast, the Kurds also live in major metropolises such as Istanbul. The majority of the Kurds in Turkey adhere to Sunni Islam, though there are also Kurdish Alevi and Yazidi communities.

Most Turkish Kurds speak the Kurdish dialect *Kurmanji*, with a smaller portion speaking *Zazaki*, which is sometimes regarded as a distinct language. The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, yet they lack official recognition, as such status is granted only to non-Muslim communities under Turkish law.

Map. The areas traditionally inhabited by Kurds in Turkey, in approximation



Source: the author's own estimates.